

## **An Experience of Franciscan Solitude**

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What has a medieval rule for Hermitages to say to a person in the twenty-first century? The answer to that vital question has had tremendous consequences not only for our congregation of Franciscan Sisters Minors but also for the many guest hermits who have availed themselves of our purpose-built Portiuncula, a House of Franciscan Prayer and Solitude. St Francis reminded his followers: God in his mercy has called us not for our own good alone but for the good of the many. Since building our Portiuncula at Clay Cross in rural Derbyshire, this has been our experience: the good of the many.

The building of the Portiuncula and the new hermitage ministry associated with it was the result of many years of prayerful discernment and academic research. As a Congregation we became aware of a need to explore the eremitical dimension of our Franciscan charism. It was a very exciting and adventurous journey that eventually resulted in taking a great leap of faith to build and provide our particular interpretation of St Francis' Rule for Hermitages. We were encouraged by the words of Pope John Paul II in a document addressed to religious entitled *Vita Consecrata*. In this document the Pope emphasized not only fidelity to the founding charism but also creativity in interpreting it for present day needs. Our experience since opening in 2005 confirms that the legacy we have received from St Francis in the Rule for Hermitages is much needed today, as it continues to fulfil a hunger in the human heart.

Our discernment and research centred on the active - contemplative tension that seems to surface in the lives of individuals, communities and societies, regardless of age, creed or culture. This dichotomy between active ministry and personal prayer goes back to Jesus. We are all familiar with the story of Martha and Mary recorded in St Luke's Gospel 10.38-42. St Francis, too, had to struggle with this tension in his own life and the way he resolved it continues to challenge both the Marthas and the Marys among us. For Francis it was not an either/or decision, rather it was a both/and choice that lovingly integrates a rhythm in life that makes space for the personal and intimate as well as the total dedication to loving service of one's brothers and sisters.

Realising that the call to solitude lies at the heart of our Franciscan vocation, the Franciscan family continues to discover new ways of interpreting and living the Rule for Hermitages. Our Portiuncula is one example among many. I speak from the experience of having travelled to several countries to explore the eremitical dimension of our Franciscan calling. The originality and creative fidelity to Franciscan eremiticism reflects the originality and creativity that first prompted Francis to write his precious little Rule for Hermitages. We have tried to preserve the spirit of contemplative prayer, littleness, loving

service, gospel simplicity, and warm fraternity as the hallmarks of our hermitage experience. The relational dimension captured by St Francis in nurturing the mother-son relationship, inherent in fulfilling and integrating the role of both Martha and Mary, is central to our interpretation of the Rule.



The actual design of the Portiuncula building integrates the Martha and Mary dimension in a way that is unique and creative with a meaning and relevance for twenty-first century people. It is not possible adequately to convey this in words. It has to be seen and experienced. Therefore, if you feel the call to solitude, we lovingly invite you to 'Come and See'. We offer a minimum residential stay of two nights and a maximum of eight nights. We also offer non-residential days. Those who visit may have a sister-companion to accompany them in their solitude experience. One to one meetings are built into the individual's timetable. However, a guest-hermit may wish to spend the whole time in solitude without a Sister-companion. We respect each



person's journey and desire only to facilitate the working of the Holy Spirit in whatever way meets individual need.

We have five hermitages under one roof: Greccio, Poggio Bustoni, The Carceri, Fonte Colombo and La Verna. In the company of St. Francis, each guest hermit is invited and challenged to explore the spirituality of a particular hermitage by journeying into the depths of one's heart and into the heart of God. Being Third Order Regular Franciscans, we share with all Third Order Franciscans the charism of conversion of heart. Therefore, from the outset we knew the "heart" would have a central focus in the spirituality of the Portiuncula. Aware of the primacy given to the heart by Jesus and by St. Francis - and indeed by so many of the Early Fathers of the Church and the Desert Fathers and Mothers, we too emphasize the centrality of the heart in the journey towards wholeness and transformation in Christ.

Out of his own need and experience, Francis risked the journey into his own heart. It led him to total identification with the heart of Christ and forged in him a deep, passionate love for all his brothers and sisters and for the whole of creation. Solitude was crucial in this process of transformation and surrender of the lover to his Beloved. The rhythm that St. Francis revered in his own life is his legacy to us in a way that challenges us to read the signs of the times and creatively do what is ours to do. Rooted and grounded in love, St. Francis developed a contemplative attitude to life that was nurtured in solitude and made fruitful in active ministry to his sisters and brothers in the cloister of the world. The journey into his own heart made Francis realise that 'Brother Body is our cell, and our soul is the hermit who dwells within it, to pray to God and meditate. If the soul does not live in peace and solitude in its cell, a cell made by hands profits a religious little'.

Perhaps it is in the experience of solitude we learn the art of living in peace within ourselves in the loving surrender that is forever associated with the lure of the desert and the heart's journey.

I have completed a doctoral thesis on The Spirituality of the Heart in the context of the Franciscan Eremitical Tradition. A Scriptural understanding of "heart", "desert" and "conversion" is the basis of this, both historically and in the present day. I have written two books based on that thesis and these are directly related to the Franciscan hermitage experience. There our hearts are exposed to the personal, passionate, unconditional and lavish love of God. There we are challenged, changed, purified and sanctified. As we lovingly surrender, the Holy Spirit leads us to total union with God in Christ in the intimacy of transforming love. If you wish to explore this further the books will be available from Gracewing Publishers in February 2008. The first is called An Affair of the Heart (ISBN 978 085244 690 4); the second is called Come Apart and Rest for a While (ISBN 978 085244 691 1).

I wish to conclude this article in the words of our Third Order Regular Rule:  
"The brothers and sisters whom the Lord has called to a life of contemplation should show forth their dedication to God with renewed joy each day and celebrate the love which the Father has for the whole world, who created us, redeemed us and who out of his mercy alone will save us." *F*



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