

## St. Francis' Rule for Hermitages *Samuel SSF*



The short document written by St Francis for 'those who wish to live in hermitages' is not really a rule, establishing or codifying a form of life within the then emerging Order of Friars Minor, but is rather some advice to those of his brothers who were already drawn to the eremitical life. Francis himself, as we know, spent much of his time (perhaps up to two thirds of every year) pursuing a contemplative pattern of prayer with small groups of brothers in out-of-the-way places; the Carceri high up on Monte Subasio above Assisi, and certain places in the Rieti Valley to the south, Greccio, Fonte Colombo, Poggio Bustone and La Foresta, were favourite locations of his. Other brothers certainly followed his example and Francis was moved to give guidance to this way of life.

What's striking in the Rule is that the eremitical life is clearly understood by Francis to be not an individual but a communal vocation; he stipulates that the hermitage should contain three or four brothers, enough to make a viable community. The daily offices, Matins, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline, are to be prayed together and meals are taken in common. This is not a private enterprise, an escape into solitude to find 'space' for oneself; rather, fraternity is an essential part of this eremitic way. Each brother is to have his own cell for personal prayer and for sleep, but, as a visit today to the Carceri reveals, the cells were little more than hollows in the rock of a larger cave and the brothers would not have lived far apart from each other. Silence is to be kept from after Compline but it is by no means total and some communication between the brothers is assumed. The enclosure is strict in that there's a warning against permitting others to enter or eat in the hermitage, yet the brothers living this life are seen as very much part of the wider fraternity of the Order; they are under the guidance and the discipline of the Minister and the Guardian who visit from time to time. This is not isolation from community but solitude within it.

Perhaps the most noted aspect of the Rule is its stipulation that in this little hermit community two of the brothers should be 'the mother' while the other two live as 'sons'. The 'mothers' should keep the life of Martha, i.e. serving, cooking, cleaning etc, while the 'sons' should follow the life of Mary, sitting at the feet of the Lord in contemplative attention and prayer (Luke 10.42). Throughout the Middle Ages the model of Mary and Martha had been used to distinguish the vocation of the religious who had withdrawn from the world and who was therefore free to be wholly attentive to the Lord, from that of the 'secular' Christian involved in the affairs and concerns of the world; the vocation of the 'Marys' being considered higher than that of 'Marthas'. Francis, however, makes no such hierarchical distinction. The 'sons' who are focussing primarily on contemplative prayer are to be dependent upon their

'mothers', 'beg[ging] alms from them as poor little ones out of the love of the Lord God', and periodically the roles would be reversed so that those who had withdrawn for a time of intense prayer took their turn in serving while the others were left free to go deeper into contemplation. Thus any hint of 'religious competitiveness' is dispelled by the mutual care and support required among the brethren; both the contemplative and the more active life are integrated within the hermitage. Poverty and humility, as in the rest of the Order, are to be paramount. The Rule ends with Francis exhorting the brothers to 'strive to observe conscientiously and eagerly everything mentioned above'. Desire is the foundation of this way of life, a desire for God in the context of intimate fraternity in which the brothers are reminded that they are dependant upon each other and owe each other mutual love and obedience.

Thomas Merton, in his essay 'Franciscan Eremiticism', writes that 'the importance [of Francis' Rule for Hermitages] lies in the spirit which it exhales, a spirit of simplicity and charity which pervades even the life of solitary contemplation'. There are no austerities or penances outlined which the hermits must perform, how many hours must be devoted to prayer etc,....'Francis simply communicates the atmosphere of love which is to form the ideal climate of prayer in the hermitage'. This is a prescription not for eccentric piety nor for reclusive introversion, but for a fraternal way of life in which the brothers may know that the authenticity of their prayer is measured by the humble care and love that they give to one another. *f*

