

THIRD ORDER STUDY WEEK – ALNMOUTH 2008

Francis's Rule for Hermitages

In preparation for the Study Week, I re-read Brother Ramon's "Franciscan Spirituality". When I first read it several years ago I ignored the references because abbreviations like 1 Cel, LP, Sp, 3S, LM, Omn, etc. meant nothing to me, but a Sabbatical of two terms spent studying at the Franciscan International Study Centre in Canterbury has changed all that. Above all I have discovered Francis's own writings, not just the *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, *The Praises of the Lord God* and *The Blessing for Brother Leo* which I knew already, but *The Letter to the Faithful* (written in 1214, possibly as a simple Rule for the Third Order), *The Office of the Passion* and *The Rule for Hermitages*.

It is the latter which I have chosen to look at in more detail. The idea of a Retreat was new to me when I started my journey along the Franciscan path, and the first time I found myself eating in silence with a group of strangers, I felt acutely embarrassed. To find out more I booked on a "Retreat for Beginners", but we were plunged into silence without warning on the first evening, and my most vivid memory is of trying to persuade another lady to stay for the whole weekend when she couldn't bear the enforced silence.

Francis's description of the "hermitage experience" seems rather different from what I had discovered. *The Rule for Hermitages* is a short document, so I am quoting it in full:-

1. Those who wish to dwell in a religious way in hermitages may be three brothers or, at the most, four; let two of these be the "mother" and have two "sons" or at least one.
2. Let the two who are "mothers" keep the life of Martha and the two "sons" keep the life of Mary (cf. Lk 10:38-42) and have one enclosure in which each one may have his cell in which he may pray and sleep.
3. And let them always recite Compline of the day immediately after sundown; and strive to maintain silence, recite their Hours, rise for Matins, and seek first the Kingdom of God and His justice (Mt 6:33).
4. And let them recite Prime at the proper hour and, after Terce, they may end their silence, speak with and go to their mothers.
5. And, when it pleases them, they can beg alms from them as poor little ones out of love of the Lord God.
6. And afterwards let them recite Sext, None and, at the proper hour, Vespers.

7. And they may not permit anyone to enter or eat in the enclosure where they dwell.
8. Let those brothers who are the “mothers” strive to stay far from everyone and, because of obedience to their minister, protect their “sons” from everyone so that no one can speak with them.
9. And those “sons” may not talk with anyone except with their “mothers” and with the minister and his custodian when it pleases them to visit with the Lord’s blessing.
10. The “sons”, however, may periodically assume the role of the “mothers”, taking turns for a time as they have mutually decided. Let them strive to observe conscientiously and eagerly everything mentioned above.

(Translation by R. Armstrong, OFM Cap)

I would like to suggest some questions for possible discussion:-

- Is there a place for talking during a retreat? If so, when and how?
- What worship should be included in the 21st century?
- Can *The Rule for Hermitages* be adapted for use in a Local Group or local church situation, or perhaps in a private home?
- If those meeting on retreat are strangers to one another, how can a sense of “fraternity” be established?
- How can a “solitary” remain part of the Area or Local Group “fraternity”? Bearing in mind our commitment as tertiaries to community, what advice should be given to a novice who feels called to be a “solitary”?

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