

A tranquil man is honoured for his commitment and contribution

**Stephen
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CAMPBELL RIVER

As the overnight rain gave way to a drizzly, half-hearted morning, I made my way toward St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church for the Mass celebrating 40 years since Father Charles Brandt was ordained a hermit priest.

At first, Brandt can seem a bit austere, as one might expect of somebody in his 80s who has committed a life to the discipline of an ascetic's regimen of prayer, meditation and self-imposed solitude. In fact, he's a warm, welcoming man, a man of eloquence and imagination, a man of letters.

Many people must feel the same way I do because when I arrived at St. Patrick's, the distractions of Super Bowl Sunday notwithstanding, it was standing room only with Bishop Richard Gagnon of the Diocese of Vancouver Island presiding.

This didn't surprise me considering the esteem in which Brandt is held, both for the guidance his calm presence offers and for his steady commitment to reconciling the natural world with human affairs both temporal and spiritual.

For Catholics, of course, the rite had a profound religious significance. Brandt represents an ancient tradition of wise men and women withdrawing from the world, the better to reflect upon how best to serve God.

Yet I spotted more than a few irreligious folk who had come to honour him, too. Can there be higher praise for a holy man than that even unbelievers express gratitude?

Brandt commands respect not only because, as the bishop reminded those present, the hermit's life shows us the importance of silence in a noisy world, but also because of the bigness of his vision.

Humanity and nature, Brandt teaches, are braided into a continuity of being and divine purpose that makes them essential to one another.

Among the few officially recognized hermit priests in the western world — he's one of the first to be so ordained in the past 200 years — Brandt began his contemplative life on the banks of the Tsolum River near Courtenay

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among a colony of similarly inclined souls who were encouraged by then-bishop Remi de Roo in 1964.

Brandt had served as a navigator with the U.S. air force from 1943 to 1946. After the war, he did a degree in biology, was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1951, then became a Roman Catholic and eventually emigrated to British Columbia.

The hermitage, just west of the old First World War soldier's settlement of Merville in the Comox Valley, began with eight men and then grew to 13, each required to build his own shelter and provide his own living. When the colony later dispersed, Brandt moved to the Oyster River, a bit farther north, which is how I came to know him.

The Oyster is a beautiful stream that rises between Mount Albert Edward and Alexandra Peak and tumbles down to the Strait of Georgia a bit north of Miracle Beach Provincial Park.

It's always been renowned for its winter steelhead, cutthroat trout in the lower river and an abundance of pink salmon that can be caught on the fly in the estuary in late July and August.

But the river has taken a drubbing from progress. Landowners who built on the floodplain sought to tame its meandering with riprap that speeded the flow and changed the hydrology. A marina was permitted to gouge a boat basin in the estuary. Loggers moved into the steep slopes and canyons of the upper river, changing runoff patterns.

Where some felt despair, Brandt provided a unifying vision of what might be, advocating for the idea of a "sacramental commons" in which all living things, including humans, have their dignity and place.

Around this idea gathered people determined to do better by the little river and each other.

Today, management of the Oyster River watershed — still not perfect by any means, for what human endeavour can be? — has emerged as a model for cooperative stewardship of a living resource.

That's why I and so many others were quite happy to forgo the transient thrills of the football circus to honour this tranquil man who meditates upon eternity and works for the ages.

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