



—Dave Paterson photo

SPIRITUAL FATHER JAMES WINANDY . . . a moment for prayer.

## *Eight lonely paths*

By AL ARNASON

On an abandoned farm near Courtenay, on Vancouver Island, eight men are conducting an experiment in a way of life hitherto unpracticed in North America.

They are the Hermits of St. John the Baptist, a Roman Catholic order of recluses living in isolated cabins deep in the quiet of a cedar and spruce forest.

"They are unique in the western church," says Bishop Remi de Roo of the diocese of Victoria, under whose authority the ecclesiastic experiment is being conducted.

"I am not aware of any other authentic hermitage of this kind in the whole western world, although there may have been some experiments tried and abandoned," he said.

In western Europe there have been no such hermits since about the time of the French revolution.

The bishop was speaking during a rare visit to the 105-acre hermitage.

He took pains to explain the apparent paradox of hermits living in a colony.

"They are definitely not a community," he said. "Each hermit has his own hermitage, built by himself, and each sets his own program, earns his own living and only rarely has contact with the others.

"Their first purpose is to lead a life of prayer and contemplation. They see themselves as representatives of their fellow man, seeking to make amends for the sins of man."

By stripping away man's worldly wants,

they seek to become worthy of forming a link between God and man, according to their interpretation.

The things they strive to avoid are listed in a small book issued to each one. The tract, with the eye-catching title "A Manual For Hermits," says: "What agitates the soul is disordered passion, vain and useless reading, gossip, resentment, envy, anger, impatience, the wish to be admired and loved. These are all obstacles to prayer."

The manual elaborates on the hermits' relationships with one another.

"We are a group of solitaries, with each member of the group wishing to remain as truly solitary as if he had no neighbor at all. . . . We have settled in a group to defend us against our own selves—against our instability, our weakness and our self-will—as well as to defend us against the intrusions of the outside world."

Four of the eight brothers at the hermitage are priests, the others laymen. They are not encouraged to seek priesthood—it is considered a sign of pride to desire Holy Orders.

Their small shelters are dotted about the property well out of sight and sound of one another.

The priests have a church stipend, but the laymen must earn all of their physically meagre living. One is a bookbinder, another an artist, another keeps live-

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BROTHER MATTHEW CASEY



Brother Casey built his home out of old two-by-fours and shakes.



BROTHER CHARLES BRANDT

## Hermits seek link between God and man

stock. The fourth has not yet chosen a livelihood.

Most are principally vegetarians and each has a vegetable patch for his own use. Most bake their own wholewheat bread to add protein to the vegetable diet.

There is none of the flagellant or the physical filth of the ancients in the lives of these hermits. Their approach to health is modern and almost clinical.

James Winandy, a 58-year-old Belgian Benedictine of the French order, is the elected Holy Father of the group.

The grey-bearded scripture scholar is known throughout world church circles for his writing in ecclesiastic journals.

His personal search for the hermit life is the backbone of the success of the experimental program at the hermitage.

Before beginning his first lone hermitage in Martinique, French West Indies, he had spent a decade as abbot of the Abbey of Clervaux in Luxembourg.

"The people of Martinique are very reverent," he said in an interview. "I have never seen so many people in my life as when I was a hermit there. There was someone to visit me every day. They think of a hermit as a sort of holy man."

He described the failure of an earlier experiment in hermit life with which he was connected in Texas. Privacy, he said, could only be found in unfenced, flat and

treeless Texas plains by buying a huge tract of land, which the hermits could not afford.

He feels now that he has found his home. "I hope that God will let me stay here until my death."

He credits the attitude of Bishop de Roo with the success of the hermitage.

"He understands our way of life—a rare thing in the Western Church. Many bishops cannot without difficulty understand such a way of life."

Two of the hermits and their differences illustrate the separate paths the individuals are taking toward their goal.

One is Brother Charles Brandt of Kansas City, a 41-year-old Cornell University graduate and ex-Anglican priest. He was ordained a Roman Catholic sub-deacon last year—two steps away from priesthood.

A Second World War U.S. Air Force navigator, he is on leave of absence, as many of the others, from his order. He was head of the bookbinding section of the Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of New Mellary in Dubuque, Iowa. He will earn his living in his tiny book bindery be-

tween daily reading, praying and penance.

What will he contribute to the world as a hermit?

"The work of a parish priest is explicit and open. But whom does he depend upon for his ministry? A good priest will tell you he depends on the prayers of the religious."

The other hermit is layman Brother Matthew Casey, 28, of Syracuse, New York.

His home is something of a contrast to Brother Charles' where bookbinding equipment requires electric power.

If a movie casting director wanted to find a man to play a centurion of the Praetorian guard, this full-bearded, straight-nosed young man would be a natural choice.

He is city-bred, but lives under primitive conditions and is learning to cope with nature.

It takes him two hours a day in the winter to saw the wood devoured by the space heater in the centre of the conical hut that is his home.

Only the day before he learned that it

doesn't pay to throw coal oil on a flagging fire. His dark hair and beard still carry the mark of the blast of flame that followed.

The life is different from the one he left in the Trappist monastery where he spent the last four years working as a baker.

His imaginative home took the shape it did because he wanted to spend as little money as possible on it.

"I went to the lumber yard and asked what the cheapest lumber was that they had. They said six-foot two-by-fours were 15 cents each."

He bought a load, then planned his house to fit the material.

Despite their varied background, the two men share one immediately noticeable quality—serenity.

It shows in the quiet confidence that keeps their voices just above a level of audibility, in the calm comprehension of their own shortcomings and their dignified humor.

The history-making experiment is a success now, says Bishop de Roo, but there are probably two years of continued trial operation of the hermitage before it may receive canonical or fully established recognition from Rome.

To hermits, two years is a very insignificant period.

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