

# FATHER CHARLES BRANDT

## CANADA'S HERMIT PRIEST

Twenty six years ago when Brandt came to Vancouver Island he became, according to the Island Diocese, the first man in North America to be ordained as a hermit priest, and reputedly the first in the Catholic Church in nearly 200 years.



Born in Kansas City in 1923, Brandt served as a navigator in the United States Air Force, before continuing with his studies to obtain both Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Divinity degrees. Ordained first as an Anglican and then as a Catholic, Brandt began to explore the origins of monastic life in the church, and became absorbed in re-establishing these ancient and almost lost traditions. He was encouraged by his friend Thomas Merton, the renowned Catholic monk who worked to develop a form of Christian-Buddhist meditation and contemplation, and also inspired by the eco-theologian Thomas Berry.

Discovering that his Cistercian order, that follows the rule of St. Benedict, was originally of hermits, Brandt felt himself drawn to a life of "deeper silence and solitude". Thus in 1965 he left his Trappist monastery in Iowa to move to Vancouver Island where he joined a small colony of theologians and scholars who had established a colony of hermits in an old logging camp beside the Tsolum River.

Inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, Brandt does his "walking meditation" in the forest and beside the river banks, in the company of "his brothers and sisters" the deer, otters, insects, birds and creatures of the West Coast Forest. What could be more fitting for one who has discovered that "the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects to be exploited." It is not an easy thing to do, claims Brandt "to realize that the human soul and the earth and the spirit of God are all interconnected, all one."

While Father Charles Brandt is devoted to contemplation and meditation upon God, earth and humankind, and how far the three have grown apart, he also had to live in accordance with the colony's principle that each person has to earn his own bread. Brandt became accomplished at bookbinding, which he later went on to study in Europe. Here he also became skilled in paper and art conser-

vation and restoration. However, when the hermitage became too large and crowded to permit solitude and prayer, Brandt purchased 30 acres of secluded land in the north of Vancouver Island on the banks of the Oyster River.

On returning in 1984 to his old hermitage on the Tsolum River he was horrified to find copper leachate from an abandoned Mount Washington mine had seeped into the river killing both plant and fish life. The river was considered "dead". Thus began his six year battle with politicians and media, that eventually resulted in getting a Government commitment for \$1 million towards cleanup and restoration costs.

Brandt has recently been awarded several prestigious environmental awards including the Cal Woods Conservation Award, and the Roderick Haig-Brown Conservation Award.

Spending the greater part of his life in devotion and solitude, Brandt commits over five hours daily to sitting cross-legged, or walking in solitary prayer and meditation. He also celebrates Mass daily in his tiny wooden chapel. He regards these spiritual exercises as only the beginning of the spiritual journey that leads towards the submergence or "death" of the ego. Still making time for artwork and book preservation work, he also leads meditation retreats at his hermitage. He is a member of numerous environmental groups, and maintains an impressive correspondence with politicians using media coverage to publicize his concerns with what is happening to the environment.

Like the monks of the 12th century, Father Brandt believes that a lifetime of prayer for the planet is far from irrelevant. "People in contemplation are assisting in bringing about a major planetary shift in consciousness," he maintains. "The human community and the natural world must go into the future as a single sacred community or we will both perish in the desert."

**"Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred."**

*from the Open Letter from the scientists to the religious community*

# SACRED SPACES