

Holy hermit fishing for satisfaction

By Steve Berry
Staff Reporter

Priest comes out to unite his community

In Campbell River he's known as an environmentalist who has brought loggers, residents and activists together to plan the future of their community.

He has an abiding passion for fly-fishing. He's a restorer of fine art on paper and a noted bookbinder.

Father Charles Brandt is a hermit-priest who lives a life of contemplation and worship on the banks of the Oyster River.

Today, the 70-year-old man will travel over logging roads the 24 kilometres into Campbell River to give the Easter Sunday sermon at St. Patrick's rectory.

Father Brandt will begin his homily with quotes from T.S. Eliot. His theme will be man's emptiness that waits to be filled with a resurrected life.

"The idea is that most people have a tremendous emptiness. The way out of this emptiness is the resurrected life," Brandt said from his isolated home on 12 hectares (30 acres) that sits on almost a kilometre of riverfront.

His journey to the salmon-rich Oyster River was a long one, started many years ago in his home town of Kansas City, Mo., and then to a Benedictine abbey in Iowa.

Brandt left the abbey in 1965 when he learned of a group of hermit monks who had gathered from around the world in a remote site on the Tsolum River north of Courtenay.

"Everybody back in the '60s was trying to discover their roots," Brandt remembered.

"In our readings we discovered that the first monks were hermits in the desert." He

decided to join the hermit monks of B.C.

"It was quite an unusual thing really," he now understates of the six official hermits who lived there. That number sometimes rose to 13.

The group broke up when they realized they were becoming a community — they were meant, after all, to be hermits.

In 1965 he was ordained by Roman Catholic Bishop Remi de Roo as the first hermit-priest in 200 years.

After spending five years at the Tsolum site Brandt moved his hermitage — a six-by-six metre cedar-board shelter — to the Oyster River on a truck.

A basement was built. Later, a contractor added a conservatory and upper floor for bedroom and study.

"I'm still a hermit," Brandt said.

"I live a very isolated life. I'm alone at least 80 per cent of the time."

Brandt said being a hermit "is a matter of being separated yet united with everyone."

As part of that united spirit he leads retreats, gives sermons once every two weeks and founded the Oyster River Watershed Management Committee.

"He's done a fantastic job in bringing together a wide array of interests to talk about the Oyster River," said Ted Kimoto,



Province file photo

Father Charles Brandt enjoys fly-fishing the Oyster River in his spare time.

logging manager for MacMillan Bloedel.

"He's an absolutely fascinating guy, a real genuine human being."

Brandt rises at 5 a.m. and meditates for the first of two half-hour periods in the day.

He holds a daily mass for himself and reads the psalms of David and studies.

He sometimes travels to Courtenay or Campbell River to attend meetings on the

environment, on which subject his thoughtfulness is mixed with his spirituality.

Brandt spends about three hours a day with his bookbinding and restoration work. And the rest fly-fishing the Oyster River.

"It's a wonderful river. You can start at the ocean and walk the whole length of 28 miles (45 kilometres). And you can fly-fish the length of it."