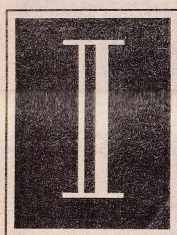


# On Sacred Ground

By FRANCIS PENNY



It's more of a road than a driveway - a long, narrow dirt track running through a stand of fir. At the end a simple, wooden building marked with a sign reading "Hermitage" sits in a clearing.

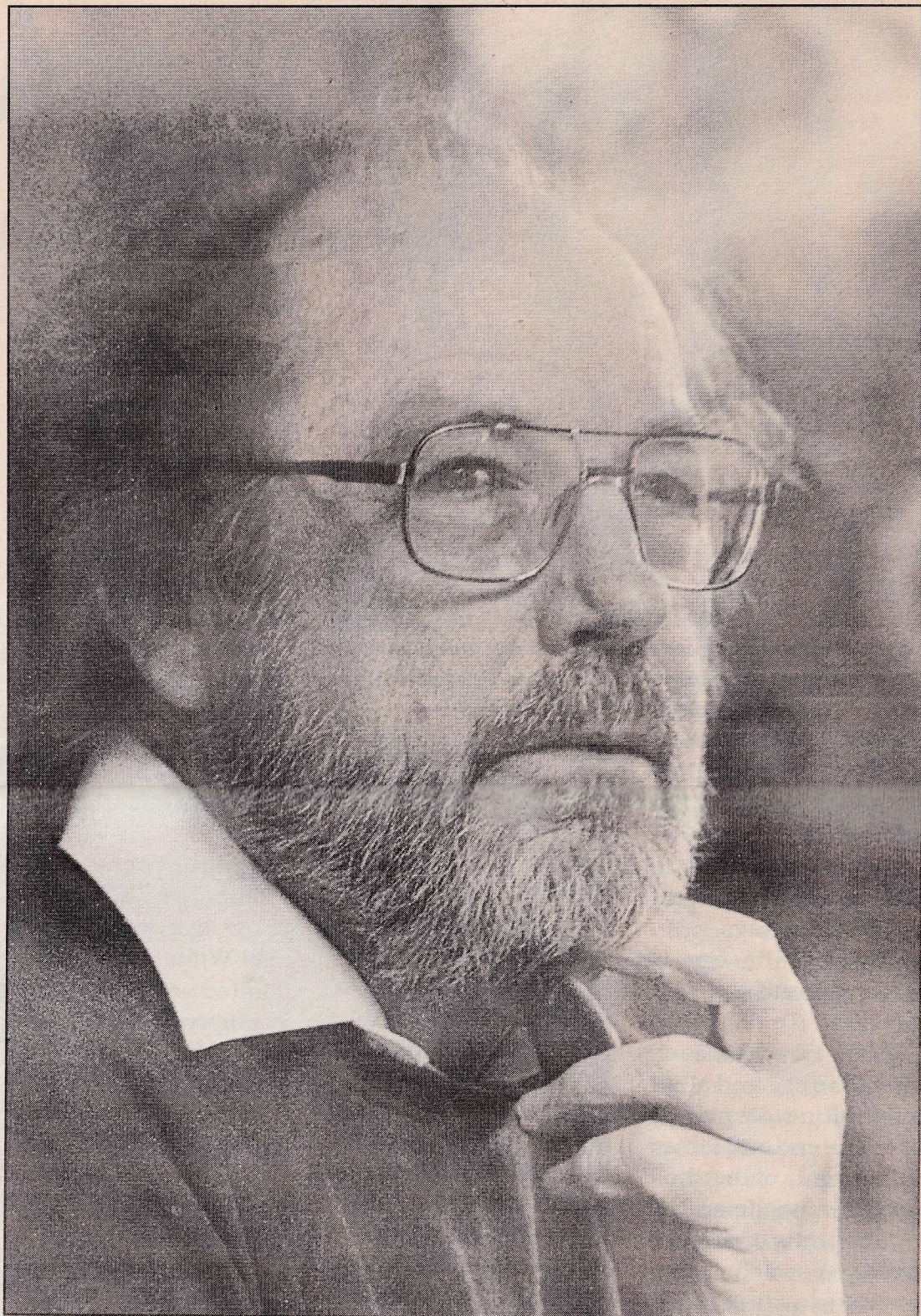
This is sacred ground. The cross is obvious - tall, wooden, brown, affixed to the house. But there's a sanctity here extending beyond the human symbol, to the forest and its creatures.

The lone resident, hermit priest Father Charles Brandt, spends time with his spiritual family - the trees and forest creatures - in "walking meditations" inspired with a sense of the universe as "a communion of subjects, not objects."

Today, some of Brandt's "brothers and sisters" lie dead on the forest floor, a testament that humans and the natural world can share the planet. It's called eco-logging, a process of thinning a forest by about 15 per cent, which opens the canopy and allows undergrowth and wildlife to flourish.

His voice is soft, whispery. "A forest is an ecological community," Brandt says. "In a forest there may be as many as 8,000 different species of arthropods, insects and spiders. And that's only the ones we know."

"I think it's a better forest than it was before and also it's an example of how forestry can be done, an alternative to clearcut logging."



Hermit priest Charles Brandt: "Everything out there is articulating itself, it's expressing itself, and if we were sensitive enough we would be able to pick that up." Photo by Boomer Jerritt

He's been likened to St. Francis of Assisi who, having communed with animals and birds, was rewarded with marks on his body resembling those of the crucified Christ.

Brandt calls himself a "radical conservative" - orthodox theologically, yet open to the enchanted world before the dawn of Christianity and the complex instantaneous relationships of particle physics.

"Everything out there is articulating itself, it's expressing itself and if we were sensitive

enough we would be able to pick that up," he says.

"I don't mean this as an airy-fairy type. Even a stone has a primitive type of awareness. I mean, an atom has an interiority, something that keeps it together."

Brandt's rewards after 40 years of pursuing a contemplative life - one of meditation, prayer and study - are more earthly than those of St. Francis. He's been chosen the recipient of two environmental awards in recent years and is one of a handful of hermit priests in the

Roman Catholic Church.

Inside his tidy dwelling he sits cross-legged in meditation for as many as five hours each day. In a tiny chapel off the living room, Brandt, born in Kansas City in 1923 and raised a Methodist, conducts a daily Catholic mass by himself.

His religious eccentricity and the ecological honors have thrust him into a media spotlight that included a story on the front page of the *Vancouver Sun*, which was then syndicated across the country, and

appearances on the CBC television shows *Man Alive* and *On The Road Again*.

Brandt chuckles. His celebrity is a bit mystifying and a little uncomfortable for him. He spends about 90 per cent of his time alone, but he likes people, and feels he has a responsibility to speak out.

"I don't hesitate to do this, because I have a message, an environmental message. I call it the 'new story', the story of the universe and I would like everybody to know that," he says. "So I'm not shy about talking about it. If I can use the media to do that I will."

Once every month Brandt conducts mass in Campbell River and gives a homily indirectly associated with the environment, but the "new story" makes few appearances in churches.

It's a story acknowledging the cosmos as developing and interconnected by origin. What Brandt wants is to have people understand this as a sacred story.

"Obviously there is a very fundamental element in the Catholic Church," Brandt says. "Not only in Christianity is there fundamentalism, but in Buddhism, in Hinduism, in Taoism, there's that aspect that really won't look at the new story of the universe because it's a threat to them."

"And it means they have to change their thinking a bit and to realize what science is finding is applicable to their own lives. It's not really a threat."

When he's not taking his message to the media or the congregation, Brandt leads a meditation group twice a month on his 30 acre property next to the

Oyster River.

Occasionally he'll accept a speaking engagement to further the cause of spirituality and the environment.

Recently he spoke at a University of Victoria symposium of landscape architects from across North America.

And from time to time he teaches 10-day university courses on the curatorial care of paper. Brandt is a "beautician" of books - a professional paper and book conservator, slowing the inevitable deterioration of documents, books and works of art.

Working about three hours each afternoon - his mornings are reserved for meditation, study and reading - Brandt painstakingly dismantles the often rare volumes, then washes the pages to take out the acid in the fibres, then re-sews the books.

In his tidy work area he shows off a mammoth leather-bound volume of charts titled *The India Pilot* (circa 1800).

"I do anything with books," he says. "I don't do a lot of ordinary edition binding. I limit myself to what I call restoration binding."

Some of his projects date back to the time of Johann Gutenberg, the inventor of moveable type, whose first published work, a bible, came off the presses in 1454. On the counter rests the famous book, the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, an illustrated world history from the creation to the present (first printed on July 12, 1493). And in the past he has restored an Emily Carr print.

But one of his most memorable jobs was conserving the first volume of the four-volume *Birds of America* folio, by John James

Audobon. Brandt has a degree in ornithology from Cornell University.

His healing hands work well. Brandt has worked for the Canadian Conservation Institute as a paper and book conservator, and he's set up a state-of-the-art, \$1 million paper conservation lab for the Manitoba government.

It's a long way from the boy scout who got his first taste of bookbinding by taking apart and rebinding his scout manual to add another merit badge to his collection. The lad who would later become a U.S. Air Force navigator during the Second World War had begun to chart a course that would take him to the very roots of monastic life, where bookbinding was a traditional craft.

But first he would become an Anglican deacon, complete a Bachelor of Divinity and be ordained to the Anglican priesthood. He would become a follower and friend of the renowned Catholic monk Thomas Merton, who developed a form of Christian-Buddhist contemplation.

"I ended up studying at a Benedictine place in Oklahoma," says Brandt. "I was received into the Catholic faith when I was there and that's where I learned bookbinding."

In 1956, Merton encouraged him to become a hermit, so Brandt went to Iowa where he spent eight years in a Trappist monastery.

"Then (in 1965) we heard about the hermits on Vancouver Island. We were all trying to discover our roots and we discovered that the first monks were really hermits in the desert around the third and

fourth century.”

The Comox Valley hermits were led by a retired abbot. Still, Brandt needed permission from the abbot of his monastery in Iowa to come to the colony on the Tsolum River. Brandt's bookbinding expertise enabled him to meet one of the conditions of joining the colony - that each monk earn his own living. He also worked part-time helping to manage a Tsolum River fish hatchery.

He was ordained as a Catholic hermit priest at Canadian Martyrs Church in Courtenay in 1966, the first such ceremony in the western world in 200 years.

Four years later the colony was too crowded for him, so he packed up his belongings and trucked his 20' by 20' hermitage, built using salvaged wood from old farm buildings, to Black Creek.

Fueled by an article about the death of the Tsolum River due to mining pollution, Brandt began writing and speaking about the environment and accepted the role of chairman of the Tsolum River Enhancement Committee. For that undying dedication he was awarded the Cal Woods Conservation Award.

And in 1992, Brandt was honored with the Roderick Haig-Brown Conservation Award for working to protect the Oyster River.

“But it's just work where I've been,” he says. “I don't go out to Clayoquot. I've done what I could because I have a responsibility. I live on this river and I lived on the Tsolum River.”

He belongs to a number of environmental groups, but he doesn't attend meetings. In-



*Brandt's 20' by 20' hermitage, now in Merville, is made of salvaged wood from old farm buildings. Photo by Boomer Jerritt*

stead, he writes letters, “lots of letters”, and he meditates for the planet and himself, seeking the “death of the ego.”

One of six children (three boys, three girls), Brandt's family was a little unsure of his career choice. “They don't think it's a completely wasted life.”

He laughs and resumes his thoughtful tone. “I think my mother and my dad, in the beginning, were a little disappointed.

“They were quite proud about me being ordained to the priesthood, but I think they had the idea I should be more useful, you know, maybe social work or teach or something.”

When it comes to meditation, Brandt doesn't hesitate to say that it's useful.

“We have to undergo transformation. We're in the midst of a real deep pathology. That's why we're closing down our life support systems. We are dysfunctional in the sense that we've been functioning out of a human to human, human to God relation-

ship with almost a total exclusion of a human/earth relationship.

“To change that we have to change ourselves and we have to ask other people to do the same thing. People in contemplation assist in bringing about a major planetary shift in consciousness.”

Brandt bases much of his work on Thomas Berry, a noted Catholic eco-theologian. One of Berry's provocative quotations hangs on the wall of Brandt's conservation lab, and it's how Brandt often sums up his work.

“The human community and the natural world will go into the future as a single sacred community or we will both perish in the desert.”

The words are ominous, but Brandt assures a visitor that Berry is full of hope. And that hope includes him.

“I think our schools and churches have been very backward as far as the ecological movement is concerned, but it's beginning to gather momentum now.”