

CHURCH



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■ BRANDT: "To St. Francis, nature was a revelation of God."

Modern-day hermit seeks God in nature

By Douglas Todd
Vancouver Sun

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solitary prayer and meditation. He also conducts the Catholic mass daily by himself in his tiny wooden chapel.

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BLACK CREEK, B.C. — The story goes that St. Francis of Assisi, who spiritually communed with animals and birds, was rewarded late in life for his dedication with the "stigmata" — marks on his body resembling the wounds of the crucified Christ.

Today, St. Francis' modern-day counterpart, Vancouver Island hermit-priest Charles Brandt, receives something more worldly: prestigious environmental awards.

Twenty-five years ago, Brandt became the first man in North America to be ordained a hermit-priest, according to the island diocese. He spends almost every moment among his "brothers and sisters," the creatures in the West Coast forest.

At the end of a long, narrow dirt road through a stand of Douglas fir stands his small, tidy wooden dwelling, marked with a sign reading "Hermitage" and a wooden cross taller than a man.

Next to his beloved Oyster River, Brandt, 68, walked recently in the pattering rain, breathing the pure air, completely at home on the earth he feels "is part of us."

Inspired by St. Francis, Brandt does his "walking meditations" among the forest's deer, raccoons, otters, woodpeckers, flickers, finches and warblers.

"You just put one foot in front of the other, with no destination in mind," he said. "You're just there — in communion with the animals and birds. St. Francis was in touch with all nature. To him, it was a revelation of God."

St. Francis also cherished his hermitages, where his followers spent lifetimes in devotion. Sitting cross-legged, Brandt commits more than five hours each day to

solitary prayer and meditation. He also conducts the Catholic mass daily by himself in his tiny wooden chapel.

Unlike the medieval church mystic Julian of Norwich, who literally had a brick wall built around her so she could connect with God without disturbance, Brandt makes clear he is not a recluse. He is a hermit.

That means he spends only about 90 per cent of his waking hours without human company.

In the other 10 per cent, Brandt's love of nature, and people, draws him into the world of politics and teaching, just as it did St. Francis. Brandt leads meditation retreats at his hermitage, and is a member of many environmental groups.

"I never go to the meetings," he says. But he writes letters — constantly.

For his undying dedication to saving Vancouver Island's Tsolum River from mining pollution, which put him uncomfortably in the public spotlight a few years ago, he received the Cal Woods Conservation Award.

Last month, for additional work spent protecting the ecological diversity of the "bio-region" he lives in near Campbell River, he was honored with the Roderick Haig-Brown Conservation Award.

With the full support of Vancouver Island Bishop Remi de Roo, Brandt is one of only a handful of ecclesiastical hermits now working in North America.

He admits he sometimes battles loneliness.

But after almost a lifetime of prayer for the planet, combined with activism, he believes ecological progress is occurring. "I'm much more positive about the way the environment is going," he says, "than I was 25 years ago."

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Vatican rejects methods slur

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VATICAN CITY — The Vatican has angrily rejected Greek Orthodox Church accusations that Pope John Paul had used "underhand and deceitful" methods to strengthen his influence in Eastern Europe.

Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said in a statement last week: "These are groundless charges that take no account of facts."