

A monk of the diaspora

BY M. CHARLES BRANDT

Dom Jacques Winandy, a Benedictine monk from Belgium, who spent seven years on Vancouver Island in the 1960s founding a remote hermitage, died recently at his home abbey in Clervaux, Luxembourg. He was 96 years old.

A close friend of Trappist monk Thomas Merton of Kentucky, who also sought more solitude within the monastic life, Dom Winandy was an internationally acclaimed Scripture scholar. In 1964, already well-known in Europe as the elected abbot of his community, Dom Winandy came to the small town of Headquarters, Vancouver Island, at the invitation of the Bishop of Victoria, Remi de Roo. Dom Winandy sought to establish a tiny hermitage on the banks of the Tsolum River, a few miles west of Merville.

The colony of eight hermits, which he led, was mostly unknown to local residents and even to the Catholic Church in general. But it became well-known to the worldwide monastic community, offering a way of life known in the early church that had all but disappeared in the last 500 years.

At Vatican II (1962-65), monks worldwide were discovering their historical roots, studying the life of St. Anthony (AD 250-350) in the deserts of the Middle East. Many 20th-century monks felt a call to return to this third century AD eremitic life with its simplicity and monastic integrity, and to enter into pure and constant prayer.

Dom Winandy provided the opportunity for aspiring monks to live the hermit life. Merton said in 1968: "When you undertook this project of offering to people a hermit group with a minimum of structure, it was even before the council, even before Bishop de Roo made an intervention in the council, speaking of the need to recognize the hermit life in the church and to permit some monks to fulfill solitary vocations. Your work was epoch-making and it had a decisive effect on the rest of us."

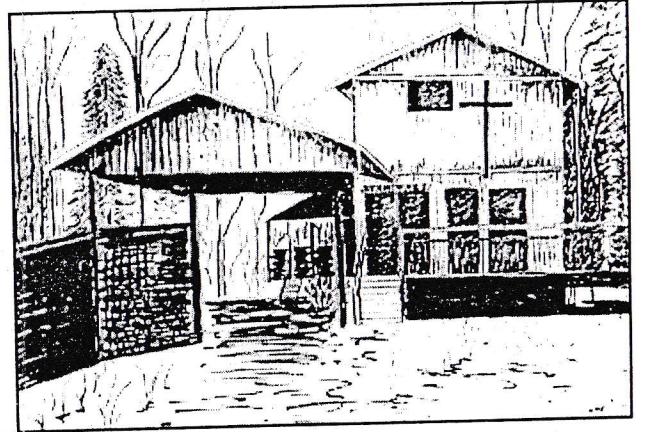
The desire for solitude came early to Dom Winandy. When elected Abbot of Clervaux Abbey in 1946, he had applied for admission to the Carthusians, a religious order with a strong eremitical bent. He abandoned the idea of a Carthusian vocation and then took it up again in 1962.

As a youth, Dom Winandy had entered the Benedictine Abbey of Clervaux. He was a brilliant student, earning two degrees from San Anselmo in Rome.

As the Second World War broke out, Dom Winandy was master of novices and professor of philosophy at Clervaux. Expelled from their abbey by the Nazis, the monks spent the war years in exile in religious houses in Belgium. Immediately after the war, Dom Winandy was elected abbot. Somewhat reluctantly, he accepted the office and presided over the reconstruction of the abbey, which had been desecrated by the Nazis. He stepped down 11 years later and worked in Rome for a year for the Sacred Congregation of Religious. From Rome, Dom Winandy went to lend a hand at the new Benedictine monastery in Martinique. There, he met Canadian Fr. Lionel Pare, who had studied with the Augustinians in Quebec City. Fr. Pare spoke to Dom Winandy of his strong calling to a life of solitude and, at the end of that year, arrangements were made for Fr. Pare to establish a hermitage for himself and one for Dom Winandy under the wing of the Bishop of Martinique.

Before long, the word got out about the hermits on Martinique. Many monks came to see for themselves: Fr. Sylvanus de Aguiar and Gerald Groves, Fr. Hughes Vandoorne, Fr. Dunstan Morrissey. In 1963, more candidates sought acceptance. Some of the hermits were asking themselves if it would be to their advantage to become a group to safeguard the purity of the solitary ideal and to remain subjects to an elder as monastic tradition required.

Dom Winandy's superior general and the Bishop of Martinique advised the monks to go to North America to start a colony of hermits. Authorization was given to Dom Winandy by the Sacred Congregation of Religious to make the move. The Diocese of San Angelo, Tex. was chosen and the hermits arrived in January, 1964. But the property that would offer them the needed solitude was too expensive and they turned to British Columbia instead. Encouraged by Bishop de Roo, they found a property at Headquarters, near Merville, B.C. There were eight and then 13 hermits. Each man had to build his own hermitage and provide a living for himself. This was quite different from the usual monastic house where one receives what is necessary and offers what he is able. In 1968, the colony became even more democratic, making the life of each hermit more flexible. Throughout the diocese, each hermit lived on his own, in real and complete solitude. They were not attempting to re-establish a unique and timeless norm or to recover the security of a glorious past; they were attempting to enter fully into that diaspora (spreading out) of which Karl Rahner, SJ, spoke so eloquently. The church will depend more and more, he said, on the goodwill of its ordinary members. It should be a qualitative approach, not



A hermitage on Vancouver Island, B.C.

a quantitative one; not drawing strength from a massive ecclesiastical entity organized on quasi-military lines, but on the openness, the freedom and the total sincerity with which the ordinary Christian is prepared to meet the non-Christian. The earliest monks in Catholicism, Rahner had pointed out, were simply laymen living in solitude or in small informal communities of a somewhat charismatic nature, grouped around a holy hermit — a spiritual father.

A few months before his death, Merton wrote to Dom Winandy: "I would say frankly that for some of us, as individuals, for you as well, as for myself, there is a better way which is to be a hermit without disciples, simply on one's own and without any concern to promote the eremitical life for others. At most, two or three like-minded individuals could choose to live in proximity to one another, but without any engagement of any kind. This would provide the maximum flexibility."

In time, several of the hermits found a solitary dwelling in the Canadian diocese: Fr. Donal in Nanaimo, Fr. Aguiar on Hornby Island, Fr. Charles Brandt on the Oyster River and Dom Winandy on Mayne Island. He wrote the important article, "Priest and Hermit," published in *Monastic Studies*. Then, after much prayer and counsel, he decided to return to his native country, Belgium. "It remains true that I have found here, on Mayne Island, everything I could wish as solitude and silence. But I had eventually to admit that this ideal is too high for me. I feel the need for more human contacts and for the possibility of more intellectual activity, as well. I have decided to leave for Europe and to settle in an old, 17th-century hermitage which I have known for years."

Dom Winandy ultimately settled in the Ermitage de Bernister, Malmedy, Belgium (not far from Clervaux Abbey), where he remained for over 25 years, praying and studying, giving advice and counsel on request. His friend, Fr. Lionel Pare, came to the Hermitage of Bernister and remained in constant communication. At the end, Dom Winandy accepted his abbot's invitation to return to Clervaux.

While the monks chanted the office of Lauds on the morning of May 11, Dom Winandy peacefully passed to the Lord, a true monk of the diaspora.

As Merton had remarked: "The diaspora imagined by Father Rahner may well call for the small, poor, isolated and unknown monastery instead of the illustrious plants of our great American communities. The monk will have an important place in that diaspora, not as a pious organization man, but as a true servant of God."

Fr. M. Charles Brandt is a monk and a hermit in Oyster River, B.C.

Father M. Charles Brandt



Photo: CNT archives