

FEATURE

Hermit priest pursues books

Living in quiet solitude as a hermit priest, Father Charles Brandt has made a vocation of conservation, earning recognition far beyond the boundaries of his 30-acre hermitage in Black Creek.

His parish is the lushly wooded promontory overlooking the Oyster River, and his ministry is the restoration of the human spirit — his own and that of others.

Brandt restores his personal

famous works, and faced his most daunting project with the conservation of a set of Audubon prints valued at \$1.5 million.

No stranger to academia, Brandt first entered the halls of higher learning in the 1940s as a biology student at Cornell University.

He went on to obtain a divinity degree, and was ordained an Anglican priest in England in 1951.

cabin, which he built himself from salvaged timbers, to his Oyster River acreage in 1969.

He had turned to the traditional craft of book-binding to earn his living as a hermit monk on the Tsolum, and pursued studies in paper conservation as a natural complement to that work.

His profession has served him well. It is perfectly compatible with the contemplative life he leads and well-suited to his mandate as a hermit priest.

And aside from the conservation of spirit and redemption of precious texts and paintings, Brandt has made a life-long vocation of wildlife conservation.

And as a member of the Steelhead Society of B.C., Brandt has gained recognition for his part in the campaign to restore the now-dead Tsolum to its former glory.

"The Catholic Church is very

active in matters of human rights and social justice, but it hasn't really taken a leadership role in matters of environmental conservation.

"I feel that with my background in biology and ornithology I have a responsibility to speak out."

Brandt plans a trip to India this year, to visit a Benedictine monk who is carrying on the work of a theologian Brandt has long admired.

But for the most part, he plans to continue his monastic life on the banks of the Oyster River, pursuing his vocation of conservation, venturing forth to fight the environmental cause when the need arises.

"I live as a hermit, but I don't feel isolated from the world," Brandt says, offering a quote as explanation.

"It is to be separate from all, but united with all."



spirit by beginning each day with several hours of prayer and meditation, but his afternoons are given over to restoration of a different kind.

Brandt, a youthful 64, is a professional paper conservator and book-binder. His work is known among collectors, archivists and curators across the country.

Over the past two decades, Brandt's dedication to his ancient art has earned him numerous prestigious commissions and a comfortable living.

"I don't really worry about finding work," Brandt says. "People know I'm here, and it seems to keep coming in."

He has done extensive restoration for the special collection departments of both the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria.

While employed with the Canadian Conservation Institutes, he worked with archival material in museums across the country.

Sought out by private art collectors, Brandt has had the opportunity to restore an \$80,000 Emily Carr among other

It was while living among Benedictine monks in a Michigan monastery that Brandt began to question the Anglican Church.

He eventually joined a Catholic monastery in Louisiana, and was received into the Catholic Church while living as a monk in Oklahoma.

It was in the library of that Oklahoma monastery where he learned the rudiments of book-binding.

After spending several years in various abbeys and monasteries, he came to the Comox Valley in the early 1960s to join a group of Catholic hermits living on the Tsolum River.

"But a community of hermits is a contradiction in terms," says Brandt. "So we disbanded and I came here to establish this hermitage in Black Creek."

Bishop Remi de Roo recognized Brandt's dedication to the conservation of the human spirit, and in 1966 ordained him the first Catholic hermit priest in almost 200 years.

With the permission of his Bishop, Brandt moved his small

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