

In the Avant Garde

The Prophetic Catholicism
of Remi De Roo



and Politics Within the Catholic Church

Patrick Jamieson

This may be all of The
Biography for The Times Being.
CAEB

See
pp 69
" 280
" 271-27
" 283 INDE

IN THE AVANT GARDE

The Prophetic Catholicism of Remi De Roo (and Politics Within the Catholic Church)

For Fr. Charles Brandt
Thanks for all your
help with the work
& your own overall
prophetic ministry
Best regard
& Best wishes
Patrick
Feb 02/02

This is indicated some twenty-five years later by the movements that persisted through his first quarter century as bishop. The history of his diocese that was completed in 1997, after its first 150 years, gave a comprehensive list to indicate the degree of change.

From the pages of the Island Catholics News were gleaned over three years' issues a list of nearly a hundred movements, organizations or persistent initiatives that were active between 1988-91. Few of these movements existed before the Second Vatican Council. Many did not exist elsewhere.

A quick sampling indicates prison work, social justice projects, widespread local ecumenism, interfaith action, meditation practice and other new prayer styles utilizing Jesuit-developed techniques, links with Latin America, retreat houses offering the latest types of spiritual development techniques including the Enneagram, wholistic health care, basic communities, women as university chaplains, youth work, new schools and parishes structured strictly on Vatican II principles.

Parishes throughout the Island formalized their ecumenical arrangements. A number of parishes were started which shared accommodations with Anglicans and United Church of Canada congregations.

Christian meditation workshops were part of a worldwide movement. Hermit monk Father Charles Brandt pioneered conservation and ecological awareness by his lifestyle and writings. Brandt became a national figure through media coverage of his experiment which integrated meditation, conservation and environmentalism.

Traditionally Touchy Topics: Two

Willard is now situated in his earthly remains in one of these premium locations. He died unexpectedly on the golf course one Sunday afternoon in the middle 1990s.

At the end of his life he was surrounded by those he considered true loyalists to the faith including the publishers of the dissident traditionalist newspaper, *The Trumpet*.

During O'Brien's last years, he centred his liturgical life at the tiny Saint Thomas chapel at nearby Metchosin, presumably named after an appropriate Roman Catholic saint and not some member of the English ruling class.

2. HERMITS AND OTHER HISTORY

The monks that Monsignor Bulloch mentioned would be receiving the cathedral high altar parts for their Mass-saying purposes in the Comox Valley constitute a significant story in themselves.

In the three hundred years prior to Vatican II the eremitical life in the Western Church had greatly declined. There existed no canonical rights for hermits until the 1983 Code of Canon Law. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, that other great branch of Christianity, the tradition had been maintained. But in the western or Catholic Church it had been eliminated in the reforms following the major adjustment following the Council of Trent (1545-63), the ecumenical council which was called to counter the Protestant Reformation.

The most famous modern monk who had been pressing just prior to Vatican II to have this status reinstated was the author Thomas Merton. Merton, a monk of Gethsemane Monastery in rural Kentucky, became virtually world famous on the basis of his critically-acclaimed autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Published in 1948, the book—a sort of modern *Confessions of Saint Augustine*—tells the story of his religious conversion, journey to Catholicism, and eventual life in a Trappist Monastery. The title image is from Dante's image of purgatory where Merton felt he spent a long time prior to entering the church. Thomas Merton eventually wrote fifty books and became the spiritual centre of a popular reform push from the bottom up in the Catholic Church. Much of Vatican II vindicated his ideas, instincts and initiatives.

Part Three: The Cost of The Containment

At the time of his sudden and rather mysterious death while on a trip to Asia in 1968, Merton was considering moving to Vancouver Island to be part of a new hermit community which De Roo had encouraged to set up foundation in his diocese.²⁵³

A number of monks had left their Trappist and Benedictine monastic communities around the world to converge at the old town of Headquarters on the Tsolum River, near Courtenay, four hours north of Victoria. The movement, fed by the fervour of Vatican II, was under the leadership of Belgian Jacques Winandy who first arrived with one other monk July 16, 1964.

Members of this community included Bernard de Aguiar, a Brazilian who had served with Merton in Kentucky, and Charles Brandt, an American from Missouri, who had been a Trappist at New Melleray, Iowa. They were the most persistent two of an original eight hermits who formed part of a hermit community which "quickly grew to a maximum number of thirteen."²⁵⁴

In his 1969 memorandum of history of the founding of the community, Winandy stated: "Besides those mentioned, some twenty candidates presented themselves during a period of five years... without mentioning those who just came 'to see' and the many, more numerous, who wrote for information and were either refused for diverse reasons or who never followed up..."

The ones who did stay included Americans, a Québécois, an Irish from Australia, a native of Martinique and the Brazilian, de Aguiar. In the first five years of their presence on the Island, the twelve thousand dollar property they bought tripled in value and they anticipated establishing a colony of women hermits in the next three to five years.²⁵⁵ But before this could occur it started to dwindle.

In the early 1960s, Brandt was in correspondence with Thomas Merton who candidly stated his own discontent at Gethsemani. Merton felt that an American corporate model had taken over monasticism there and he wanted to be part of a reform back to basics à la Vatican II:

"It has to be admitted that the monastic life as we have it in the houses of our Order now leaves much to be desired... The consequence is that problems arise... Superiors have tended to regard all such desires with suspicion, on the bases that there have been so many eccentrics and neurotics.

Traditionally Touchy Topics: Two

"At the same time even a genuine vocation to a more contemplative life can be made to appear and to act neurotic by a certain type of frustration of his legitimate needs."²⁵⁶

The idea of a community of hermits seems somewhat paradoxical but as Merton wrote in the same letter: "The thing we have to remember is that the desire for authentic monastic solitude comes from God and not from man, and that God is working to bring about the realization of conditions in which His will can be fulfilled.

"We all have to co-operate with Him in whatever way we can, and the ways offered may for some reason seem paradoxical. The ability to accept paradoxical and untidy solutions has a great deal to do with the solitary life which is necessarily unpatterned and existential. But if you do come to live as a hermit somewhere, be ready for a grim time and don't expect some of the consolations you are leaving behind."

Merton never did join. He missed a connection with De Roo and Winandy at the Vancouver airport in the fall of 1968 on his last trip. Brandt said Merton was well known for getting flight times confused, so they never did connect.²⁵⁷ Ironically, given his radical pacifism, Merton only returned from Asia in a coffin in the belly of an American Air force bomber, a paradox itself which fuelled speculation about the cause of his death.²⁵⁸

The residual paradoxical tensions Merton alluded to may have resulted in this experiment lasting only a decade in its uniqueness following the Vatican Council. By 2000, only one hermit persists, Charles Brandt, although de Aguiar continued to dwell nearby as a laicized priest. De Aguiar lived a hermetic existence on Hornby Island, as a scholar, artist and pastoral counsellor until nearly the time of his death in November, 1998.²⁵⁹

If Merton had decided to join the group, with his dynamic charism, one can only conjecture how something special could have developed from the leadership styles of the avant garde bishop and the world famous writer hermit, perhaps something permanent.

Part Three: The Cost of The Containment

THE CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION

It was the work of Bishop De Roo at Vatican II which enabled this worldwide development of western hermit life to begin on Vancouver Island. De Roo made a key intervention in 1965. According to Charles Brandt, it helped re-established the tradition in the Catholic Church after the lengthy hiatus.

In his successful intervention at the Council De Roo stated "the Latin Church is experiencing an ever growing renewal of the life of hermits. It is urgent therefore that the western Church officially recognize the life of hermits as a state of perfection. And Vatican II should make a point of this."

De Roo was quoted saying the hermit fills a prophetic role in the church "reminding us that the building of an earthly city is not the final end of all things. Fleeing the noisy whirlwind of worldly activities, he opens his heart to the Holy Spirit in an atmosphere of calm and interior reflection. Thus he pursues an essential calling of the church, the direct contemplation of God."²⁶⁰

'AVANT GARDE'

When De Roo ordained Charles Brandt in November, 1966 the *Victoria Daily Colonist* headline exclaimed: "Hermit-Monks Ordination First in Two Centuries" and called the hermit colony "the only one in North America."

"Bishop De Roo, who has encouraged and supported the unique 20th Century hermitage since its founding in September, 1964, said the ordination would emphasize a facet of religious life neglected by the western church for years and would restore a balance such as is still maintained by eastern and Oriental branches."

"He said Father Brandt and the other solitary hermits of the Hermitage of St. John the Baptist, each of whom lives alone and apart from his fellows on the primitive hermitage acreage... There is little regimentation, for the hermits feel, in the words of Father Winandy that they must guard against the strong tendency of westerners to organize, standardize, centralize and legislate every detail of life."²⁶¹

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Traditionally Touchy Topics: Two

Thirty-two years later in November of 1998 De Roo accepted the renewal of vows by Charles Brandt at Saint Andrew's Cathedral under a section of the new Code of Canon Law which gives legal status to the hermit state in the Catholic Church. Throughout his career De Roo was consistently seen as counter-cultural, and the contemplative dimension was the root of it. This experiment expressed the ultimate alternative experience of being counter-cultural.

"Before Vatican II there was really no possibility of living the hermit life with the church's blessings," said Brandt who by this time was being celebrated nationally as a 'modern Saint Francis winning awards for environmental care.'²⁶²

"Asked how he was able to integrate his lifestyle, Brandt said he was inspired by Saint Francis... You just put one foot in front of the other, with no destination in mind."

Vancouver Sun religion writer Douglas Todd goes on to say: "Brandt is a follower and friend of the renowned Catholic monk Thomas Merton, who developed a form of Christian-Buddhist contemplation and encouraged him to become a hermit. Brandt also bases his life's work on Thomas Berry, a noted Catholic eco-theologian."

"With the full support of Vancouver Island bishop Remi De Roo, whom Brandt considers 'avant garde'... It is not an easy thing to do—to discover, as he says in his slow, almost-whispery voice, the deeper inner self—to realize that the human soul and the earth and the Spirit of God are all interconnected, all one.

"Like the monks of the 12th Century, Brandt believes his life of prayer and contemplation is far from irrelevant to the world. 'It's absolutely essential.'"

In his sermon at Charles Brandt's ordination on November 21, 1966 at Courtenay, De Roo gave this summary to the proposition: "The hermetical life is a unique, a select, a relatively rare vocation. Hermits make their lives into an oasis of concentrated prayer and contemplation to fortify the entire Church, the communion of saints. Theirs is a silent witness, a witness of example, of conduct, of action more than of words.

"The witness of those who testify that God alone is the centre of the universe and of all religious aspirations. Hermits remind us, by their lives, of the ultimate meaning of human existence.

Part Three: The Cost of The Containment

"We are not to establish a paradise here below. We are called to a higher destiny in the kingdom of God. This destiny the Hermit proclaims, reminding us by their detachment from all things of the necessary eschatological tension of the Church."²⁶³

3. 'A CONTEXT OF MUTUALITY'

Charles Brandt only attended specific sessions of the diocesan synod between 1986-91. He was not present at the final ratification round in 1996 although there were a number of proposals to do with the environment confirmed in the final documents.²⁶⁴ De Roo cited one introduced by Charles Brandt when the bishop described the goal of the synod as "Liberation from Cultural Bondage."²⁶⁵

Someone who was present at the final session, although it was her first occasion, was Catholic university chaplain twenty-six year-old Kate Fagan. When De Roo convoked the synod in 1986, Kate Fagan would have been eighteen years of age. By 1996 she had her Masters of Divinity from Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana and had just been appointed the third female chaplain in a row delegated by De Roo since 1990 when the sudden death of Father Leo Robert left a vacuum in the position.

In May, 1998 Victoria's *Zoom* magazine, with its subtitle "The People, passions and politics of Victoria," did a cover-story profile of "The Bishop and Ms. Chaplain."

De Roo's first quote about his feminist initiative was: "I can be roundly criticized for doing that but that's beside the point. I have my responsibilities as bishop. One of the biggest questions that the Roman Catholic Church has to face today is the recognition by history and culture of the role of women, not as complementary to men but in a context of mutuality."²⁶⁶

The author of the piece typifies the bishop this way: "De Roo is still concerned with political and economic issues... Flawlessly accurate, he quotes 17th Century French philosopher Blaise Pascal to illustrate his beliefs: 'The heart has reasons which reason doesn't understand.' That's one of the big dilemmas today. If we don't bring our heart into unison with our heads, we could very well, in cold reason, destroy ourselves. We have got to come back to a system of compassion and just redistribution as a matter of

INDEX

- Archer, Eileen, 35, 78, 286
 Aussenegg, Thomas, 228, 229
 Baudoux, Archbishop Maurice, 63, 125, 138, 139, 144, 147, 304,
 315, 316
 Baudoux, Bishop Maurice, 126
 Baum, Gregory, 9, 30, 31, 49, 145, 174, 190, 192, 197, 198, 218,
 222, 223, 224, 225, 227, 244, 264, 329, 331, 332, 333, 334,
 335, 336
BC Catholic, 74, 75, 76, 78, 170, 212, 249
 Bernard, Father Ken, 63, 159, 212
 Bibby, Reginald, 347, 348, 350, 354
 Black, Conrad, 5, 34, 35, 42, 155, 235, 282, 285, 290, 302, 303
 Brady, Dr. Patricia, 205, 207, 210, 211, 254
 ✓ Brandt, Father Charles, 76, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 311
 Bulloch, Monsignor William, 149, 160, 164, 263, 265, 267, 268,
 271
 Butler, Marnie, 283, 284, 285, 286, 289, 295
 Cameron, J.M., 198, 199, 244, 329
 Cardijn, Cardinal Joseph, 309
 Carter, Cardinal Emmett, 34, 35, 36, 42, 303, 308
Catholic New Times, 41, 78, 188
 Catholics of Vision, 164, 165, 171
 Charbonneau, Archbishop Joseph, 6, 181, 217, 225, 233, 234,
 235, 239, 240, 241, 242, 243, 293, 305, 328
 Christ the King Parish, 211, 212, 213
 Clemenger, Muriel, 158, 236, 286, 287, 288, 289, 293, 296, 297,
 298, 299, 301, 302, 303, 322
 Collegiality, 15, 19, 22, 58, 59, 167, 168, 194, 209, 220, 304, 360
 Cullinane, Father Eugene, 217, 223, 224, 225, 226, 233
 Cuneo, Michael, 191, 192, 197, 227, 228, 229, 230
Daily Colonist, 60, 65, 75, 76, 151, 274, 292
 Daly, Bernard, 13, 14, 77
 Day, Dorothy, 199, 225
 De Pape, Josephine, 81, 84
 De Roo, Raymond, 81, 108
 De Valk, Alphonse, 227, 228
 Demers, Bishop Modeste, 60, 118, 153, 254