

## APPENDIX V

### HERMITS AND SOLITARIES

The terms Hermit and Solitary are often used interchangeably but for the purposes of the *Handbook*, the term 'hermit' refers to a member of a Religious Community and the term 'solitary' refers to one who is not a Religious.

#### 1. **Hermits: Religious living the eremitical life**

The life of complete solitude prayer and silence before God is a continuing element of the Christian spiritual tradition. Although it involves external separation from society, it is a life lived in profound communion with the whole Church and with all humanity. Living in simplicity and poverty, the Religious is identified with all humanity in its need and poverty before God.

Vocation to the eremitical life is sometimes part of the developing vocation of a member of a Religious Community. There is also an intermediate form in which a small Community devoted to prayer and silence, often with individual dwelling places, bears many marks of the eremitical life without a complete withdrawal from all social intercourse.

A Religious who is aware of a strong call to the eremitical way of life requires experienced guidance during a lengthy period of preparation before the matter is laid before the Community for implementation. There must be close collaboration between the spiritual director, the Leader and the Visitor. The bishop of the place where the Religious is to live should be informed.

A period for testing this vocation may be provided in a place near the buildings of the Community; or in a settlement of hermits; or, if all those involved in guidance are agreed, in a place of greater physical isolation.

The Religious remains a member of the Community in which vows have been professed, even though the eremitical life has distinctive characteristics, demands and obligations.

The Chapter must give approval before a member undertakes this way

of life. Once this life been undertaken, the Chapter government of the Community will have no direct relevance to the life of the hermit, who will be under the personal direction either of the Leader of the Community or some other experienced person agreed by the Leader and the Religious, and approved by the Chapter. During the period of probation, the Religious will relinquish Chapter rights. If the period of probation proves that there is no permanent vocation to solitude, the Religious should return without question to the place formerly held in the Community.

If the vocation proves permanent, it should eventually be given formal recognition by the Chapter. This recognition would imply final relinquishment of Chapter rights on the part of the member, and acknowledgement of the permanence of the eremitical vocation by the Community. The Community will retain concern for the spiritual and physical well-being of the hermit, especially in old age.

Communities should bear in mind that many Religious feel the need for shorter or longer periods of solitude in which they may give themselves more completely to silence and prayer. This natural need may have to be distinguished from an eremitical vocation in particular cases. Some Communities will provide suitable accommodation for such periods of withdrawal or permit some of their members to spend periods sharing in the life of a monastic Community where normally more silence and solitude are part of the life.

Those concerned with the administration of Communities must be prepared to distinguish clearly between a true vocation to the eremitical life and the temptation of some Religious to seek this way of life as a way of avoiding the obligations of obedience and the demands of the common life. In general it will be found that the possessor of a true eremitical vocation will be characterised by humility and will be undemanding, a good Community member without marked foibles, but with a genuine attraction to silence.

### **The Spiritual Direction of Hermits**

The Religious who is able to undertake a life of prayer in solitude will be one who already has a stable relationship with God in prayer and is simple and uncomplicated in relating to other people and in the material concerns of life. This disposition of unwavering trust in God,

and in God's providence through those who minister to their basic spiritual and material needs, is necessary for sustaining a spirit of solitude and inner silence. The spiritual director, though not themselves living the life, should be of a similar disposition. The hermit and the director need to be able to recognise each other as kindred spirits in this respect.

Since the hermit's rhythm of life and mode of prayer should be created out of their direct dependence upon, and co-operation with, the Holy Spirit, and will be unique to that person, the director should not interfere with that formation, nor normally initiate changes. However, the director should be sufficiently knowledgeable concerning the Church's tradition of spiritual growth and of the eremitical life in particular as to be able to detect deviations from the way. In monitoring the hermit's life from the point of view of its goal - union with God through Jesus Christ - the director should be available to encourage, to confirm developments, to warn of temptations, to keep trials in proportion, and always as a fellow pilgrim to point the way to God.

Frequent meeting is not desirable, and most questions might be dealt with by correspondence. Above all, the director must maintain detachment, so as to be able to identify with the hermit in prayer and counsel without imposing self-generated patterns or solutions to problems arising. There must be a mutual listening for the leading of the Holy Spirit. If not a priest, or not living at a convenient distance from the hermit, the director may suitably arrange for another sympathetic priest to celebrate the eucharist occasionally in the hermit's dwelling-place and (with the permission of the Ordinary of the place) reserve the Blessed Sacrament for regular holy communion.

The director needs remember that it is the Leader of the hermit's Community who makes provision for their accommodation, decides with the member how Community observances such as the Divine Office or enclosure are to be adapted for their life, provides for their maintenance, and is responsible for decisions about health care, and when they have become too infirm to live in solitude. In all such matters the task of the director is to help the hermit make the best use of what is provided or decided.

## 2. Solitaries

There have always been some who believe that they are called by God to dedicate themselves by a vow and to live as consecrated celibates, whose primary concern is to build up the body of Christ in unity and love, though without living a community life and a common Rule. This autonomous vowed life has been recognised in the Eastern and Western Churches from earliest times as an authentic Christian vocation. Because it is not a life lived in community according to the norms of the Religious Life, it does not come within the normal scope of the Advisory Council; but since it has some similarities to the situation of Religious living under vows, bishops and others have frequently referred cases to the Council.

The Council offers the following guidelines:

- a) The whole-hearted commitment, dedication and offering of any Christian to God is to be encouraged and supported by the Church. However, the desire of anyone to make the commitment publicly by pronouncing a vow of celibacy needs to be examined and discerned carefully and wisely. A person believing they are called to do so should discuss this with their parish priest and their spiritual director, and with their support approach the diocesan bishop. The bishop alone has authority to receive such a public commitment by vow. Advice may be obtained from the Single Consecrated Life (SCL)<sup>24</sup>, which can also provide a service for making and blessing the vow, though those making a vow of consecrated celibacy are not obliged to be part of the SCL network.
- b) It is unlikely that people living alone within the context of, say, a parish community could undertake the other traditional vows of poverty and obedience, since these vows would imply shared ownership of resources and communally ordered decision-making for the sake of the kingdom. Therefore, normally only the vow of celibacy should be undertaken.
- c) The wearing of a habit similar to that worn by members of a Religious Community is inappropriate, since those who make a vow outside of a Religious Community are not included in the

---

<sup>24</sup> [www.singleconsecratedlife-anglican.org.uk](http://www.singleconsecratedlife-anglican.org.uk)

formal category of Religious. For the same reason it is not desirable that a Religious name or title be adopted.

- d) In receiving this vow, the bishop should make it clear that they or their successors are not responsible for providing work, an income, or accommodation. As chief pastor of the diocese, they take spiritual responsibility for the person under vow, though they would normally delegate this to a designated priest of experience.
- e) Should the person under vow move into another diocese, the bishop who has previously acted as guardian of the vow should commend that person to the care of the bishop of the receiving diocese. Likewise, a retiring bishop should commend any such under their care to their successor.
- f) The bishop and the Solitary should both register with the Secretary of the Advisory Council the names of all those who make this vow in public.
- g) The dispensing authority for this vow is the bishop who is currently the guardian of the vow.