

CHRISTIAN HERMITS AND SOLITARIES

Tracing the Antonian Hermit Traditions

Carol McDonough

DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR, on 1 December 1916, Senussi raided the Saharan hermitage of the Roman Catholic hermit-priest Charles de Foucauld.¹ He refused to renounce Christ, kneel and confess the *Shahada*, the creed that is recited on conversion to Islam. A teenager shot him in the head. A French army officer, playboy and North African explorer, de Foucauld (1858–1916) had become a solitary for Jesus. ‘As soon as I believed that there was a God, I understood that I could do nothing else than live for Him exclusively.’² His life’s desire was that others would come to live the Christian solitary way, ‘doing good in silence’.³ He was possibly the first Western solitary hermit monk of the twentieth century (*hermit, eremitism* from *eremos*, desert and *monachos*, alone).

Inspired by his writings, the Little Sisters of Jesus and then the Little Brothers of Jesus were born, followed by another seventeen communities and associations. Catholic hermit priests, then religious and lay solitary hermits, spread slowly up until the mid twentieth century; then, the resurgence of the solitary vocation gathered speed. On 13 November 2005, the hermit martyr Charles de Foucauld was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI.

The way of life of Charles de Foucauld emulated that pioneered by St Antony the Great of Egypt (c.250–356). The Antonian eremitic tradition, based on the gospel imperative of love through ‘doing good in silence’, has survived for 1,700 years as a persistent vocational presence in

With thanks to my advisors, Dr David Gormley-O'Brien, Br Dr Camillus Parkinson and Mark Slattery—and the hermits.

¹ The Senussi are a North African Sufi sect who fought against the Allies in the First World War.

² Michel Carrouge, *Soldier of the Spirit: The Life of Charles de Foucauld*, translated by Marie-Christine Hellin (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1956), 86.

³ North American Jesus Caritas Communities, ‘The Spiritual Family of Brother Charles’, available at <http://www.brothercharles.org/wordpress/literature/2-the-spiritual-family-of-charles-de-foucauld/>, accessed 19 December 2013.

the Oriental, Eastern and Western Christian ecclesial communions. I shall be looking more closely here at the six ways that St Antony developed for both solitary and eremitic communal forms of living the gospel. I trace the means by which his teachings have survived into the twentieth century.

It is said that hermit monks and nuns were always present in the Oriental and Eastern communions from the fourth century on, but in the West they nearly disappeared. As the Benedictine scholar Jeremy Hall observes, 'In the Catholic Church the hermit has been in a kind of limbo since about the



Charles de Foucauld

sixteenth century Monastic communities ... held the hermit life in suspicion.'⁴ Rotha Mary Clay collated centuries of documentary evidence in *The Hermits and Anchorites of England*. She describes 'men and women of strong and saintly character whose life commanded respect and won gratitude At its best, the contemplative life was a career and a noble one.'⁵ Clay presents a way of life that was clearly Antonian in heritage and lived around Britain from Celtic times. The women's movement of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries in the Low Countries, the Beguines, also bears marks of Antonian intent and organization in both communities and solitary lives.⁶

In England, Clay found that the solitary eremitic life had become accepted in the Church and the wider culture: less so in the earlier Christian centuries, but commonly from the twelfth century onwards. Most visible from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries were hermits, who moved about, and immobile anchorites, often Benedictine or Augustinian. Arguably the most well-known of the British anchorites was Julian of Norwich (enclosed c.1372–1416).

⁴ Jeremy Hall, *Silence, Solitude, Simplicity: A Hermit's Love Affair with a Noisy, Crowded, and Complicated World* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2007), 87.

⁵ Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), 191–192.

⁶ See Fiona Bowie, *Beguine Spirituality: An Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1989).

Supported by society and church, they undertook their solitary life by encamping in the heart of the community. Enclosed and yet exposed, hidden and yet visible, shadows behind the curtains of their access windows, medieval English anchorites were daily reminders of the proper focus of Christian existence.⁷

But all were unhoused at the political dissolution of the monasteries and chantries (1536–1547) by Henry VIII and Edward VI. In 1903, the historian and Church of England clergyman William Holden Hutton lamented:

The hermit's life was unique ... there could be no doubt. Those who gave themselves in this way wholly to God, so strange to the gregarious ... were loved and venerated with wonder They did much to mould the English ideal of public service Through the Spirit's goading they sought God for God. Their life commanded respect and won gratitude from their fellow-men.⁸

'Through the Spirit's goading they sought God for God'. Were there, perhaps, hidden solitaries even after the dissolution? As the hermit monk Thomas Merton declared,

Just as the church of God can never be without martyrs, so too can she never be without solitaries, for hermits, like martyrs, are the most eloquent witness of the Risen Christ The truth is, the persistence of hermits even in ages which are most hostile to the solitary ideal is that the exigencies of Christian life *demand* that there be hermits.⁹

In 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude', Merton showed his understanding of the history and theology of Antonian eremitism as a lay movement.

I intend obviously, not to disparage, to reject the monastic institution, but to set aside all its accidentals and externals so that they will not interfere with my view of what seems to be deepest and most essential The 'solitary' ... is never necessarily a 'monk' (juridically) at all. He may well be a layman, and of the sort most remote from cloistered life.¹⁰

⁷ Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: U. of California P, 1985), 7.

⁸ William Holden Hutton, 'The Ideal of the Monk and Hermit', in *The Influence of Christianity upon National Character Illustrated by the Lives and Legends of the English Saints* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton, 1903), 219.

⁹ Thomas Merton, 'Preface', in Jean Leclercq, *Alone with God*, translated and edited by Elizabeth McCabe, rev. edn (Bloomington, Oh: Ercam, 2008), 1–2 (italics original); first published as *Seul avec Dieu: la vie érémitique* (Paris: Plon, 1955) .

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude', in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985), 177.

Origins: Antony and Antonian Eremitic Traditions and Vocations

St Athanasius of Alexandria (c.295–373) became a political and ecclesial exile, hiding from his persecutors and moving around the Egyptian deserts. There Athanasius was inspired by and wrote about a local peasant-farmer, Antony, and his disciples—who included labourers and also scholars and theologians. He became St Antony, known as the father of hermits and monks, a pioneer of solitary prayer and life lived for God and for Jesus' commands of love.

Antony has been considered uneducated and illiterate; he did not write in Greek (the international *lingua franca* of the time, as English is now), but he probably did write in Coptic, and his surviving letters are now thought likely to be genuine.¹¹ The writings about him and attributed to him at any rate offer a distinctive voice:

He spoke to them in the Egyptian tongue as follows: 'The Scriptures are really sufficient for our instruction, yet it is well for us to encourage one another in the faith, and to employ words to stimulate ourselves. Be you, therefore, like children, and bring to your father what you know and tell it, while I, being your senior, share with you my knowledge and my experience.'¹²

Persevere in the testimony which the Spirit bears within the mind He who knows himself, knows God He who knows himself knows all ... and loves all He who sins against his neighbour sins against himself We are members of each other and the body of Christ, if one member suffer, the whole body suffers with it For he who loves his neighbour, loves God and loves his own soul.¹³

'What must one do in order to please God?' Abba Antony replied, 'Pay attention to what I tell you: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes; whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the holy Scriptures; in whatever place you live, do not easily leave it.'

Our life and death is with our neighbour. If we win our brother we win God.

¹¹ See Samuel Rubenson, *The Letters of St Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (London: A. and C. Black, 1995).

¹² St Athanasius, *The Life of St Antony*, translated by Robert T. Meyer (Mahwah: Paulist, 1950), 33–34.

¹³ Quoted in Kallistos Ware, 'Foreword', in *The Letters of St Antony the Great*, translated by Derwas J. Chitty (Oxford: Fairacres, 1975), vi. See also Derwas J. Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (London: Mowbrays, 1966).

... with the work of God, if we stretch the brethren beyond measure they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down to meet their needs.¹⁴

We can still learn how to live from St Antony's *Vita*, *Letters* and *Sayings*, even in the complexities of a globalised world. In 2007, at St Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary, New York, Fr Thomas Hopko exhorted, 'I urge you, and, if I could, I would command you, to read St Antony's *Sayings* Everything we need to know in order to live is there for us in its simplest and clearest way.'¹⁵ While not formally a rule of religious life, taken together these works can offer a deep and steady formation in the contemplative–active Christian life.

In Antonian eremitic communities the aspirant-disciple would ask a hermit monk to be the Abba. This Abba decided in God to accept the aspirant, who was helped to build a cell for himself, where he would then live as a solitary, visiting the Abba for direction. Through faithfulness to the Antonian-pattern of prayer and work, the balance was discerned for each one. With his Abba, each of the thousands of hermit monks was enabled to find his unique, God-given way of seeking, being conformed to and coming into union with God for the practice of godly love.

Building styles for cells and communities were many. Archaeologists have revealed solitary small caves and mud huts within walking distance of very small settlements for a few people around their Abba. There were also bigger settlements clustered around a common worship space (known as eremitic or idiorrhythmic monasteries). Hermit monks contributed by their practical work to their Abba and to the common good. Some less reclusive hermit monks sold baskets or ropes in the markets. Some brought in the harvest grain for bread. They shared their times of worship, mandatory hospitality and relaxation with each other and visitors.

Athanasius' *Life of Antony (Vita Antonii)* (356–362) shows how Antony himself responded inwardly to God's loving formation, closely following ways of life modelled by Jesus. Through this inward godly relationship, Antony was taught how to respond in love to the demands of his neighbours through the six patterns of life that he adopted and developed.

¹⁴ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, translated by Benedicta Ward (London: A. B. Mowbray, 1975), nn. 3, 13, 9.

¹⁵ Thomas Hopko, 'The Violent Love of God', commencement address delivered at St Vladimir's Seminary, 19 May 2007, available at <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles7/HopkoCommencement.php>.

The first way, practised by the young Antony, was that of the aspirant, nudged by inner call, learning to listen and respond through the Abba-disciple relationship. The experienced Abba offered rigorous learning of living obedience for growing in the gospel ways of love of God, of neighbour, of enemies, of self. After fifteen years with his chosen Abba near his home village, Coma, led by the Spirit, Antony lived the next twenty years in solitude—the second way of life. In solitude and silence people face inner wounds, memories and unhealed issues (regarded literally as ‘demons’ before modern psychology), gradually attaining inner peace and so being of loving service for the greater good, through this way of ‘doing good in silence’. From this experience, Antony teaches: ‘The Creator saw that their wound was grown great, and needed the care of a physician—and Jesus himself is their Creator [John 1:1–14], and Himself heals them’.¹⁶

For some this reclusive path may become permanent; for others, it is a phase chosen by God for their inner formation leading to service. Eventually Antony’s friends brought him out of his isolation (c.305). Antony found he could now live his integrated, inner solitary way among people, offering them the hospitality of God, welcoming and teaching hungry spiritual seekers and expressing in his relations with them, ‘a Trinitarian communion and communication of persons, both within God’s being and in relation to us’.¹⁷ This pattern of life is a commonly observed third Antonian way. Antony exhorted that the cell must always be open to the stranger and the brother. ‘A hunter in the desert saw St Antony enjoying himself with the brothers and he was shocked.’¹⁸ There are many stories of great welcome and attentiveness to the newcomer and to each other.



St Antony, by Piero di Cosimo

¹⁶ *Letters of St Antony the Great*, 9.

¹⁷ Anne Hunt, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery: A Development in Recent Catholic Theology* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1997), 113.

¹⁸ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 13.

To accommodate the many lay people who now camped near him to learn his secrets, Antony responded with an emergent fourth way: eremitic ‘communities’ gathered around him and around those of his disciples who also became Abbas. Antony left disciples with aptitude to organize the practicalities of daily life and weekly shared worship at the encampments, developing a long-term way of life in these desert places. Formation in practical (work), spiritual (prayer as duty of service) and social (*caritas* ministry and recreation) life underlay the primary Abba–disciple relationship. The spiritual formation of each hermit monk remained in the care of his chosen Abba.

Antony’s fifth way is prayerful travelling and ministry balanced by deep withdrawal. For decades, Antony lived this alternating pattern of God-led availability and withdrawal into solitude. At Mount Colzim, he lived in silence in a cave above a spring and desert oasis. He was self-sufficient, but he could come down to trade baskets and ropes for bread with passing caravans. Yet again people sought him out to request his personal teaching and leadership as Abba.

The sixth Antonian way is encouragement of Christian endurance. An ‘activist’ in modern terms, Antony offered to support Christians, both hermit monks and householders, who were vulnerable to martyrdom for their professed belief in Christ. Athanasius records Antony travelling north twice from the deserts to the capital, Alexandria, openly courting martyrdom during Roman persecutions of the Christian faithful.

These six Antonian eremitic ways of life lead into deepening silence in and before God—always *for* God, and always for the world. ‘About prayer itself they had little to say; the life lived towards God was the prayer; and about contemplation, who could speak?’¹⁹ Athanasius’ *Vita Antonii* was spread around the Mediterranean countries by camel caravans and the shipping trade, and even as far as Britain by Phoenician tin galleys. The *Vita* spoke to people’s inner yearnings, called forth by the Spirit and shedding light on their response. It contributed to the synchronous rise of eremitism all over the south and east Mediterranean—around the Lower Nile, Upper Nile, Assyria, Libya and Palestine.

Without the preservation of the *Vita*, which spread the eremitic way, and that of Antony’s *Sayings* and *Letters*, we would have little access to the beginnings of this solitary vocation, centred on Jesus and still lived in a way that replicates aspects of the Antonian traditions. Antony’s pioneering

¹⁹ *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, xxvi.

charism was also transmitted through contemporary religious commentary by writers such as the immigrant theologian Evagrius of Pontus, who lived in the community known as *Kellia* (the Cells), through his disciple John Cassian, through other saints' lives and through subsequent fourth- to sixth-century religious Rules. The *Vitae patrum* ('Lives of the Fathers') contains biographical fragments from the third and fourth centuries about desert hermit monks, recording that they were following the Antonian legacy, each under his Abba.²⁰ So does the *Philokalia*, a collection of texts by spiritual masters of the Oriental, then Orthodox, traditions between the third and the fifteenth centuries, compiled variously between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. The *Philokalia* is an important agent of the transmission of these great Antonian eremitic traditions into the present. A text attributed to St Antony the Great opens the Greek editions.²¹

Antony himself also transmitted this way of being in God to thousands of his contemporaries, leaving a living legacy for solitary and eremitic communities, built upon by writers and later pioneers.

Development of Coenobitic Traditions Coexisting with Solitaries

In Upper Egypt, Pachomius (292–c.348), whose Abba was Palamon, a disciple of Antony, used his great skills in organization, learnt in the Roman Army stationed in Egypt, to modify and develop this solitary way. When others gathered around him as their Abba, he developed coenobitic (communal) monasteries, each housing around a thousand people.²² His brother preferred to remain a hermit, living the Antonian way, but Pachomius wanted to serve differently. He did so by organizing hermits into communities with a common Abba.

One of the three pioneer Rules for the Oriental, Orthodox and Western monasticism, the Rule of St Pachomius primarily contains regulations for monasteries, nine for men and three for women. The pathway to holy perfection offered was serving others under strict obedience to the Abbot. The works of St Pachomius, including his Rule, were translated by St Jerome (c.347–420) in Bethlehem (c.404).

²⁰ *Vitae patrum de vita et verbis seniorum sive historiae eremiticae* is a Latin collation edited by the Jesuit Heribert Rosweyde (Antwerp: Ex Officina Plantiniana, 1628). Translations of excerpts into English by Benedict Baker can be found at www.vitae-patrum.org.uk, accessed 3 December 2014.

²¹ Other scholars, such as Peter Anson, Peter Brown, James Goehring, William Harmless, Thomas Merton, Maggie Ross and Alexander Ryrie have also provided us with outstanding scholarship on early to medieval Antonian primary sources and commentaries.

²² *Coenobia*, Latin, from *koinonia*, Greek, meaning *community*.

A young coenobitic monk turned hermit, Shenoute (c.348–451), formed coenobitic monasteries for men and women, with their many hermits dwelling outside enclosure. Shenoute became abbot (c.385) of the stringent Pachomian Rule White Monastery of thirty old monks. By 451, it held over 2,000 monks and nearly as many nuns. St Shenoute wrote nine volumes of disciplinary canons, and eight volumes of discourses, used by the monastery for instruction and liturgy.

In Palestine, Syria and Persia a number of Rules emerged between the fourth and seventh centuries, a common theme being coenobitic and eremitic coexistence. In Palestine, St Macrina the Younger (330–379) and St Sabas (439–532), among others, were influential in creating mixed coenobitic monasteries, with full hermit monks and hermit-nuns living in separated cells. Living the third Antonian way, St Sabas spent fifteen years as a cave-dwelling hermit, while others gathered around him. In the *Vitae Sabae*, St Cyril describes how St Sabas compiled a Rule valid for all his foundations, including anchorites and cell dwellers. His Great Lavra had 150 communal monks and 70 anchorites.

Dividing Paths

The Antonian Eremitic Traditions Spread East

Surveying the history of Eastern monasticism, scholars such as Alexander Ryrie and Joseph Patrich point to synchronistic eremitic growth in the fourth century.²³ Those seeking the Abba–disciple solitary way crossed and recrossed the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and eremitic monasteries were founded throughout the region. However, cultural similarities and differences started to emerge across time and place.

East of Egypt, Basil of Cappadocia brought together the versions of the Antonian way of life that he found in different cultures. He was taught the ascetic life by his sister St Macrina the Younger, and later he learnt from hermit monks in Egypt, Palestine and Mesopotamia, and lived as an anchorite between 356 and 362. As others gathered around him, following the third Antonian way, St Basil saw the need for communal order.

His pioneering Rule (c.356) required a three-year novitiate in the coenobium before moving to life in a cell. His genius was that he expressed the common grounding in gospel sources of monastic and

²³ See Alexander Ryrie, *The Desert Movement: Fresh Perspectives on the Spirituality of the Desert* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2011); and Joseph Patrich, 'Eastern Monasticism: Historical Survey and Characteristics', in *Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism: A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism, Fourth to Seventh Centuries* (Washington, DC: Harvard UP and Dumbarton Oaks, 1995), 11–29.

solitary vocation. Later travellers seeking the solitary ascetic life allude to this, including Palladius of Galatia in his *Lausiac History* (419) and St John Moschos in *The Spiritual Meadow* (c.615). In 693 the Orthodox Council of Trullo incorporated the Rule of St Basil with other patristic theology into regulations for eremitic and coenobitic monasticism. These Rules are still extant today.

The Russian Orthodox Archimandrite Kallistos Ware describes how the often overlapping vocational paths of eremitic community, solitude and coenobitic community remain alive in Eastern Orthodoxy today.²⁴ On the Mount Athos peninsula, sacred to the Blessed Virgin Mary, solitary, eremitic monastic (idiorrhhythmic) and coenobitic monastic life has been lived continuously (by men only) from early times, and certainly from the ninth century.

The Antonian Eremitic Traditions Spread West

Unravelling how the Antonian eremitic traditions were spread to the west by the *Vita Antonii* and its followers is complex. Here are some fragments of their geneses, transmissions and survivals.

St Martin of Tours influenced Gaul and Britain. Not uncommonly for a churchman of the time, he was a solitary at heart, founding a monastery in 360. One of his monks, who would become St Patrick, travelled from Gaul to Christianize Ireland. Through Patrick's influence, it appears there was a unique blending of Celtic clan cultures and Gaulish modifications of Antonian ways of seeking God, honouring the solitary vocation. There are many stories, buildings and artefacts relating to early hermits in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, being rediscovered by archaeologists.

The Rule of St Augustine (c.397), emphasizing the gospel commands of love, was written for lay Christians, predominantly living a common life. Augustine had spent years learning with hermit monks. His Rule spread to women's convents by 411.

It was in use across Europe from the fifth century onwards by small groups of hermit monks and nuns, as well as by diocesan priests living—as had Augustine and his priests in Hippo—in cathedral communities with their bishop.²⁵

²⁴ Kallistos Ware, 'The Kingdom of Heaven Suffers Violence', XVIII International Ecumenical Conference on Orthodox Spirituality, 11 September 2010, Monastero di Bose, available at <http://www.monasterodibose.it/en/hospitality/conferences/orthodox-spirituality/1088-2010-communion-and-solitude/5291-lecture-by-kallistos-ware>, accessed 26 November 2014.

²⁵ Augustine's Rule, available at <http://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/mission/campusministry/spirituality/resources/spirituality/about/rule.html>.

The Augustinian hermits and the Augustinian canons competed to be the first and legitimate heirs of the Rule of St Augustine. In 1256, a single Augustinian Order of Canons, Hermits and Recollects under the Rule was proclaimed by papal bull. The Augustinian hermits appear coenobitic, more than eremitic in community. According to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

As an apparent survival of the hermit life, the Discalced Augustinians practise strict silence and have in every province a house of recollection situated in some retired place, to which monks striving after greater perfection can retire.²⁶

An immigrant to Egypt, John Cassian lived twelve years as a solitary, one of many gathered around the scholar-Abba Evagrius; afterwards he lived in a Pachomian monastery and during these years he wrote a kind of travelogue or a memoir. In 399 Cassian fled from conflict in Egypt to Marseilles. Reflection on his time in Kellia inspired the *Conferences*; the monastery period produced the *Institutes*. These works were—and are—to be read during silent meals in Benedict's coenobitic men's monasteries and in his twin sister Scholastica's nunneries. These are still influential today through the Rule of St Benedict (c.530).



St Benedict at Subiaco, by *Fra Angelico*

²⁶ 'Hermits of St Augustine', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1913), 284, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07281a.htm>.

St Benedict is known in the West as the ‘father of monks’. His story can be found in the *Vita S. Benedicti* (594) of Pope Gregory the Great. The young Benedict was formed in a solitary life consistent with Antonian tradition informed by Cassian. He lived for two periods of about three solitary years in a cave in a cliff, with his food lowered to him by the hermit monk Romano. Called out of his seclusion to teach, Benedict founded monasteries dedicated to charity and self-sufficiency, based on a rhythm of prayer and manual work—Antonian and Pachomian characteristics. The Rule of St Benedict, a third-generation Rule, drew on the anonymous sixth-century Rule of the Master, which was in turn indebted to previous desert sayings, *vitae* and Rules.

Like St Basil before him, Benedict turned the Antonian path of formation around. Antony discerned that the prime path was one-to-one, Abba–disciple spiritual obedience for formation in brotherly love. All Antonian social and spiritual organization was to that end. Once the charism of the eremitic life was well integrated interiorly, discernment might later lead to reclusion, or living in eremitical groups, or intentional writing and travelling ministries, or pioneering and activism. For Benedict, all persons and their giftedness were to be given into long-term, common and stable life in enclosure, as ‘soldiers for Christ’, obedient to the Abba, who was ‘*in loco Christi*’ (in the place of Christ). This way of living and service was and remains greatly beneficial to the local communities close to the foundations. The thousand years since Benedict’s first foundations under his Rule have been called the ‘Age of St Benedict’. Some monks and nuns, Benedict acknowledged, might hear the eremitic call:

The second kind of monk is that of the anchorites; that is, the hermits—those who, not by the new fervour of a conversion but by the long probation of life in a monastery, have learnt to fight against the devil, having already been taught by the solace of many. They, having been well prepared in the army of brothers for the solitary fight of the hermit, being secure now without the consolation of another, are able, God helping them, to fight with their own hand or arm against the vices of the flesh or of their thoughts.²⁷

There were later medieval discernments about how to organize life according to the Rule of St Benedict. These resulted in the Camaldolese (c.1012, Italy) foundations of St Romauld, an intentionally ministering

²⁷ St Benedict, ‘Prologue’, *The Rule of St Benedict: In Latin and English with Notes*, translated and edited by Timothy Fry (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1981), 20.

wandering monk, and those of St Bruno, whose Carthusians sought deeper seclusion and silence for their monasteries and for each individual monk (1084, France). These orders have continuously tended and transformed their eremitic traditions. The Order of Cistercians of Strict Observance was and is communal-coenobitic. (In 1965, Thomas Merton's research and requests finally led the Cistercian General Chapter to recognise again a second vocation for religious hermit monks and hermit nuns of the Rule of St Benedict.)

Like St Benedict during his solitary period, the layman Inigo of Loyola, who became St Ignatius (1491–1556) and founded the Society of Jesus, lived as a solitary in a cave at Manresa in 1522, where his Spiritual Exercises emerged and were tested. This eremitic to communal pattern is repeated many times in the lives of religious founder-pioneers. Each has experienced adult formation in Christian love and service. Later, they live through a period of solitary withdrawal, receive God-given insight, experience an initial sharing and testing of the insight, then receive the significant gift of a charism and its organization to love and serve, enduring over time.

There are many other transmissions of Antonian tradition eremitism. They enabled the continuance of the hermit and anchoritic solitary and communal traditions through periods of visibility and hiddenness. Recently there has been an unexpected resurgence in the Roman Catholic Church of priests, religious and laity heeding an inner call towards the solitary life, leading to canonical recognition and a rapid growth of interest in this way of life, in dioceses as well as in religious communities and associations. Franciscan (St Francis, who was torn between eremitism and preaching, gave his Order a Rule for Hermitages, 1210–1216) and Carmelite hermitages (recovering the 'hermit in community' charism from the Rule of St Albert of Jerusalem, 1206–1214) have been refounded.

Into the Twenty-First Century

Like St Antony the Great, people called to a life of Antonian tradition eremitism incarnate the gospel command to go, sell, give, come and follow (Luke 18: 18–23). It becomes imperative for these people as a way of living into the great commands of Jesus to love God, self and other—and, most importantly, to love and pray for their enemies (Matthew 5:43–48). It is a source of wonder how the Antonian themes are repeated through the centuries. Antonian tradition eremitism has been modified in different times and places—by culture, language, and ecclesial and organizational

practices. Comprehending how to live it today has become a challenge for many scholars and hermits. They need to identify the original imperatives, that lead to the different forms of the eremitic life.

As in past centuries, there remain people around the world who live solitary lives of prayer, prayerful work and its fruits of peace. They watch and pray, learning to persevere in God and 'to live at the point of intersection where the Love of God and the tensions and suffering we inflict on one another meet, and are held to God's transforming Love'.²⁸ Do these hermits contribute to the peace of the world, given that, as Thomas Merton asserted, the Christian life *demands* there be hermits? In the body of Christ and the body of humanity it is important that there are doctors and health workers, teachers in schools, long-distance lorry drivers, farmers on tractors, mothers walking fractious babies in the night, activists who welcome refugees and asylum seekers. But those living the revived Antonian traditions, in their pointing to the Kingdom, their love of all of creation and their seeking of peace with enemies within and without, local and global, believe they are laying down their lives (de Foucauld's 'doing good through silence'), for the grave concerns of today's world.

Carol McDonough was placed on the Victorian Honour Roll of Women for her human services innovations in juvenile justice and community mental health. Earlier, she was on the academic staff at Australian National University and other tertiary institutions. A rural solitary, reading reflectively about hermits for decades, she is undertaking scholarly research at the University of Divinity, Australia.

²⁸ Verena Schiller, *A Simplified Life: A Contemporary Hermit's Experience of Solitude and Silence* (Norwich: Canterbury, 2010), 191.