

SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



An Experience of the Eremitic Life

by Abbot Luke Rigby, OSB

[On June 21, 2002 Abbot Luke became a hermit and lived the life in a frame building on the abbey grounds for nine months, when ill health forced him to abandon the experience. Ill health has also prevented his resuming it. Many people have wondered what he was doing and why, so he here gives an account of how the call came to him, what he did as a hermit, and what its value was. Ed.]

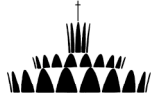
It was on the eve of the Feast of Saint Benedict, March 20, in the year 2001 that seemingly from nowhere, there came to me a conviction that God was calling me to a period of eremitic life. I have been asked to make my contribution to this book an account of how I responded to this call, how I spent the period of time allotted to me and the effect that it has had on me since.

Three hermits played a vital role in my discovering that this indeed seemingly was a true call. Two of these were members of the English Benedictine Congregation, Mother Maria Boulding, a nun of Stanbrook Abbey, and Father Aidan Gilman, a monk of Ampleforth; the third was Sister Scholastica Egan, a nun of Princethorpe Abbey who, in order to live the life, had been permitted to transfer from her community and live under the authority of her diocesan bishop. It is these three people who contribute far more than I do to the mystery and reality of this call. I should add that I also told two monks whom I always consult on major decisions in my life, Abbot Francis Rossiter and Father Edmund Hatton, as well as my diocesan priest spiritual guide. I believe I mentioned it also to one or two others of my fellow-monks.

However, I will begin by trying to describe my immediate response to this call. First of all, I have always admired the eremitic life. I have known Father Aidan for many years and was delighted that the Ampleforth community had such a man living such a life. However, I admired it at a distance and believed that that would always be the case. This was clearly not the life for me. Initially I continued inwardly along the same lines; this was a passing fancy: it would not persist and my life would continue as it had been before. Yet the call was persistent and I found myself trying to find reasons why it was not genuine. It was very self-centered and, though disguised, a gross pursuit of my own will and so I went on. But so did the persistence of the call.

Immediately, I did not talk to Father Abbot about this. I felt fairly confident that he was my last court of appeal and would dismiss the matter. It was a long and complex story but how wrong I was. When finally I placed before him the result of my correspondence with the three hermits, their analysis of how closely my initial call corresponded to theirs, how much the same and, in a sense, ordinary this life was and how much accepted it had been for many years by their own communities, Father Abbot and his council welcomed the idea. They gave it their unequivocal blessing.

Abbot Francis and Father Edmund advised me to be in touch with Dame Maria Boulding who at that time had been in her hermitage for seventeen years. I outlined to her how suddenly it all came to me, how skeptical of it all I was, how self-centered it seemed to me. Yet I also told her that I felt bound to pursue it and get some light from one who had experienced the call and had found that it was genuine. Dame Maria's reply was



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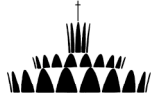
utterly clear: I must take this sudden call very seriously. It had come to me very much as hers had come to her. She too thought that her superior would put an immediate end to it and that would be that. Dame Maria was granted her request; her superior, Dame Elizabeth, had already read the signs that it was coming! She readily acquiesced.

As I look back on what I wrote to all three of the hermits I am surprised by the details in it. I had already given much thought and done a fair amount of writing about the way I would live. I had a suggested daily schedule, I outlined where I hoped I might live and what that entailed in terms of transportation, what practical work I might do for the community, how often I would need to visit the monastery and so on. Yet it was also clear to me that the major emphasis of my life would be intercessory prayer; I could expect that in God's good time what remained for me would have a prayer emphasis in place of the administrative emphasis of the previous 48 years of my monastic life here. I also realized that I would likely be called to continue with a certain amount of counseling and advising. I will note later that Father Aidan suggested I modify this emphasis—or, perhaps more accurately, broaden it.

It is not surprising that I was also advised to consult Sister Scholastica and Father Aidan, both of whom had spent many years in their hermitages. All three of them did far more than merely confirm my own pursuit of the way of life; they told more than I ever could of its essence and its place within the framework of our Holy Rule. At this point I believe it would be most valuable to quote from their replies; I have their permission to do so for this chapter. I will begin with that of Dame Maria: "Your letter is extremely interesting. I have read it several times and it provokes a lot of thoughts which I will offer to you for what they are worth. But I think it is important to say first that hermits seem to come in all shapes and sizes with individual calls, so what is suitable for one may not be for another. In addition to the different grace, differences in material circumstances inevitably loom large and have to be accommodated. However, here are some of my thoughts, a mix of spiritual and practical but mostly with the spiritual first. I cannot see any reason why your call should not be genuine. Why shouldn't God call you to a new phase of life with Him? I have always thought of my own as an outgrowth from the Benedictine vocation, not a negation of it; a particular way of living it out which is essentially related to the cenobitic. (She quotes from RB73 and RBI, notably "after long probation in the monastery.") You have served your community well and long in demanding jobs. Nothing is surprising if God calls you to live it out in a new way. I have come to think of it as simply "being the Church, a call to live Church's vocation—to be the Church in relation to Christ, to God, apart from apostolic work. A call, therefore, to intimacy and a great deal of poverty of spirit."

Sister Scholastica's reply was this: "Dear Father Luke: Your letter was a surprise and pleasure. I feel I know something about you from Edmund who has talked of your friendship over the years since schooldays; Basil also was my friend and I am glad to make the acquaintance of the third one of the trio. I know Aidan, of course, very well. Abbot Francis I only met once fleetingly and I'm surprised he remembers me. He was not our superior at Princethorpe, as we were an independent house until we joined the Subiaco Congregation.

Well, I have read your letter carefully and held it before the Lord a while. It is not at all unusual for a retired Abbot or Bishop to move into solitude. It seems to me a good



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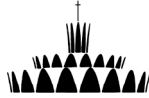


completion to a life of service, bringing the wisdom of a lifetime to rest in God, the author and finisher of our faith... the call to solitude is a mystery and it is usually compelling and obstacles are swept out of the way. I have had the privilege of listening to many would-be hermits who have come to me for discernment of what they believe to be the urgent call to solitude, so difficult to explain to anyone who has not had that experience. So over the years I have developed an eye and an ear for the genuine. This certainly comes over in your letter; all leads me to believe that you should respond to the call. I have found from experience for myself that it is better to break away from the monastery. That is, except for certain events like profession, ordination, etc. at the Abbot's discretion. I think it is confusing for all concerned to have a hermit popping in. Thomas Merton knew that and would probably have moved out if he had returned from that fateful journey. We need a kind of ruthlessness over this, to think of solitude in terms of being with God and not worrying how it will affect those we leave behind. He can well look after all of that. In order to get firmly rooted into the life you will need a period of real solitude without a break, say the three months you suggest, and monitor it with a trusted adviser during the first year. We are all different and there are no two hermits alike; there are degrees of solitude and each one has to find out what can be sustained in a healthy way. Reclusion is something different and very rare. It is by trial and error that we find the right level; it is better to long for more than to be oppressed and give up. Most hermits come to have a window on the world for the sharing of spiritual riches, it somehow happens, we don't have to seek it.

In all of this you have to take account of your age; it is late in life to make such a radical change in lifestyle. Change of diet, of sleep patterns, and unaccustomed work could cause strains difficult to manage. Of course, there must be discipline and a regular life but probably not the kind of asceticism a younger person would need. I began with great fervor and became ill at the end of the first year. The doctor thought I was sad and counseled moderation. I think Saint Benedict would say the same; discretion is important."

Finally, here are quotes from Father Aidan Gilman: "What a lovely surprise to hear from you—thank you. I was so pleased to read what you wrote about being a hermit. I think the impetus to give yourself to God anew in this way must be genuine. At 77 I think this is especially true. God may make it clear either through obedience or by trying the life that it is not for you. But surely it is right to respond to the call and leave the outcome in his hands. "Later he writes "but I think you can become too fussy about intercessory prayer, the details etc. If you attend to the Transcendent God you know he is also the Immanent God—in every situation. A bit like Mary concentrating on the breast-feeding of Jesus working wonders in the world." Later again, "I think that being a hermit is more than just living in solitude. The word holistic comes to mind. It is a whole life experience. You know this, as is clear from details and life style etc. which you mention." He concludes, "I feel a heartening warmth as I think of you and your vocation."

These further words were particularly helpful, "It is not an effort to pack in as many prayers as possible, as much spiritual reading etc. It is a gift of oneself and all that one was doing as one single gift of the prayer, the reading, the meals, the chores, everything as valuable as everything else because it is what God is calling me to. It therefore was, in one sense, very little different from the ordinary monastic life and the



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ordinary way of the Gospel. It was an attempt to follow a particular vocation with its own special emphasis of intercessory prayer, yes, but with all of the day revolving round that emphasis.” This was particularly helpful, and I modified my ideas accordingly.

This was far from the end of the story. When all seemed set for me to make a definitive move I had a series of illnesses. First of all, I got blood poisoning from a tick bite—erlichiosis. This was quite debilitating and took several weeks to clear up. Then literally on the day I sensed I was myself again, I had a heart attack. It was not a serious one and was discovered early. However, the doctor made several things clear. First, for me to live out in the country, not readily accessible to medical care, would not be acceptable. Secondly, there would have to be a considerable delay until the effects of the heart attack were clarified and, thirdly, I would have to find a different location.

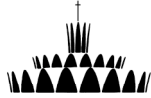
The key element was: Where should I live? The country was out, the future, because of my health was very uncertain and so we settled on a building that was, in itself, quite satisfactory yet very poorly located. It was very close to the monastery and to the school; its only outlook was over a parking lot; I was trapped within it for much of the time because of the constant presence of boys, faculty and others. In the summertime, I could at least get out and wander over the campus in the evenings, yet I had only two or three months when the light remained long enough for me to do this. Its one major advantage was that I could slip down to the monastery and get a portion of the monks’ food for my dinner; this reduced my own cooking chore considerably. Yet as I look back on the nine months I spent in this building I realize that its location was such that it could never have been a long-term solution to the problem.

All of the above indicates that my sense of this as a vocation was very definitely tested. Yet it is clear to me that it remained strong and the difficulties did not in any way tempt me to give up; they seemed merely to be problems that had to be overcome.

Anyway, the outcome was that on June 21, 2002, Father Abbot and the community had a brief ceremony of Blessing and I was on my way.

I believe it would be helpful for people to get a feel for the way of life were I to lay out my own initial tentative schedule, so here it is:

4:30 am	RISE, MATINS MEDITATION—ONE HOUR LAUDS
6:30	BREAKFAST
7:30	HOUSEHOLD CHORES
8:30	LECTIO DIVINA—DIVINE OFFICE OF TERCE
9:45	WORK TIME
11:15	PREPARE AND HAVE MAIN MEAL
12:30 pm	DIVINE OFFICE OF SEXT RECREATION EXERCISE
3:30	DIVINE OFFICE OF NONE TEA BREAK
3:45	WORK—STUDY
5:30	LECTIO DIVINA—HOLY MASS—VESPERS



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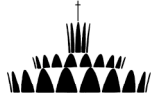
7:00 SUPPER—CHORES—COMPLINE
8:00-
8:30 LIGHTS OUT

Whilst I ultimately used this as a framework, I did not stick to it rigidly, notably towards evening. I found that I had to extend the evenings quite frequently in order to complete my prayer and to get my work done. I also modified the schedule regularly on Saturdays when I spent the afternoon cleaning house and doing my laundry. It was clear to me that without this discipline, I might have lived in a perpetual mess.

Father Aidan was particularly helpful in suggesting that this eremitic way of life is a totality, not an effort to pack in as many prayers as possible, as much spiritual reading etc. It is a gift of oneself and all that one is doing as one gift—the prayer, the reading, the meals, the chores everything as valuable as everything else because this is what God is calling me to. It therefore is, as quoted above in Father Aidan's words, very little different from the ordinary way of the monastic life and the ordinary way of the Gospel. Before I started my eremitic time, at Father Aidan's suggestion in particular, I modified this aspect significantly.

I did in fact live the life for almost exactly nine months. Once again, it was sickness that put an end to it. This was finally diagnosed as idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. In layman's terms this means that I was not getting enough oxygen into my blood. Moreover the diagnosis was not made until I had been on steroids for six months and, after a gap of three months and two lung biopsies, put back on them for a full year. I'm sure by now it is clear that my call to the eremitic life was closely bound up with significant changes of health. To me, it seems that God was preparing me to reach the age of eighty and then to have to live with problems that have entailed being significantly isolated from the community. As I look back on those nine months, I do believe that they were truly God's gift to me, a gift that has helped me enormously to handle with some graciousness and basic good spirits this long and weakening illness and to live in what I have come to call "my twilight zone."

A new experience for me was praying the psalms on my own. I found myself having to adjust quite drastically to handle them. Not least of the difficulties is the wide range of emotions expressed in a single psalm—from intense love of God to bitter hatred of Israel's enemies. This is much more evident I found when praying the psalm alone than when I pray it in choir. Here I was with the advice of the three hermits ringing in my ears and at the same time, seeking to blend it in with much attention to the meaning of the psalm and praying it in the context of the present condition of the church. I saw an opportunity to accept this condition as it is and to pray the psalms in reparation for it. I saw the chance of my prayer being a small contribution to the purging of the church at this time when the whole moral fiber seems to be reeling under the blows of the recent scandals. It seems to me that accepting the reality of the scandals is a way of praying for the Church's purgation. And this is what I have been trying to do. When I link this effort with the steroids I'm taking and the confusion that they so often bring as side effects, I'm able to offer the pain of it all and the confusion very much in reparation. Perhaps I'm old-fashioned enough to be able to offer it all up in reparation for the sins of the world. As I pray, all of this constantly comes to the fore of my mind and every aspect of my prayer is



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lined with some expression of purgation. I find it links with the side-effects of the steroids, my loss of immediate memory, my helplessness in expressing myself to others, my awareness of things out of place or undone: all of these come together in pain which begs for the purgation of the Church. Perhaps all of the above is very repetitive and, as such, does move in and out of the solid truth that through it all I'm seeking God's will to be united to him, to be offering myself with any pain I have, with any blame I have, offering it all in reparation—trying to give myself to the pain of the Church.

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