

Former Firefighter's Guide to Living as a Hermit in the Modern World

Brother Rex of the Little Portion Hermitage follows Jesus joyfully, prayerfully and silently

by SARAH REINHARD 06/02/2014



Brother Rex Anthony Norris appears on EWTN's Coming Home program.

– LittlePortionsHermitage.org/EWTN

When **Brother Rex Anthony Norris** learned that his rented hermitage would likely be sold, a group of friends founded the Friends of the [Little Portion Hermitage](http://LittlePortionHermitage.org). The organization has been collecting both prayer requests — Brother Rex's is a life of prayer — and also donations to purchase and maintain a hermitage for Brother Rex's use and the use of hermits to come after him.

Little Portion Hermitage in Oakland, Maine, was inspired by St. Francis of Assisi for prayerful solitude; Brother Rex is under the jurisdiction of his local bishop, Bishop Robert Deeley of Portland, Maine.

William Newton, who serves on the Friends of the [Little Portion Hermitage](http://LittlePortionHermitage.org) board as secretary, said, "We're all called to follow Jesus, and we take up that path because that's what makes us Christians, obviously. The difference is: Christ is calling Brother Rex to follow him in a rather more intense way than the majority of us will have to, something that most of us would find rather difficult. Frankly, I'm glad I'm not being called to do it, but Brother Rex is."

Author and blogger Kevin Lowry serves as board chair of the Friends of the [Little Portion Hermitage](http://LittlePortionHermitage.org), in part because of the importance he sees in Brother Rex's vocation. "I think it's extremely cool that we have people in the Church praying for us all the time," Lowry said. "Particularly as a husband and father of eight, there are always things (and people) to pray for. I really appreciate how seriously he takes his vocation of assiduous prayer."

Brother Rex has been featured on EWTN's *The Journey Home* (he came to the Church from a Presbyterian and Episcopalian background), and his story has been covered by a number of Catholic bloggers. He recently shared with the Register what it means to be a hermit and why he feels called to this vocation.

Tell us about your life as a hermit.

Perhaps a good way into an answer for this question is to take a look at what canon law has to say about life as a hermit. Canon 603, from the Revised Code of Canon Law 1983, addresses the eremitical life:

§1. Besides institutes of consecrated life, the Church recognizes the eremitic or anchoritic life by which the Christian faithful devote their life to the praise of God and salvation of the world through a stricter separation from the world, the silence of solitude and assiduous prayer and penance.

§2. A hermit is recognized in the law as one dedicated to God in a consecrated life if he or she publicly professes the three evangelical

counsels, confirmed by a vow or other sacred bond, in the hands of the diocesan bishop and observes his or her own plan of life under his direction.

And in (St.) Pope John Paul II's 1996 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World), he wrote:

“Men and women hermits, belonging to ancient orders or new institutions, or being directly dependent on the bishop, bear witness to the passing nature of the present age by their inward and outward separation from the world. By fasting and penance, they show that man does not live by bread alone, but by the word of God (Matthew 4:4). Such a life ‘in the desert’ is an invitation to their contemporaries and to the ecclesial community itself never to lose sight of the supreme vocation, which is to be always with the Lord” (7).

What does it mean to be a hermit in 21st-century America?

Every baptized Christian has a vocation, a calling. Each of us is called by God to a particular way of life that God uses as he sees fit to share himself with the world. The hermit's life is one such calling.

Through separation from the everyday hustle and bustle of 21st-century American life, the hermit enters more deeply into the spiritual desert that is our culture of death. In the desert, the hermit does spiritual combat with the forces of evil that threaten to overwhelm the world as a whole and American culture in particular. Like every vocation in the Church, the vocation of the hermit is to shine the light of Christ into the darkness that cannot overcome it.

All the above being said, it is still true that the Christian life is above all one of everlasting joy. We of all people should know that Christ has won the victory over sin and death. We of all people should know that the battle against the “powers and principalities of the air” (Ephesians 6:12) — in which each of us is engaged on a personal level

and together as the Body of Christ — will not go on forever. And since this is the case, perhaps it falls to the hermit to witness in a very particular way to the joy that comes from knowing that, in the end, God wins — and, in the meantime, Christ alone suffices.

How do you live?

To all outward appearances, the life of the hermit looks very much like any other life. The hermit has bills to pay, meals to prepare, dishes to clean, laundry to wash and fold, a living space to keep clean, and so on.

There are two added dimensions to my life. First, there are the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. These are vows which I made before my diocesan bishop in the presence of the parish community.

Second, there is my “Rule of Life.” The Rule of Life, approved by the bishop who received my vows, governs my prayer life: adoration, Liturgy of the Hours, Mass, the clothing I wear, the time I spend outside the hermitage, etc.

Is this even possible with the Internet?

So long as the Internet is used as a tool to be used wisely, it proves no hindrance to life as a hermit. For instance, I receive prayer requests from all over the world via the Internet.

In addition to the ministry of intercessory prayer, I am a part of the ministry team of the Coming Home Network International. The [Coming Home Network](#) is an apostolate founded by Marcus Grodi to assist non-Catholic clergy and laity who are making or are considering making the journey home to the Catholic Church. My part in the Coming Home apostolate is to provide prayer support and/or spiritual direction for women and men on their journey home to the Catholic Church who desire help.

Given the nature of my vocation to the silence of solitude, I must be ever vigilant that the Internet

does not become a distraction, rather than an aid, to my ministry of prayer and spiritual direction.

Why did you choose this lifestyle?

I am not sure why God chose me for this life. For a number of years, I was more or less content with my life and with my career as a professional firefighter. I had even toyed with the idea of becoming an ordained minister (I am a convert to the Catholic faith). I just kept saying Yes to what I perceived as the next right thing in front of me; one thing led to another, and here I am, living a life in Christ, the depth and beauty of which I could never have dreamed possible.

And it is all pure gift. All that I have (except my sinfulness) is because of God's grace — every last bit of it.

What's important about the life you've chosen?

I have a quote tagged to the end of my emails that reads: "Live to be forgotten, that Christ might be remembered." It is how I want to live my vocation as a hermit, though my pride and ego often lure me into bringing more notice to myself than to Christ.

Perhaps one of the important things about the hermit's vocation is to remind people that while each of us is beloved of God and will be remembered by him for all eternity, it is equally true that our vocation as a disciple of Jesus is to be forgotten, that Christ might be remembered.

Another important aspect of this vocation I have accepted as pure gift is to witness to the importance of praying for the glory of God, the good of his Church and the salvation of souls.

For those of us who are not called to a hermitage, what advice do you have? How can we use your example to inspire us?

As I said above, the importance of prayer in the life of a Christian cannot be overemphasized. We cannot have a relationship with Someone to whom we do not listen or to whom we do not speak. In

the case of a Christian, there is no more important relationship than the one we have with the Blessed Trinity.

To pray is to listen and to speak to the One in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28), the One who lives and moves in us (John 14:20). One need not live alone in a hermitage to pray well or to pray often, so my first bit of advice is to make prayer a priority in your life.

Secondly, try to take time each day to be silent and sit quietly. If you have a family with small children, you will need to be creative as to how and when you can be alone and sit quietly, but try it.

God speaks through the people and events in our day-to-day lives. This is true. But he often speaks most profoundly in silence: There are things he would say to us; things he would do in us; things he should do through us — if only we would sit quietly and in silence.

Maybe you have only five minutes.

Give those five minutes to God in the silence of solitude. God will not disappoint. God can do more in the human soul in the space of five minutes than can be done by the whole of humanity in the entire sweep of history.

Sarah Reinhard writes online at NCRegister.com and SnoringScholar.com.

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