

Community of Solitude - Customary

Introduction

What we believe

The community is united in their intention to "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22)

We each carry out this mandate very aware of our own faults before God: "The first degree of humility, then, is that you keep the fear of God before your eyes and beware of ever forgetting it." (Benedict of Nursia)

The love we know

The 'work' of the community is to bring the Love of God to all we meet. St. Bernard said: "You wish me to tell you why and how God should be loved. My answer is that God himself is the reason he is to be loved." (St. Bernard of Clairvaux)

The love we live out

All members of the community are committed to living out their calling where they live and work: "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. Keep these three precepts and you will be saved." (Anthony of the Desert)

The love we practice

Our calling to love God and neighbor in our communities is practiced day-by-day, hour-by-hour by following the "one way" of the psalms and sitting "like a chick, content with the grace of God." (St. Romuald)

The love we are

We accomplish the deep love of Christ in our communities primarily through a fundamental renunciation of the world, by sitting in our cells "as in paradise", and placing ourselves in the presence of God with fear and trembling. (St. Romuald)

1. Charism: the love we know

One of the best ways to understand our charism is to grasp that Love (the great, overwhelming, cup-overflowing Love with a capital L) is a privilege not an entitlement. We of the Community of Solitude seek to honor our calling to a Greater Love understanding full well the depth of commitment and responsibility that this entails. To Love unconditionally, enthusiastically and unfailingly is the charism of this Community.

2. Calling: the love we live out

Our calling is not to traditional, geographically-bound, community life. What differentiates the eremitical tradition is its physical independence. But being alone has many spiritual dangers – it is very easy to leave the “narrow way” and begin following our own fancies. Monastic literature is full of such warnings. St. Benedict does not spare them by calling them a “most vile class of monks”. He called them “Sarabaites” and they are the ones who “have been tried by no rule.” His warnings are especially pointed:

“Living in two's and three's, or even singly, without a shepherd, enclosed, not in the Lord's sheepfold, but in their own, the gratification of their desires is law unto them; because what they choose to do they call holy, but what they dislike they hold to be unlawful.” (RB 1)

Let us pray that never will this community be known as such. For the protection of our immortal souls, therefore, this community eagerly embraces the Camaldolese approach for living both a solitary lifestyle while still receiving the spiritual protection which comes from a common rule and knowing ourselves as belonging to one sheepfold.

Our community looks to create a space where the individual can engage in the hard work of following the Lord every moment of the day, while at the same time to be supported by a community of like-minded workers. We do share a common life of prayer and are united with each other in the recitation of the Divine Offices, Lectio Divina and meditation/contemplation, as well as in the common study of those teachers and masters that have gone before us, especially the writings of the of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and the Camaldolese saints.

2.1 Non-Canonical

This Community is non-canonical. This means it does not abide by the canons (rules) of any institutional church. This is required because institutions are (frankly) very protective of their turf, and while officially professing ecumenism they constantly raise new barriers to entry and taxes for the free-trade of ‘goods and services’ between denominations.

But the lack of institutional backing can raise some concerns. This Community strives to go much further than most canonical requirements. For example, in this Community, to get from Aspirant to Vowed it will take a minimum of 4.5 years, probably more, of individual and group formation led by senior members and with the active involvement of the individual's family and parish. To paraphrase, "It takes a village to raise a monk."

Our structure is as formal as any of the other officially recognized Orders and Communities in either the Episcopal or the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, with our emphasis on the role of the local community, we believe we have stricter standards.

2.2 Individualism

In the history of the church contemplative orders have always had to defend themselves against charges of individualism and of going against the apostolic mandates of Our Lord to go out and make disciples. It is much simpler to understand the role of a soup kitchen run by Franciscans than the 'usefulness' of a cloistered contemplative order like Carmel. It is not the purpose of this letter to offer an *apologia* to the contemplative call, but rather to clarify how a Community such as is envisioned can serve to avoid excesses which often do creep in when individuals are not held accountable to a Rule and Constitution.

While no one can truthfully discern whether or not a person is being individualistic in the fulfillment of their calling or not (God alone knows our hearts), this Community is created with the explicit desire to bring together the *de facto* solitaries which are in our midst under a common rule. While practicing their spiritual life in the context that makes sense for their life and circumstances, the Community through its Rule and Constitution will serve as mentor and protector of their souls through teaching, mentorship and regular (annual) Councils.

3. The love we practice: 'living novenas' to Divine Love

Relying on the love and protection of the Holy Trinity, we are called by Christ to offer our lives as a perpetual devotion, a "living novena", for peace and reconciliation of the heart and soul of the world, and to ease the suffering of our neighbors through our own sacrificial prayerfulness in thought word and deed. Fundamentally we seek to be the instruments of Divine Love.

Our guide in life, first and foremost, is Holy Scripture. We search without tiring for a closer union with Our Lord. To achieve this we have found it beneficial to be organized in the manner set out by the Rule of St. Benedict, but following the eremitical structure outlined by Sts. Romuald and Paul Giustiniani (the founders of the Benedictine Camaldolese and the Camaldolese Hermits of Monte Corona respectively), especially St. Romuald's Brief Rule.

3.1 St. Romuald's Brief Rule

1. Sit in your cell as in paradise.
2. Put the whole world behind you and forget it.
3. Watch your thoughts like a good fisherman watching for fish.
4. The path you must follow is in the Psalms — never leave it.
5. If you have just come to the monastery, and in spite of your good will you cannot accomplish what you want, take every opportunity you can to sing the Psalms in your heart and to understand them with your mind.
6. And if your mind wanders as you read, do not give up; hurry back and apply your mind to the words once more.
7. Realize above all that you are in God's presence, and stand there with the attitude of one who stands before the emperor.
8. Empty yourself completely and sit waiting, content with the grace of God, like the chick who tastes nothing and eats nothing but what his mother brings him.

4. The love we are: actions & interactions

We serve our community and the world through our life consecrated to prayer, silence and solitude. But these are tools, not end in themselves. Their function is to create a space for a deeper and more constant conversation with God.

4.1 Prayer

More accurately we should say “prayerful presence”. We aim to pray always as the Apostle Paul suggests. The concrete details of how to prayerfully go to the supermarket or drive on the freeway are the very work which a solitary must engage in. There are no formulas for this.

4.2 Silence

Even with our mouths closed, we are hardly ever silent. Our eyes dart to and fro, our mind races forwards into a fantastical future, and backwards into an imagined past. We are hardly ever just present to the moment. Yet it is in this very moment where silence and healing are to be found. So our work is to constantly strive to be where Christ is, here and now.

4.3 Solitude

Just as Our Lord blessed the poor in spirit (while clearly not suggesting that being destitute, hungry, and homeless were noble ideals) so too we take the meaning of “solitary” to be a person who in the midst of their life is profoundly aware of being alone with God.

4.4 Practice

We carry our cloister in our hearts and our monastic cell is wherever we are. We believe the Lord is calling us to be a visible witness of the eremitical life without a monastic enclosure. We place emphasis on the centrality of the Holy Eucharist. Following Romuald, we dedicate much time to the “one way” of recitation of the psalter.

4.5 The Divine Offices

We all have different tastes and spiritual inclinations. Therefore, we do not restrict recitation of the offices to any one version. Some use the offices from the Book of Common Prayer, some use a traditional Roman breviary, others a different version, and some may have constructed their own Office book using the shape and form traditional to each office. It doesn't matter much which version is used. What matters is that you recite the office. We also place emphasis on "quality v. quantity" when praying the office. Sometimes life circumstances limit the number of offices one can recite on any given day. Rest assured the community supports you with *their* prayers when this occurs.

4.6 Lectio Divina

Apart from the Offices this is the single most important "weapon" in the arsenal of a solitary. A great part of the formation of the novice will be spent teaching and refining the practice of Lectio, until it becomes second nature. Fundamentally, lectio is to be a time where the individual seeks the Heart of Christ in the Gospels, learning directly from the Master how to become fully human.

4.7 A visible witness - Habits

Life circumstances vary among us. We offer the option of wearing the Holy Habit wherever and whenever it is appropriate. As we do not hold any property or possessions in common, the Holy Habit is purchased by each member from the Community's approved supplier.

5. The Guardian Council

We take the Lord as our only true "superior" and do not vest total authority in the person of an abbot/abbess or prior/prioress. Our community is shepherded by a Guardian council of 3 vowed members elected by the community. If the size of the community allows, service on the council is to be for not more than 2 consecutive 3 year terms. The council is the first point of contact for inquirers and assists the novice with selecting a mentor. As the word "shepherd" implies, the council is there to help, guide and support the rest of the community. It does NOT lay down the law for anyone. Only God can do that. On the practical side of things, the council is responsible for the website, arranging annual chapters/retreats and vetting potential new members.

See the Constitution for details on membership and leadership.

6. Individual/Group Formation

It is important that all members share a "common language", a common set of ideas and ideals that shape us together. Without this formation there is no community, we would be no better than a support group. Each one of us is at a different place in our walk with God. We believe our individual walks with God proceed at a different pace. We are NOT about creating "cookie-cutter" religious.

We are individuals, united by our mutual goal of loving God (through the practices mentioned above).

While the end goal of formation is, traditionally, the taking of Solemn Vows, the route to getting there will be different for each person. For those who already have established some or many of the practices of our life, your journey to vows may be shorter than another's. But this is not a race or competition. It's an individual journey and absolutely NO emphasis is placed on reaching the point of Solemn Vows within a specific time frame. In fact, one may choose to remain in Simple Vows rather than proceed to Solemn Vows, renewing their commitment every few years.

In addition to the steps of formation detailed below, we have a proscribed reading list. All books on the list are required to be read by all members. At all stages of formation, each member should receive spiritual direction on a regular basis. Members of the Community of Solitude are referred to as Solitaries, as our way of life is modeled on the Hermits and Solitaries of the monastic tradition, especially those in the Camaldolese tradition.

6.1.1 Aspirant

An aspirant is an individual who is discerning a call to a vocation as a Solitary. An aspirant is expected to have a good knowledge of the Divine Offices. Likewise the spiritual tool of Lectio Divina should be understood. Hopefully, the aspirant will have already been seeking God through these tools prior to discerning a call and embarking on their novitiate.

The minimum age for an aspirant is 25. We feel the level of maturity needed to be a solitary requires some experience of life including some higher education and professional work experience. There is no upper age limit.

If an aspirant is married, we require a letter from the spouse demonstrating their enthusiastic endorsement of the call and their understanding of the demands this will place on the family, especially in terms of time management and responsibilities. Only one spouse can be a Solitary.

6.1.2 Novice

A novice is an aspirant who has been vetted and approved by the Guardian Council. The novice begins by aligning themselves with a mentor from the vowed ranks. Together with the mentor, the novice examines his/her daily life circumstances and writes a companion customary to compliment that of the Community. This customary details the how, when and where religious devotions and practices will be done. Throughout the novitiate, the mentor makes regular reports to the

Guardian Council regarding the progress of the novice under their mentorship.

Based on the novice's spiritual "here and now", a course of study is designed and implemented. The mentor is involved in this process. The course of study should be both academic and experiential. Academic studies are a necessary part of monastic formation and, in addition to materials on the proscribed reading list, could include a comprehensive study of the Rule, the teachings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers or the life and teachings of a saint or spiritual leader. The area of study is not limited to one subject. A series of subjects may be studied. Experiential formation could include making a pilgrimage, writing icons, composing chant music or making a series of retreats at a monastery. These two aspects of monastic formation should be geared to achieve a specific goal by complimenting each other.

Throughout the novitiate, the novice and mentor have a monthly conference via the phone (not email). This is a spiritual check up for both parties. This is the minimum the novice and mentor should communicate each month. More communication is desirable and highly encouraged by email and/or phone. But at least one monthly phone call is required. Keeping a spiritual journal or blog is encouraged. If the novice and mentor are in the same geographic area, a face to face meeting would be ideal.

The length of the Novitiate will vary from person to person. On the average, a novitiate should last one to two years. Formation is part of an individual journey and cannot be boxed into a finite time frame.

The Novice, mentor and Guardian Council jointly decide when a novice is ready to take Simple Vows. Novices wear street clothes or the Witness Shirt with a simple medal or cross. They receive the Holy Habit when they make Simple Vows. If a Solitary is called to a vocation of Simple Vows, they are permitted to wear the Cowl when they make their first renewal (three years from making their initial profession)

6.1.3 Simple Vows

Simple Vows bind the Solitary to the Community in three year increments. Our vows are based on those taken by Benedictine religious but are slightly different in focus:

Conversion of Life: This vow is essentially the same as the Benedictine vow. That is, a never ending vow to strive to remake oneself to be as Christ-like as is humanly possible

Stability in a life of prayer: As we have no motherhouse or monastery, we do not vow stability to a specific place/monastery. Rather, our stability

is to live a life of constant prayer that supports the community and makes reparation for the evil done in the world.

Obedience to the will of God: The Solitaries does not vest total authority in the person of an abbot/abbess or prior/prioress. We acknowledge God as our only true superior. Therefore, this vow is a direct covenant between the religious and God. The covenant is also a communal one. Each member of the community must be obedient to the Rule of Benedict (as it is interpreted in the Community's Customary & Constitution) honoring the wisdom of St. Benedict.

Other communities refer to the time spent in Simple Vows as the "Juniorate." We acknowledge a vocation to Simple Vows that does not require making Solemn Vows. Therefore the term "junior" does not apply to our community.

Formation while in Simple Vows is, again, self directed. An annual meditation, derived from the year's studies is expected, to be shared with the entire community. This can be something sent via cyberspace or delivered at convocation in the form of a homily or a teaching session/retreat.

When a Solitary is called to a life of Solemn Vows, the time spent in Simple Vows should, on the average, last three years. The Solitary and the Guardian Council determine when Solemn Vows are appropriate.

6.1.4 Solemn Vows

These are permanent vows, once taken they can only be revoked by separation from the Community. Study and formation do not stop end with the taking of Solemn Vows. Rather, it is a life long custom to continue formation. Like those in Simple Vows, an annual meditation is asked and delivered in the same manner. Another aspect of Solemn Vows formation is sitting on the council and/or serving as a mentor. The Cowl is the traditional symbol of the solemnly professed religious' right to sing the Divine Office in choir and to hold office in the community (i.e. serve on the Guardian Council or as a mentor). At the taking of Solemn Vows, a cowl should be blessed and worn, thereafter, at all Offices.

7. Stewardship: Property & tithing

As a Community we do not share property or possessions in common. It is a requirement that all members practice sacrificial giving to their local parish and right stewardship of their resources, but there are no mandatory requirements for the maintenance of this Community or its members.

Funds may be asked for accomplishing common goals, such as paying for the website, securing a retreat place for all to attend, or to undertake some charitable cause that the mind of the Community believes it is called to support. And funds are always welcome for sponsorships to attend Convocation, or help secure reading resources for those who cannot afford them.

See the Constitution for details on finances.

8. Admission to the Community

We do not restrict admission to this community based on age, gender, clerical or marital status. If you are baptized Christian and can honestly agree with the traditional Creeds of the Church (Apostles, Nicea and Athanasian) then you are welcome as Christ. It is our belief that if one is called to this way of life by Jesus no one can stand in their way. Once called to this way of life by Jesus, the person cannot stay as they are; they are now on a path of irrevocable transformation.

We understand that this community is not in any way owned or in the possession (even emotionally) of those who undertook the call to found it in the name of Christ. The community belongs only to God.

Admission to the Solitaires requires that one have a good understanding of our way of life. Formation in the community is self directed, in concert with a mentor from the vowed ranks. If one already has a tradition of prayer and solitude in their life you may be called to join with us.

1. Contact a member of the Guardian Council and initiate a discernment process or just chat to get to know us and understand better what we're all about.
2. Talk to your spiritual director about your journey toward an "interior/inward" way of life.
3. Read about and reflect on the Camaldolese way of life and the vows of Conversion of Life, Stability in a life of prayer and Obedience to God's Will.
4. Above all, talk to God.....PRAY!