Columns
Religious Life



The hermitage built by Fr. Charles Brandt above the Oyster River in Black Creek, British Columbia, Canada, offers Benedictine Oblate Julie A. Ferraro a connection to the land, recognizing it as part of the greater whole of this planet. (Julie A. Ferraro)



by Julie A. Ferraro

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As a Benedictine oblate, stability is a topic much studied and discussed at monthly meetings and retreats. Mentioned only briefly in the Rule of St. Benedict, the concept can mean different things. For some, it's about a connection to a place — a monastery, a community. For others, it involves perseverance in "the task of seeking God when the spiritual journey becomes difficult, boring, or otherwise unpleasant," according to a Benedictine Sisters of Cullman, Alabama blog.

This tradition within the Benedictine Order contrasts the mendicant communities founded in the 13th century and later. For instance, Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Sisters of Mercy and many others chose to balance prayer and work beyond the walls of their homes, serving those on the margins of society, in education and more. These latter expressions of following the Gospels nurtured their own type of stability: returning to the motherhouse at various times during the year to reconnect with their communities, finding in that core connection a means to continue their ministries with joy and dedication.

During a monthly Zoom series on monastic land stewardship, sponsored by the Center for Benedictine Life at the Monastery of St. Gertrude this summer, a number of presenters mentioned stability as an integral component of the growing eco-spirituality movement. Nurturing a connection to the land on which we live, for instance, and the diverse creation found in that region can allow for a grounded vision about how to better care for our common home, as Pope Francis wrote in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* and his subsequent apostolic exhortation. *Laudate Deum*.

Where does that leave me, though? I tend more toward the "mobility" side of things, especially over the past dozen years. I've traveled where my skills have been needed: starting in Indiana, where I grew up and raised my family, to Southern California, then Iowa, the Navajo Nation and New Mexico, Texas, Washington State, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Idaho and, now, Vancouver Island, north of the Canadian border.



The rapids of the Oyster River can be seen through the trees during the autumn months from Fr. Charles Brandt's hermitage. (Julie A. Ferraro)

One of the organizers of the Monastic Land Stewardship series serves on the board of the Brandt Oyster River Hermitage Society. He asked me some months ago to spread the word about the contemplative-in-residence program initiated by that organization, which allows individuals of any faith background to spend three months to a year nurturing their contemplative practice.

The rustic hermitage on the 28-acre property was built by Fr. Charles Brandt (1923-2020), who was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and grew up with a love of the natural world, studying wildlife conservation before pursuing ordination as an Anglican priest in 1952. He later converted to Catholicism and eventually became a Trappist monk at New Melleray Abbey in Iowa. He learned bookbinding and lent his skills to the rich Benedictine tradition of creating fine volumes by hand.

Brandt became a hermit on Vancouver Island in the mid-1960s, moving his hermitage to its present site in the 1970s. He became an advocate for the natural

resources along the island's eastern shore and lived there until his death.

As I write this, I'm sitting at the table where he ate his daily meals, looking out on a grove of tall trees where deer often graze. Below the dwelling, the Oyster River rapids rush toward the sea, creating a natural symphony.

Here, I will write — as I have done for more than 50 years — do a bit of remote work in communications, and perhaps try my hand at a bit of abstract art, as I lack the talent for still lifes or portraits. A meditation group meets in the hermitage's gathering space twice a month, and I will occasionally give presentations on aspects of contemplative life.

Amidst my mobility, I will cultivate my own brand of stability: a connection to the land where I am at any given moment, recognizing it as part of the greater whole of this planet, all in need of our attention and tender loving care.

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