

Resource Material for the Discernment of Hermit Vocations according to canon 603.
From the Congregation of Institutes on Religious Life and Societies of Apostolic Life

Canon 603:

1. Besides institutes of consecrated life, the Church recognizes the eremitic or anchoritic life by which 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.

Theological Identity of the Vocation:

From the text of the canon one may draw particular elements of the theological nature of this particular vocation to a consecrated life in the Church. It is:

- a life devoted to the praise of God and the salvation of the world
- a life dedicated through public profession of the evangelical counsels
- a life of assiduous prayer
- a life of penance
- a life lived in the silence of solitude, more strictly withdrawn from the world.

A "Desert Spirituality" involves accepting the poverty of one's own heart, allowing oneself to be led by Jesus through His Word and the gentle voice of the Holy Spirit. It is a call to continuing conversion, a way of discovering the forgiving and healing love of the Father, and of entering more deeply into union with Him.

The teaching of St. Peter Damian is important for understanding the solitary communion of the hermit with the entire Church. The prayer of the hermit cannot be strictly solitary; while physically isolated, the hermit is fully present to the Church. Damian called the hermit a minor ecclesia, a Church in miniature, in communion with all of its members. The life is a radical choice of God and a life of radical solidarity with all of humanity.

Juridic Identity of the Vocation:

The canon isolates a very specific form of hermit vocation. It is:

- an individual form of consecrated life
- a life consecrated through public profession of the counsels received by the Diocesan Bishop
- a life lived according to an approved eremitic Plan of Life, under the direction of the Diocesan Bishop.

The canon deliberately does not deal with members of religious congregations who receive permission from their superiors to live a solitary life, nor does it deal with communities aspiring to become religious institutes according to a traditional semi-eremitic Rule. Likewise, the canon does not deal with individuals who privately undertake a solitary way of life, but who do not seek this recognition by the Church.

There is no established Rite for receiving the vows (or other sacred bonds) of a hermit. A formula, using elements analogous to profession formulae for institutes of consecrated life, should be included in the Plan of Life. It seems reasonable that a hermit would profess temporary vows for a period of years, prior to making a perpetual profession.

A Laura (colony) of hermits can be approved under canon 603, as distinct from a religious community. The laura follows the ancient tradition of Egypt and Palestine in which hermits live in separate solitary hermitages around a Chapel and Central House. (The term laura comes from the Greek for the paths connecting the hermits' cells with the Church, central building and other cells.) In order to live their individual solitude, such hermits commonly gather only once each day for the celebration of Eucharist. Weekly they may gather for solemn First Vespers and on Sunday for Lauds, Eucharist, a meal and sharing. The hermit life is lived by each in an individual and solitary way, yet there is a communion, which builds among them.

Pastoral Considerations:

1. What is motivating the candidate toward an eremitic vocation of solitude and silence?
 - Love of God and desire to donate self completely to God?
 - Desire to live in the heart and mystery of the Church?
 - Desire to embrace the suffering of God's people throughout the world in solitary prayer?
 - Desire and readiness for detachment toward simplicity of life?
 - What discernment has already taken place?

2. What is the level of psychological and spiritual maturity?
 - The age often suggested is 30+, but chronological age does not guarantee the maturity required for a solitary life.
 - The candidate should already have experience with spiritual direction, being open to the Spirit and to direction.
 - Has there been growth in relationship with God, in a deepening prayer life, and increasing call to the solitude of a desert spirituality?
 - What is the sacramental practice of the candidate?
 - Does the candidate demonstrate a capacity to imbibe the Word of God? Is there experience in the process of Lectio Divina? Is there some solid background for praying with the Scriptures?
 - Has there been experience in communal living?
 - Is there familiarity with classic authors on the solitary life?
 - Is there evidence of the "silent preaching" of Him to whom the hermit's life is given? (CCC 921)

3. Is there readiness to begin articulation of a Plan of Life for the Bishop's approval?

Although each will be proper to the individual, elements would include:

 - A personal understanding of the elements of a consecrated hermit life, reflecting the basic content of c. 603
 - An articulation of how poverty, chastity and obedience are understood and how they will be lived
 - The hermit's view of his/her relationship with the Bishop, the Church and the world.
 - A daily rhythm of life including prayer (liturgical and personal), work and rest.
 - Provision for spiritual direction.
 - Protection of solitude and projected frequency and reasons for needing to leave the hermitage.

4. Has sufficient consideration been given to practical questions such as:
 - a suitable place to live which allows for silence and solitude, away from the noise and confusion of city life. A dwelling should be simple but have the basic necessities of life. The question of "urban hermits" remains debated. The location should be reasonably safe.

 - availability of sacramental life: daily Eucharistic liturgy, regular access to the sacrament of Reconciliation and to spiritual direction.

- the possibility of reservation of the Blessed Sacrament in the hermitage, or, availability of a Church or chapel to which the hermit could readily have access for Eucharistic adoration.
- a means of financial support. Can work be done in the hermitage? If the candidate is leaving the solitude of the hermitage in order to go out to work, he/she should be working toward a work situation where this would not have to occur. Is the work contemplative? Are there endowments, pensions or inheritances available for support? Are there benefactors? The establishment of a 501-c (3) non-stock, non-profit corporation can help minimize tax liability. Sound legal counsel is necessary for this. Note: Even if the hermit has adequate means of support, some form of physical work is important for balance in a life of solitary prayer.
- provision for comprehensive health insurance. Can the hermit afford this? Is the bishop willing to carry the hermit on the diocesan plan, in conformity with diocesan policies. The Bishop is not financially responsible for a hermit, but may be willing to contribute in some way.
- a Last Will and Testament should be drawn up as well as a Living Will/Power of Attorney according to state law. A copy of these should be on file in the Diocesan offices.

Related Contemporary Questions:

1. Transfers to/from Religious Life. A religious in an institute which does not have a tradition allowing for eremitic life, is sometimes allowed by legitimate superiors to have a gradual experience of a more solitary life. If there is serious consideration of transferring to the life of a consecrated hermit, contact with the bishop should be begun. At first there might be permission of absence from the religious institute, then exclaustation and finally there would be an indult of departure, juridically separating the religious from the institute in order to profess vows as a hermit. In some cases, a process analogous to a transfer might be used, following canon 684 §5 which refers certain transfers to the Apostolic See. A hermit wishing to enter religious life would need to follow the usual norms for admission, while adaptations provided for in law might be used in the period of formation.
2. Aggregation to a Religious Order: Although a hermit, as envisioned by c. 603, may have a spiritual affinity to a particular Order's saints and spirituality, aggregation to the Order would not in keeping with the individual vocation of the hermit who depends on the diocesan bishop. Aggregation is a canonical structure providing for affiliation between two autonomous institutes.
3. Use of a habit Although hermits, under canon 603, are not religious, it is not unusual for them to use a monastic type habit, according to circumstances.

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