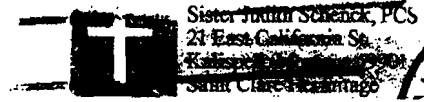


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Dear Bishop Sisk,

I am immensely grateful that the House of Bishops is going to take a close look at the eremitic vocation of solitaries. And very glad they are asking the solitaries themselves for input.

Enclosed is a position paper I wrote at the request of Rodney Michaels several years ago when he was bishop in charge of religious vocations. A few weeks ago I sent a copy to the presiding bishop after she made a visitation to our Diocesan Convention. Her reply letter said a copy was being sent to Bishop Russ Jacobus. I think it might be very useful and hope either he or you gets it distributed for the House of Bishop's meeting in March. It goes into detail about the call, theology, requirements and dangers and is particularly addressed to bishops with a special section for them. There is also a brief list of what one could consider minimal requirements.

Question 1)... "Does the church want to continue recognizing Solitaries? Yes!!! I beg and beseech you YES. It is the most ancient of monastic vocations and the most focused and intense in terms of prayer. Nothing can be more important to the Church than an intense life of prayer and the hidden solitaries maintain that. Blake said "the hermit's prayers and the widows tears alone can keep the world from fear." It is a constant availability to God, a sort of Incarnation, through which God can do what God wills, a remembering of God in a world that forgets.

Question 2 and 3)... "Should this vocation be singled out for canonical recognition?" Yes. In the first place, not doing so says it is not a valid and important vocation and like all vocations, priesthood, diaconate, religious community life, it needs the solidity, protection and structure of canons.

The present canon, III 14:3 for Special Vocations in wholly inadequate. Our polity needs specific definition for the eremitic. The solitary eremitic vocation is as much a valid monastic vocation with its own structures and traditions as any cenobitic and needs to be labeled and honored and bound as such. And the number one necessity in this is some form of accountability to a specific bishop, normally diocesan unless perhaps connected to a cenobitic community and maybe even then.

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As all know, this is a vocation of both great importance and great vulnerability and it needs oversight. Some of the solitaries will scream at canonical oversight and if they do, that should be a red flag on authority issues. Obedience is paramount to monastic life. There are some very solid solitaries and some fly by their own habit-tails.

First it is essential for the solitary to be under the obedience and protection of either their local diocesan bishop or if a solitary under the umbrella of a religious order within ECUSA under that bishop protector or some form of connection with both. It is a problem to the local bishop if the eremitic has no local obedience. If vows were made in another country, that obedience needs to reside within the local ECUSA diocese. Obedience is sacrosanct to the vocation.

Having said this, the obedience and canonical process needs to also hold some flexibility. Rigid definitions are exclusionary of many vocations that simply don't fit in a one-size-fits-all box. The Roman canons are probably too rigid. Eremitics by nature are unique and no one vocation is like another. Vows need to be individually written and held by the diocesan bishop or bishop protector. There needs to be canonical guidelines for making vows, release of vows and transfer of vows if the solitary changes dioceses.

I understand there has been some discussion among the bishops to require eremitics to be under the umbrella of a coenobitic community. This could be a huge mistake for some vocations. Some religious orders look down upon and snub solitaries condescendingly. The vocations to eremitic and Cenozoic are very very different and that needs to be understood. It is like the difference between deacon and priest with the deacon not being just a mini-priest but a separate and equal vocation. If the eremitic has a comfortable and mutual relationship with a particular religious order, like I do with the Franciscans with whom I am now a part, then it can be a great support and blessing.

I appreciate this dialogue for the vocation of solitary which I treasure. If I can be of any help, please contact me again.

God Bless..

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sister Judith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sister Judith Schenck

basic pre-requisites for eremitic life...the eremitic vocation is the most difficult of all vocations and needs to be guided and guarded...

1) experience in contemplative monastic life....perhaps a minimum of six months living within an enclosed type community

2) economic independence.....an ability to sustain oneself in a simple basic hermitage....health insurance, rent or house payment, food, etc.

3) celibacy and independence from family ties and responsibilities. there can be adult children or elderly parents but held at a detached and physically free dimension.

4) spiritual discernment for a number of years with an authorized spiritual director

5) approval of the bishop

6) a one-year "novitiate" within the eremitic enclosure after all the above complete. In this period vows will be written, approved by the bishop and lived.

7) strong emotional/psychological stability affirmed by a therapist

8) ability to live in long term extreme solitude and silence. This includes ability to go out only for the absolute necessities like food and doctor. Most other needs can be purchased over the web. No clubs or groups of any sort, no friendships outside the hermitage. A hermit is by virtue of vows and calling enclosed. People may visit the hermit for spiritual purposes under the umbrella of hospitality. If the hermit is not a priest, some arrangement needs to be made for eucharist. Some lay hermits do go out once a week to a parish church for the eucharist.

9) ability and willingness to submit totally in obedience to the bishop of one's diocese. The bishop holds the eremitic vows...in the hands of the bishop....which means it is to the bishop that one is accountable and obedient. this applies even if a new bishop follows the one of the original vow making.