

“What an extraordinary gift Paula Huston’s *The Hermits of Big Sur* has revealed itself to be. Who would have thought a seventy-year history of a Camaldolese monastery that rose in the wilds of the California coast could turn out to be such a page-turner! There’s so much history here—world history, the major movements from Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin to the opening dialogues between East and West, the aftermath of Vatican II, hippydom, and radical feminism. And at the heart of it all, the need to find that necessary solitude and solace and true companionship which only the interior Mystery at the still point can provide.”

—Paul Mariani, biographer, poet, and author of *Thirty Days: On Retreat with the Exercises of St. Ignatius* and *The Mystery of It All*

“In *The Hermits of Big Sur*, author Paula Huston uses her exceptional literary skills to introduce us to individuals who are hidden to us but who nevertheless pray for us constantly. Deftly, she weaves together the thousand-year history of the Camaldoli order with intimate details of monastic life at Big Sur. Above all Huston shows us the deep Christ-like community these hermits have been able to develop.”

—Richard J. Foster, author of *Celebration of Discipline* and *Sanctuary of the Soul*

“This story of how one monastic community found its place on earth and in the evolving church will certainly appeal to those who already recognize monasteries as spiritual oases. Huston offers an intimate glimpse into the complex community life, life-giving humor, and humble wisdom of men who know something about love the rest of us can’t afford to forget.”

—Marilyn McEntyre, author of *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* and *Word by Word*

“Paula Huston’s very readable history of the Camaldolese monastery at Big Sur gives a very clear picture of the challenges faced and overcome in establishing an eremitical monastery on the coast of California. She tells the story by focusing on the people involved, how they discovered monastic life, and how the unique experience of each has contributed to the unfolding of the community’s charism. The result is a realistic and very human portrayal of this distinctive chapter of monastic history.”

—Michael Casey, OCSO, author of *Balaam’s Donkey: Random Ruminations for Every Day of the Year*

“Absolutely fascinating, gorgeously written, frequently brilliant. In her story of how an ancient monastic order found a home in California, and how the author found a home with them, Paula Huston offers us an invitation into a world that few see, but all will want to experience.”

—James Martin, SJ, author of *Learning to Pray*

“*The Hermits of Big Sur* is a remarkable book. Meticulous in research and engaging in tone, it explores some of the most significant and turbulent moments in the history of Italy and America through the lens of the thousand-year-old Camaldolese order in the mountains of Tuscany and the order’s sometimes challenging relationship with its younger daughter house in California. More than a fascinating introduction to the rich and complex history of eremitical monasticism, this book is also an invitation to drink from monastic spirituality’s deep, life-giving springs.”

—Deborah Smith Douglas, Oblate OSB Cam, is the author of
The Praying Life: Seeking God in All Things

“Paula Huston’s history of the founding of New Camaldoli Hermitage reads like a novel, recounting the tumultuous story of planting the seeds of a thousand-year-old tradition on fresh but wild American soil. Told with obvious love as well as unflinching dedication to research, this work is sure to delight monks and oblates and serve as a warm introduction to the unique spirit of an incredible place on the edge of the continent.”

—Cyprian Consiglio, OSB Cam, Prior, New Camaldoli Hermitage and
author of *The God Who Gave You Birth*

“This is a wonderfully affectionate and informative look at the holy ground that has been a source of prayer, revelation, and grace for so many.”

—Ron Hansen, Santa Clara University, author of *Mariette in Ecstasy* and
Hotly in Pursuit of the Real

“Like a family history, with diverse characters ranging from the chemist to the guitarist, Paula Huston tells the story of the Camaldolese hermits of Big Sur. Having co-founded more than one hermitage at the same time as New Camaldoli, I can attest to the authenticity of the hermits’ struggles to survive in the wilderness in a true spirit of ‘derring-do.’”

—Tessa Bielecki, co-founder of the Spiritual Life Institute and the Nada/
Nova Nada hermitages and co-director of the Desert Foundation and
the author of *Holy Daring*, *Season of Glad Songs*, and *Desert Visions*

“T. S. Eliot once said of a sacred place: ‘You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid.’ In Paula Huston’s graceful, engrossing narrative history of New Camaldoli, she has given us privileged access to another such place. Even if you can’t go there yourself, this book will enrich your sense of what contemplative prayer and the monastic life offer to every living soul.”

—Gregory Wolfe, author of *Beauty Will Save the World*

The Hermits of Big Sur

Paula Huston

With a Foreword by Pico Iyer



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Bench at New Camaldoli Hermitage (photograph by Kayleigh Meyers)

Foreword

My life was transformed the minute I set foot in New Camaldoli, thirty years ago today. A smiling monk in the monastery bookstore led me down to the small but comfortable room in which I was to spend the next three nights. I stepped into the dazzling sunlight, saw a white chair in the private walled garden beyond the desk, took in the ocean stretching out in every direction thirteen hundred feet below, and knew I'd come home. The feeling was as sudden, as impossible to argue away, as when you encounter the person who will become your lifelong love.

Almost instantly, all the worries and fears that had been cutting me in two on the four-hour drive up to Big Sur were gone. And just as thousands, from every background, have felt on meeting the Hermitage, I realized that I was in a place that I could trust and that recalled to me a truth, a self—a freedom from self—I too often forget amidst the clatter of the freeway and the shopping mall. The fact I'd lost my family home—and everything I own—in a wildfire eight months earlier made me even more grateful for an inner home that felt so deep, so lasting, beyond the reach of every flame. The fact I wasn't Christian—and in fact had had my fill of hymns and crosses, so I thought, during sixteen years of Anglican schooling in England—came to seem the least important detail of all.

I started returning to this source, again and again, and I came to see, as Paula Huston reminds us with such radiant clarity in this book, how very diverse and unexpected it is. Many of the retreatants I met were women and soon there'd be women in residence

imparting a special grace on every flower they left behind in the rooms they prepared for us. Quite a few of the other visitors turned out to be Buddhist or Sufi or maybe nothing at all. I was working at the time as an essayist for *Time* magazine, having recently escaped from a 25th floor office in Midtown Manhattan; many of the quiet new friends I made along the monastery road were lawyers and teachers and software engineers who were even more familiar with the world far below.

In time, as Paula describes here, I'd also come to see what a remarkably talented group of monks had assembled in this spot. The current Prior practices yoga and has a strong association with a Zen *sangha*; when once I watched an obscure Shakespeare play in the Enclosure, the two monks beside me knew it better than professors at Oxford might. Everything I thought I knew about Catholicism and worship was turned on its head in the course of almost a hundred retreats, sometimes for as long as three weeks each. I started taking my wife, my friends, urging imaginative young men I know to try the *ora et labora* program that would allow them to live with the monks for a while in return for doing odd jobs around the property.

When first I arrived, it was the rare beauty of the place, the pulsing silence, the freedom from telephone and television and internet that liberated me. I could read or write or, most remarkably of all, do nothing at all. I could take walks above the ocean, try to count the stars at night, follow an impulse to write a long letter to a friend I hadn't seen for years. Gradually, though, as this beautiful book makes clear, I came to realize how much my solitude could deepen, and be deepened by, community. Every soul I met along the road above the sea had come in search of more or less the same silence, which meant that all of us were joined by the deepest of shared interests and commitments.

As you'll read in the pages to come, the Camaldoli order has been cultivating sanctuary and contemplative practice for more than a thousand years now. But has the world ever been so full of rush and distraction as now? If you're reading these words, you're likely one of those who takes in more data in one day than Shakespeare did in a lifetime. Does that make us wiser than he was? I fear it might be the opposite.

As I go about my job as a journalist—the year I arrived at New Camaldoli, I'd just returned from Tibet and North Korea and Paris and London, and was on my way to Vietnam and a dozen other places—my greatest fear is that I'll forget what's true and what lies deepest inside me. The danger with a cluttered mind is the same as with a cluttered desk: in a moment of need, you can't put your hand on what really sustains you. But then I think of the drive along the ever more pristine highway to the sign that leads to the winding road that leads to the top of the mountain.

So long as I have that place and its people inside me, I never feel alone or lost or without substance. A little of the clarity and the peace of the Hermitage will be with me even in the most stressful of moments. I'm deeply grateful for this book, which offers so much historical and human detail I'd never have known otherwise. I'm no less grateful for the community it commemorates, which sometimes seems to have been my salvation for almost half a lifetime now. For this Hindu-born traveler long based in Buddhist Japan, the Benedictine hermits of Big Sur have been my guiding teachers, inspirations, and role models. For them, and for their story, as given here, I feel—to use the word on which Paula ends, so perfectly—profoundly “blessed.”

Pico Iyer
Nara, Japan
February 15, 2021



1

The view was spectacular, one of the most beautiful he'd ever seen, and he'd been in beautiful places all his life. Before him lay the sea, a 180 degree spread of it glittering in an immense bay beneath the noonday sun. Behind him rose the mountains, fold after endless fold for miles to the north and south, and above all of it, a piercingly blue summer sky. The wilderness he'd been seeking for so long.

He stood near a fence line, his long beard and white cowl ruffled by the sea breeze. The real estate agent waited down by the car parked on the dirt ranch road, knowing enough to leave him alone while he surveyed the land. Four thousand acres, if they could afford it, Klingsmith had said in his letter, but six hundred should suffice—the entire face of a mountain with enough level ground to plant olives, vines, fruit orchards, vegetables. Grassy meadows, summer gold in June, but the winter rains are almost tropical in their intensity, Klingsmith insisted: you can run cattle, keep milk cows, whatever you need to sustain yourself so far from civilization. True, it wouldn't be so easy to fish—the crashing of the breakers against the rocky cliffs 1,300 feet below roared up the mountain face toward him like the voice of God—but it could be done. With enough hard work, it could be done.

He turned and waved to the agent. It was time to look at the old ranch house and outbuildings, at whether there was already enough in place that could be adapted for the postulants he knew would come flocking once the word was out. Their needs were simple, but still—they'd require a bunkhouse until they could build real cells, a building that could double as a chapel until the church could be constructed. They'd need a refectory for meals, and a kitchen.

2 *The Hermits of Big Sur*

They'd need a shed to store tools—these future postulants had no idea how many wheelbarrows full of rock and sand and concrete they'd be pushing before the hermitage was completed—but he knew they could do it. This would be the first American foundation birthed from the thousand-year-old Italian order to which he belonged. Here on this wild California coast with its canyons full of redwoods, they would start anew, away from the political tensions that still seethed back at home.

If only he were younger. After so many years of apostolic ministry—India, Australia, Italy—he was sixty-one and feeling his age. He'd been a monk since 1950—not long, compared to his decades as a Jesuit on the global stage. In 1953, he'd finally gotten permission to go into reclusion, but less than five years later, here he was, negotiating with American bishops, fund-raising among the celebrities of Hollywood, visiting potential building sites with real estate agents. He was at one and the same time Dom Agostino Modotti, hermit, and Fr. Ugo Modotti, former Jesuit, and this American expedition would require every ounce of energy he had and all the diplomatic and social skills he'd acquired during his long years in foreign lands. It helped that, unlike his Italian brothers, he spoke flawless English. But this was not an assignment he'd sought out on his own, and if it hadn't been for the still unhealed conflict back home, he would have tried his best to get out of it. In the end, he'd agreed to give up his recluse cell in the ancient *Sacro Eremo* of Camaldoli and to lead this mission “under obedience.” However, now that he was here and seeing what he was seeing—the great sea glittering in the sun, the screaming hawks wheeling overhead—he was filled with joy. He'd done it. He'd found the place.

The Big Sur coast of California is one of America's last true wildernesses. Highway 1, a narrow ribbon twisting its vertiginous way along the sea cliffs in the shadow of looming, unstable mountains, provides the only access, but the road is regularly cut off by landslides and devastating wildfires. The hardy souls who live here are used to drivers plunging off cliffs, basketball-sized rocks suddenly littering the road ahead of them, flooding creeks and washed-out bridges. The nearest town in either direction is a death-defying

hour's drive away. And there is no cell service, no internet, no way to call for help if you need it. In 1958, the coast was even wilder and more isolated than it is now. So why would a world traveler like Modotti be so drawn to this daunting place?

Writer Belden Lane maintains that the wilderness exerts a mysterious power over the imagination that can lead to a transformative spiritual experience. Both dangerous and unpredictable, it quickly demolishes the illusion that we are in control. We are forced to pay close attention to what is happening around us—where is that ominous black cloud headed? what's that rumbling sound? is that a mountain lion track?—which means we expend unusually high levels of energy when we are in these places. We are awake, alert, focused in ways that comfortable circumstances do not inspire in us. “Fierce landscapes,” says Lane, “serve as metaphorical maps of the life of the spirit. Deserts and mountains of the psyche can be traced throughout the history of mythology, the writings of the mystics, and the work of psychologists exploring landscape symbols in folklore and dreams.”¹ No wonder, then, that the first impulse for people being called on a serious spiritual journey is to head for some version of the wilderness, even if only for a short time and even if the wilderness is strictly metaphorical.

In early Christian times, the wilderness meant the pitiless deserts of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, and those who fled there either died quickly or found ways not only to survive but to flourish. Between the third and fifth centuries, these wilderness dwellers were known as the Desert Fathers and Mothers, and their cryptic, koan-like sayings, born of the pressure of their circumstances, still challenge and intrigue us. Some of them chose the strictly “eremitical,” or hermit, life, lived out in an isolated cave or mud hut, while others congregated in what became the first Christian monasteries. Both were driven by “*fuga mundi*,” the overwhelming longing to flee the world.

While these early Christians certainly did not invent this kind of arduous spiritual quest—there seems to be an archetypal spiritual journey in every faith tradition, often involving wilderness—enough Christians spent enough time in harsh landscapes during those early centuries that, even today, the image of a solitary hermit hut in the wilds has the power to compel. What were these people doing out there? What did they think they were accomplishing?



2

“If I am lucky and no one is there, I share the delicious solitude with the rocks, the sea otters, a passing whale, the drifting clouds, mist and fog, the floating islands of kelp and the screeching gulls. If the tide is out, I commune with a two-faced rock out of which the blazing sun and pounding surf have sculpted a king and queen of the Ptolemaic line.”¹ Thus writes Henry Miller, a delightful and eccentric literary genius whose own version of *fuga mundi* took place in 1946 and lasted for eighteen years. *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* is set fourteen miles north of Modotti’s paradise. Partway between them is Slate’s Springs, a natural source of abundant hot water, where Miller is currently floating in one of the many tubs that overlook the sea.

Miller has chosen Big Sur for a reason. He has achieved enough notoriety to last him a lifetime (several of his best-selling books are banned in the US), and his fans won’t leave him alone. Maybe, he thinks, if I go to the wilderness, one that’s nearly impossible to access, I will be at peace and have time to write and be a better father to my kids. So he moves his family first to Partington Ridge, a few miles north of Slate’s, and then, several years later, to Anderson Creek, an abandoned camp that housed convict labor during the building of Highway 1 in the 1930s. In time, he winds up back on Partington Ridge. What he realizes very quickly is that 1) he is not the first artist to think of moving to Big Sur, and 2) his fans are indefatigable and will find him anywhere.

Both types—fans and would-be artists—begin showing up at his cabin door almost as soon as he arrives on the coast. The ones who most interest him, however, are the young men with artistic

aspirations just coming out of the service after World War II. Miller understands their longings, even though he knows that the vast majority will never become real writers: “They were all filled with a desire to escape the horrors of the present and willing to live like rats if only they might be left alone and in peace.”² More, he recognizes that they are in some way prescient about the stupendous cultural shifts about to take place in American society. “These young men,” he says, “are now roaming about in our midst like anonymous messengers from another planet.”³ What message do they bear? Miller thinks it is very simple: That it is possible to live a far better life than most post-war Americans are currently living. That the only thing keeping them from this better life is fear of whatever sacrifices might be demanded of them in order to achieve it. Many give up soon and drift off to try their luck in some other, less challenging, environment. But Miller is surprised by how many do persist and manage to make a go of it on the coast, whether or not they ever become artists. He is even more impressed by what happens to them in the process: “The most important thing I have witnessed since coming here, is the transformation people have wrought in their own being.”⁴

Transformation is no small thing and also fairly rare. So how does he account for this phenomenon being relatively common in Big Sur? Miller thinks that it must be the “grandeur and nobility” of the setting. “The place itself is so overwhelmingly bigger, greater, than anyone could hope to make it that it engenders a humility and reverence not frequently met with in Americans. There being nothing to improve on in the surroundings, the tendency is to set about improving oneself.”⁵

But Big Sur is not only astonishingly beautiful; it also manifests what the nineteenth-century British Romantics would call “the Sublime.” By this term, they meant that the full power of uncontrolled nature is on display, and humans can only stand before the spectacle in awe. Religious philosopher Rudolf Otto coined a word to describe this phenomenon; he called it an experience of the “numinous,” and believed that without this underlying awareness of what lies beyond human understanding or command, religion is mere “morality touched with emotion.”⁶ Belden Lane agrees that the shock

of the numinous has the power to change us: “A vast expanse of jagged stone, desert sand, and towering thunderheads has a way of challenging all the mental constructs in which we are tempted to take comfort and pride, thinking we have captured the divine.”⁷ No wonder, then, that so many artists and spiritual seekers have made their way to Big Sur over the decades. In 1962, only four years after Modotti’s first look at the ranch that would become a hermitage, Henry Miller’s beloved hot tubs at Slate’s Springs became part of a new phenomenon, the human potential movement. Michael Murphy, a member of the family who owned the property, graduated from Stanford with a degree in psychology, as did his friend Richard Price. Fascinated by the current breakthroughs in their chosen field, they conceived the idea of inviting cutting-edge psychologists and spiritual teachers to give seminars. And thus humble Slate’s Springs, where nineteenth-century mountain men once washed out their underwear and fifty years later, Henry Miller bobbed happily in his tub overlooking the Pacific, became the famed Esalen Institute.

The name “Esalen” was meant to honor the Indigenous inhabitants of the Big Sur coast, the rather mysterious Esselen. The first Esalen seminar was offered by Alan Watts, interpreter of Zen Buddhism for a Western audience. In 1951, one year after Modotti entered the Sacro Eremo of Camaldoli, Watts published *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, which attempted to explain the peculiar phenomenon Henry Miller had noticed in *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch*: intelligent young men with “good futures ahead of them” who instead of taking corporate jobs were fleeing to the wilderness of Big Sur to live without running water or electricity. The problem, thought Watts, lay in our Western perspective: “[F]or most human beings the past and the future are not *as* real, but *more* real, than the present. The present cannot be lived happily unless the past has been ‘cleared up’ and the future is bright with promise.”⁸ Not only are we incapable of actually living in the moment but we are so burdened by the past, and so overly focused on the future, that we are doomed to deep unhappiness: “[M]odern civilization is in almost every respect a vicious circle. It is insatiably hungry because its way of life condemns it to perpetual frustration.”⁹ For Watts, the starting place toward a real life, one worth living, begins with our rejecting the illusion that we can ever achieve the security we crave.



3

You wouldn't think that a mountain-fast hermitage in the Apennines of Italy could remind you of the Big Sur coast. It is true there is no ocean. Or redwoods. But the famous sweet chestnut and coniferous forests of Camaldoli—today, close to four and a half million acres of them, planted and tended by the monks for more than eight hundred years—could easily fit on the coastal range of California. Wild boar root for mushrooms and stags bugle their mating calls in the spring. The storms are just as powerful, the lightning as violent, the wildflowers as sweet during their brief spring bloom.

If the year is 1023 and you have just arrived in this forest sanctuary east of Florence and north of Arezzo in the throes of your own *fuga mundi*, you'll have found exactly the sort of wilderness best suited to the life you are seeking. There is even a version of someday's California Highway 1 nearby, a pilgrim road from Ravenna on the Adriatic Sea that leads over the mountain pass and on to Rome.¹ A few kilometers down the mountain is a guesthouse for people who are making penances, people on pilgrimage: Fontebono, the "good spring," where travelers in these dangerous times can fill up their jugs with sweet, cold water, eat a good meal, sleep in safety for the night, and be blessed on their way by a monk and a handful of brothers.

But you are no pilgrim. You've made up your mind. You know what you want to do. The question is, can you do it? It is thus a relief to see that there really are others like yourself already living on this broad, grassy meadow ringed by beech trees: five hermits each in his own cell, clustered around a church and a lodge for common meals. Among them is the spiritual master, the monk called

Romuald, whose reputation for wisdom has drawn you, just as seekers will be drawn to Esalen a millennium later, out of your everyday life and into the compelling possibility of transformation. They say he is living proof that a person can become holy. People pull wool out of his sheepskin when he walks by, just in case they might get a miracle out of it.² Stories abound: that he once healed a madman by kissing him. That he cured another monk's vicious toothache by breathing on him. That he has the gift of tears, and that he often breaks into spontaneous weeping with compunction or joy when he is presiding over the Eucharist, or preaching, or traveling from one monastery to another. For a monk, he travels a lot.³

He is also reputed to be humble and gentle and cheerful, in spite of the rigorous spiritual disciplines he imposes on himself. He is proof that you can leave the world without losing your mind. Which, as you too well know, often happens to would-be hermits. Which is why you have chosen him, who is known as the "father of hermits who live according to right reason and follow the monastic Rule."⁴ He may be kind, but he knows human nature.

Are you up to this? Can you really fast and recite the psalms from memory and pray the Divine Office—the bell is ringing, you can see the hermits making their way to the church in their goatskins and leather sandals and mantles—every single day for the rest of your life? Can you live on chickpeas and chestnut cakes and broad beans and unleavened bread and hardly any wine?⁵ Or will you give it all up and return to the world? However you answer these questions, how can you possibly know, here in this simple encampment in this broad meadow in the Apennines, that if you do stay and become a disciple of the holy man, you'll be helping to build the oldest continuous religious community in the Western Church?⁶

Though Ugo Modotti was more than ten years older than Anselmo Giabbani when he entered the Sacro Eremo in 1950—he was fifty-three to Giabbani's forty-two—Giabbani had three decades of seniority on him. It was not unusual when, as a Tuscan boy in post-World War I Italy, Giabbani entered into Camaldolese life at age eleven; in the aftermath of that violent cataclysm, it was natural for survivors to seek marriage and babies, yet all too often,

people did not have the resources to raise their children well. So it was common practice to send sons to monasteries and daughters to convents.⁷ But there was no guarantee that these youngsters had a genuine call to the monastic life. Even if they stayed, they were not necessarily compelled by *fuga mundi* or personally committed to *conversatio morum*, the lifetime process of becoming holy. They were not seeking contemplation or the ability to pray without ceasing. They were there for more practical reasons, like regular meals and shelter they could count on.

To further complicate matters, all the monasteries in Italy had been officially suppressed twice within the previous one hundred and fifty years: first, by Napoleon in 1810, and second, by the newly unified Kingdom of Italy in 1866. Many ancient communities were permanently destroyed, and those that survived lost touch with their roots during the long years of banishment from their monasteries, now owned by the state. When the Camaldolese remnant was finally allowed to return home after working out a rental fee in 1873 for the use of their own buildings, they faced the most precarious of situations. Not only did they have to figure out a means of support, they had to recover monastic discipline and rebuild their relationships with one another. Unfortunately, the resources they had were pretty well confined to historical documents edited in the eighteenth century; these focused almost exclusively on the strictly eremitical, or hermit, lifestyle.⁸

Yet these documents presented only half the picture. Romuald founded both hermitages and monasteries, plus combinations of the two. Monks in hermitages live in individual cells, spend more time in solitude, and are called hermits. Monks in monasteries live in dormitory-style buildings, spend more time in community, and are referred to as “cenobites.” Romuald believed that both lifestyles were necessary and that each fed the other—that it was the experience of community that prepared a man to live in solitude, and the wisdom that a man gained as a solitary that in turn fed the community. The Camaldolese “stemma,” or coat of arms, an ancient symbol that predates the order, reflects the dual nature of the Romualdian monastic life: two doves (sometimes peacocks) drinking from the same chalice. Underneath the chalice are the words *Ego vobis, vos mihi*, which translate as “I am yours, you are mine.”

4



If, on March 3, 1958, you happen to spot the current *Time* magazine at your local newsstand and decide you want to buy it, you'll need to come up with a quarter. But you can already tell that it will probably be worth it. On the cover, a wildly grinning, Norman Rockwell-ish rendition of Teddy Roosevelt beside a moose medal hanging from a blue silk ribbon. On the back, a beautiful redhead in an evening gown giving a handsome, tuxedoed devil with an Air Force tattoo on the back of his cigarette-holding hand what is clearly the eye: "Where there's a Man, there's a Marlboro," declares the ad, adding helpfully that this is "the cigarette designed for men that women like." Inside, you find, there are articles on the launch of the X-15, the wonder of gyroscopes, the murder trial of Leopold and Loeb, and the crime of Minnie Lee—a sweet-faced, bespectacled elementary school teacher in Lakeland, Georgia, who made the fatal mistake of allowing a nine-year-old white boy who had missed his ride to take the "Negro" bus instead, and was subsequently forced to resign her position.

In the Religion section, you'll come upon an unusual photo for this time and place in America: two monks—"hermits," the writer calls them—wearing cowled, white habits. The clean-shaven monk on the left is smaller and younger than the other, and though smiling bravely at the camera, looks nervous enough that you suspect he is entirely out of his comfort zone. His compatriot is a different story: tall and strong, his flashing grin above a substantial beard that does not include a mustache and starts at the edges of his chin—hermit-style, apparently—projects the self-confidence of the Marlboro man on the back cover. You can tell that this is a person with energy and enthusiasm to burn. These two are called Dom Aliprando Catani

and Dom Agostino Modotti, and they have come to Manhattan via the ocean liner *Constitution* from their Camaldolese monastery in the mountains of Italy. They are here, they say, to look over prospective sites in Nebraska, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and California for a possible American foundation. And the amazing thing is that there are already more than twenty applicants hoping to become hermits too!

The smaller monk—Catani—is not quoted in the piece. The big monk—Modotti—has plenty to say, and some of it is funny: “We are so impressed with the eremetical tendencies we see here,” he says. “In our hermitage, each monk lives alone in his hut, pursuing his own way or meditating in silence. But in Italy, community life is very communal. An Italian who gets on a train introduces himself to his fellow passengers and states his business. The others do the same. Then follows a discussion of each one’s affairs.

“But in America, what do we see? Each traveler minds his own business. He sits alone, free and silent, reading and contemplating—if not Holy Scripture, then at least the New York *Times*. You are hermits at heart.”



From left, Aliprando Catani, Agostino Modotti, and Fulton Sheen

The arrival of two Camaldolese monks in America was a long time coming. Not that there hadn't been attempts to make an overseas foundation before. Each of the separated branches had tried at least once. In 1898, for example, the hermits of the Sacro Eremo experienced a powerful moment of inspiration during their annual retreat. A visiting Italian bishop from the southernmost state of Brazil was asked to say a few words to the brothers during their chapter meeting. He told them that he was moved by the peacefulness of their contemplative lives and impressed by the humility of their worship. How he wished he had a group just like them living close by in Brazil!¹

Four monks promptly raised their hands—we'll go! The South American monastery they built included both hermits and cenobites, just as Romuald's had, and was by all accounts successful. But their departure left the Sacro Eremo short-handed during a particularly precarious time. Being a monk did not necessarily exempt a person from conscription or monasteries from being appropriated by the military, so World War I further disrupted communities still trying to recover from the suppressions of the nineteenth century. The cenobitic branch of the Camaldolese, for example, saw sixteen of its monks march off to war. And after the war came more political turmoil coupled with the rapid rise of the new dictator, Mussolini.

Nearly thirty years after the exodus to Brazil, the hermits of the Sacro Eremo decided that enough was enough and called their four monks home on the grounds that they were not living the strictly eremitical life. But this was 1927, the nine-hundredth anniversary of Romuald's death, and the separated branches of the Camaldolese, hermits and cenobites, found themselves working together on a celebration. The unexpected success of the collaboration convinced them that something had gone seriously wrong in the past that needed to be addressed—and that maybe those eighteenth-century documents they'd been studying so assiduously for so many years had not prepared them for the twentieth-century future they were now facing. Traditional monastic reform, which in the past had always meant trying to recover the primitive practices of the original foundation—in this case, life as it was lived in the Sacro Eremo of 1085 when the prior, Blessed Rudolph, wrote the first Camaldolese

constitutions—did not seem adequate at this time in history. They needed a broader understanding of Romuald’s vision in order to move forward, work that Anselmo Giabbani and several other monks from the eremo, Benedetto Calati and Bernardo Ignesti, took up with great determination at the newly reopened Venerable Hermitage of Fonte Avellana in 1935.²

The thought of an American foundation, however, still lingered. Was this a way the Camaldolese could more fully live out the third aspect of the Three-Fold Good? Would Romuald have crossed an ocean to bear gospel witness to a still brash, young America? Could contemplative monastic life take root in the land of the Marlboro Man? Or was this simply another urge toward *fuga mundi*—leaving the old, tired, war-weary Europe for a new frontier?

The famous young monk and writer Thomas Merton had been living at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani for ten years when he underwent a powerful resurgence of the yearning that had driven him to the monastery in the first place. He needed solitude, he was desperate for it, yet even in this strictest of monasteries, it seemed impossible to find. His only brother had died in World War II in a fighter plane over the English Channel a year after he became a novice: Could this account for his spiritual unease? Was his unexpected and unasked for literary fame a bigger burden than he realized? Or had monastic life as he was living it simply become sterile?

Once again he recalled the large photo he’d found in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* the week before making his first retreat at Gethsemani: the ancient, mountain-fast Sacro Eremo of Camaldoli, with its high walls backed by stately firs, its white-plastered huts and red-tiled roofs, its individual gardens. He’d thought of that image every so often during his years at Gethsemani, writing in his journal on January 7, 1947, that he’d had a series of “big, spurious lights about becoming a Camaldolese hermit,” though in response, he’d gone to confession and “got straightened out.”³

But push the thought away though he might, he could not deny that the first sight of the eremo had struck him in his very heart. As he later put it in *Seven Storey Mountain*, “I had to slam the book shut on the picture of Camaldoli and the bearded hermits stand-

ing in the stone street of cells, and I went out of the library, trying to stamp out the embers that had broken into flame, there, for an instant within me.”⁴ Now it appeared that those embers had never died out.

Even more significantly, given his current state of mind, one of those cells had belonged to Romuald himself, the holy man who, nearly one thousand years before, had put into words *exactly* what Merton was urgently longing for: “Sit in your cell as in a paradise. Put the whole world behind you and forget it. Watch your thoughts like a good fisherman watching for fish. . . .”

Merton wrote his first letter to recently elected Prior General Anselmo Giabbani on September 11, 1952. Giabbani replied almost immediately. Neither letter any longer exists but according to Merton’s journal entry in October, Giabbani told him that he could come if he wished and start right out as a hermit—exactly what he wanted to hear. On December 25, 1952, Merton wrote back with an overflowing heart: “Oh my father, I have an immense need for that silence, for that *quies* in which the soul rests. . . . I am worn out by the intense activism of the life of a writer, of a spiritual director, of a cenobite subjected to the demands of a timetable full of movement and activity.”⁵ It appears that, along with encouraging his eremitical impulse, Giabbani may have also asked Merton for his opinion regarding a possible American foundation because Merton requests that Giabbani send him the Camaldolese constitutions and promises to write to him again about the American idea. “I believe it is *necessary*. We need you.”

Just after Easter, Merton writes a long letter to Giabbani, full of advice about the best way to get started in the States. He points out that a lot would depend on the source of revenue and suggests that it would be “quite easy for a monastery of contemplatives to support itself here with a big retreat house” that could be staffed by people other than the monks and “would not interfere too much with the peace of the hermits.” But, he adds, “There is a fervent minority in America seeking the very purest ideal of the contemplative life in all its simplicity and poverty—the true simplicity and humility of St. Benedict, which is actually so incompatible with the spirit of secular life in America.” In other words, just a hermitage

with no cenobites nearby. He warns Giabbani of the “noise and bustling business spirit of America” and suggests that fund-raising be handled extremely discreetly. While American publicity methods might attract interest, they could quickly lead to contamination of the pure contemplative ideal.⁶

Giabbani responds on January 21, 1954, that “Your eremitical vocation is very interesting, even if you never come to the *eremo*. You demonstrate, however, the growing need of cenobitic spirituality, which as it develops wants to flow over into solitude.” And then he adds, “I believe that monasticism without eremitical solitude cannot and will not be complete.”⁷

In these few words, and no doubt without Merton realizing it, Anselmo Giabbani is letting him know that all is not well at the Sacro Eremo. And the issue is the same one the Camaldolese have been grappling with for centuries by now, which is, Who is the true monk? By which they mean, who is the true Christian? The hermit or the cenobite? After years of plumbing the ancient Camaldolese documents through the lens provided by the ressourcement theologians, with the help of other scholar monks like Benedetto Calati and Bernardo Ignesti, Giabbani is about to offer his solution to the ancient dilemma. But his proposal, encapsulated in a new set of constitutions, will cause a major rift between the hermits and cenobites of Camaldoli, one that will eventually travel across the Atlantic, over the mountains and cornfields and wheat fields of the United States, all the way to rugged and remote Big Sur on the isolated coast of California.

Thomas Merton was not the only person urging the Camaldolese to come to the US. The prior general before Giabbani, Pierdamiano Buffadini, started receiving inquiries about an American foundation at the end of World War II. In 1950, a college student named Jim Cottrell, working on a research paper for a class at St. Mary’s College in Michigan, found a reference to Romuald in Butler’s *Lives of the Saints*, and then Camaldoli in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. He wrote an enthusiastic letter to one of the hermits, Dom Ambrogio, at the Sacro Eremo; the reply was very likely written, at least in part, by a recent entry into the order, one Agostino Modotti, who

was fluent in both English and Italian.⁸ Cottrell kept the correspondence going after graduation, asking whether there were any plans for an American hermitage, and was told that maybe they would be interested in coming if there were property available.

This was all the encouragement Cottrell needed. Soon he had launched a new organization, “Friends of the Camaldolese,” and gotten busy writing articles for Catholic publications. He researched potential donors in *Who’s Who* and wrote letters appealing for help. The response was unexpectedly positive; he heard back from Peter Grace of Grace Ship Lines, Clare Booth Luce, the famous Thomas Merton, and Harry John, a major Catholic benefactor. In 1956, Cottrell visited the eremo in person and got permission to meet Modotti, who by now had been a recluse for three years. The two of them struck up a warm friendship.⁹

When he returned to the States, Cottrell formed a group of supporters to help him get the plan off the ground. Several of them were well-connected diocesan priests; others were laypeople. There was money to raise, land to be looked at, and a whole lineup of bishops to be approached. All the Americans agreed: what they wanted—and eventually demanded—was something totally missing in this hustle-bustle young country of theirs: a real hermitage of pure contemplatives, no cenobites allowed. But it was in part the enthusiastic proddings of this group, who romanticized *fuga mundi*, had never been Camaldolese themselves, and did not know about the Three-Fold Good, that turned the smoldering family crisis at the Sacro Eremo into a full-blown blaze—one that nearly destroyed the future Big Sur foundation in its earliest and most vulnerable stage.

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