

Reverend Richard Hite, MSA – His Apostolate as a Hermit

While serving in West Virginia in the mid 1970's, Father Dick Hite met Sister Joan Sutherland, who was a consecrated virgin and a hermit. Sister Joan had been living in the diocese for seven years dedicated to prayer and solitude in great simplicity, while open to bearing the burdens of those who might come to her for help. Impressed with her depth and sense of deep faith, Father Hite began to visit her at least once a month and later asked Sister Joan to be his spiritual director.

Eventually the bishop moved Sr. Joan to an area not far from Petersburg to be a Catholic presence in that part of the diocese. Father Hite helped her find a place suitably remote and solitary for a hermitage some 12 miles north of Moorefield, West Virginia. Petersburg being the closest parish, the hermit would attend Sunday liturgy at St. Mary's. After some time Father Hite began to feel a surge of the contemplative spirit that previously had took hold of him years ago as a novice at Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky where he had spent a year.

Although Father Hite felt very much at home with parish ministry, there arose a sense that this was not where he truly sensed his roots. When he spoke to Sister Joan about his desire to spend longer time in solitude at the hermitage, she stated that she never had desired a "following" and this presented her with a dilemma. After consulting her spiritual director, she asked Father Hite to make an eight-day discernment retreat in this matter and if it was decided in the affirmative, she would also make a retreat to discern whether God was asking her to consent to the request. If both resulted in an affirmative response, the superior of the MSA would be petitioned to grant the request. Should that be given, the local bishop would have to agree to the project.

To make a long story short, both Father Hite and Sister Joan came to a positive response to their discernments, while the superior of the MSA was not convinced it was consistent with the charism of the MSA. After a time, however, consent was given to allow Father Hite to spend a limited amount of time each year in solitude. Bishop Hodges considered the project but gave no immediate answer, likely hesitant about how people would react to a man and woman living on the same property. Finally Sister Joan's spiritual director, the abbot of Berryville Abbey in Virginia, asked that he be allowed to write a letter to the bishop on the matter. The bishop's response to the abbot's letter was very positive and he consented to build a hermitage some distance apart on the property for Father Hite.

There was some delay in Father Hite leaving the parish of St. Mary in Petersburg as the MSA had to find a replacement since the Society had a contract with the diocese to pastor the parish. Eventually Father Thomas Simon was called from his assignment in Peru to take over the area. Father Hite remained for a few weeks to help Father Tom get situated since he had never been pastor of a parish. However he had spent a year as deacon in St. Joseph's Parish in Martinsburg, West Virginia, a much larger urban parish where he was well liked for his hospital visitations to many. He began in October of 1981 to take command of the Petersburg parish. He was not unfamiliar with the people since he had visited the area as a seminarian several times. Nevertheless he showed much generosity in leaving Peru to become pastor of a parish on such short notice.

Father Hite in his turn left the town and took up residence in the small hermitage on the 17 acre property in the woods on October 10th 1981. The total solitude was like a honeymoon with God at first,

but gradually solitude cast a bright light on everything in the heart that is not of God, and a person's faults can become glaring. There was no escape hatch of pastoral activity and meetings with friends. Family and parishioners asked whether he was wasting his life and gifts. A former student blasted him for being narcissistic when the world needed priests. All this went on for a long while, but there were times of great gratitude and realization that doing the will of God was the only thing that mattered. "Abide in me and you will bear much fruit." The main thing was to be faithful and leave the rest to God. The presence of a spiritual director and the support of the Trappist monks in Berryville, Virginia was a great consolation.

After a year in solitude Father Hite made a retreat with an experienced director to discern whether this life in solitude was to be continued. There were times when he was hoping that God would call him out of the woods, so difficult was the journey, yet the discernment indicated he should remain. After three years as a hermit the Society sent Father Hite notice that he was to leave the woods and take another assignment. He was reluctant to do this but the will of God seemed to call him to leave. The abbot of the Trappists in Berryville asked that he be allowed to write his MSA superiors about the matter. He did so and in a short while the reassignment was cancelled and Father Hite was allowed to stay in the hermitage.

Upon entering the hermitage Father Hite had decided not to accept money from the MSA if offered, nor from the Bishop. When money ran out, he decided to do what the poor do and searched for temporary work for two weeks or so to pay his electric and phone bills. A job in construction was offered, digging a sewer in Moorefield with a bunch of young "bucks." The heat was oppressive and the boss seeing him red in the face told him to direct traffic. A lady he knew saw him and even though he kept his cap low, she recognized him and exclaimed, "Father Hite, has it come to this?" Eventually he found a vineyard a few miles up the road where they allowed him to work from time to time when funds were low. When he turned 62 he took early retirement and no longer needed to leave the hermitage to work to support himself.

In 1987 Father Hite, seeing that he had been a hermit for five years, decided to make an Ignatian 30-Day Retreat to determine whether the Lord was calling him to make a permanent commitment to the life in solitude. This retreat was spent at a Jesuit Retreat Center in Ohio with a group of about 12 other people making life changes. The whole time was spent in prayer and solitude with the retreatant meeting with his director once a day for an hour or so. It is a very intense period in which the retreatant listens to the prompting of his heart and reflects on the pros and cons of all aspects of the matter to be discerned. One comes to a point where he is completely open to whatever the will of God might be. Father Hite's retreat director blessed his discernment to remain in the hermitage so Father Hite petitioned the MSA for permission to remain there permanently.

Now it was up to the MSA to discern whether a member should be a permanent hermit. It took several years both on the local level and on the level of the General Council to come to an answer. Most agreed that it was a good decision but the crux of the matter was a canonical one; whether an active missionary society could permit a life in solitude as part of its charism. Father Hite left the decision in the hand of the Canon lawyers. Meanwhile he remained where he was, yet made the annual retreat

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with the MSA each year. The Founder of the Society, Father Eusebe Menard, had visited the hermitage early on and had blessed Father Hite's life there as fully in keeping with his vision for the MSA. However there was nothing in the MSA Constitution to indicate this. After some time it was agreed by the General Council that Father Hite should remain where he was since he indeed complied with one of the charisms of the MSA, which was to give retreats. Some few people came to the hermitage for that specific purpose. Hence the canonical problem was solved.

Contact with the other members of the MSA was not frequent when Father Hite went to live at Holy Spirit Hermitage. He felt that it would not be helpful to leave the hermitage except when necessary. To visit the former parish would not have allowed the parishioners to bond with the new pastors. However, when a visit to the doctor or dentist brought him to town, he would stop by the rectory to see how things were going with the new pastor. The pastors seldom visited the hermitage since their duties took up most of their time. There may have been some resentment from the pastors when early on Father Hite had decided, with the blessing of the bishop, not to help out in the surrounding parishes when the pastors needed to go on vacation or for some other reason. Such a practice would mean almost a continuous going out of solitude. Moreover Father Hite refused all requests from his family to officiate at weddings and baptisms for the same reason. Only family funerals were an exception to this rule. When his mother was left a widow he took turns with siblings in seeing to her care until she went to live with his sister in Pennsylvania.

Sister Joan Sutherland's health was not very good and eventually the two hermits switched places since Hite's hermitage was smaller and easier to manage and was more secluded. They met for Mass only on Sunday and special feast days. On Sunday evenings Sr. Joan would cook a meal for the two of them. Gradually her health grew worse and there were frequent visits to the doctor in Winchester when he would do the driving. When Father Hite chose the abbot of the Trappist Monastery in Berryville for his spiritual director, he would drive them both since her director was the former abbot of the same monastery. The monks there were very cordial to the two country hermits and allowed them full use of their library and even donated supplies from their bakery. During Holy Week each year the two stayed at the abbey for the holy days, Father Hite being allowed a cell in the abbey itself.

Sister Joan was invited by the Vicar of Religious for the diocese of Wheeling-Charleston to make a presentation on the hermit life before the eastern region of the vicars of Religious from various dioceses. It was the only time that she agreed to speak about the origin of her vocation to any group. Father Hite participated in a group meeting of hermits when invited to address the bishop on life in solitude. At this time various dioceses were being asked about consecrated life in solitude and were trying to explore this new wave in the life of the church. This was true in other countries as well.

After 1999 the MSA no longer pastored Petersburg, Franklin or Moorefield. Father Hite remained in the hermitage near Purgitsville but during that period he also went to care for his brother who had terminal lung cancer. He stayed at the House of Studies in Washington during the nights and would care for his brother during the day. Eventually he had to stay with his brother at night as well until his death in February of 2000.

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At Holy Spirit Hermitage Sister Joan's health began to deteriorate, but she remained ambulatory, though with much loss of energy. In December of 2004 she was taken to the hospital where she only gradually recovered her strength. In February of the next year Father Hite found her dead in her bedroom, apparently of a heart attack. Most of her family had suffered from heart trouble so this was not unexpected. Father Hite always realized that she would die before him, but having seen her the evening before on returning from town, she seemed her usual self although she said that she did not feel well. She was 68 years old.

After so many years in solitude with the example of Sister Joan's inspiring life, Father Hite continued on through the following years alone, with various people coming from time to time to spend retreat days in the guest hermitage. He always knew that a deeper period of silence would mark the years that followed. There was one prospective candidate that asked to live there as a hermit, but she did not seem suited to the life in West Virginia.

When he reached his late seventies Father Hite's lack of energy made it difficult to do all the work required at the hermitage. Cutting wood with the chainsaw at his age was dangerous and getting on the roof to clean the flue was out of the question. Even plowing the garden and cutting the grass left him worn out. When he visited Brother Paul, one of the MSA who had retired to the Little Sisters of the Poor house in Washington DC, he was impressed with the silence of the home and the spirit of the Sisters. Eventually he was interviewed for a room there and although Father Hite did not yet feel he was ready to leave the solitude his name was put on the waiting list. Three years later in October 2015, Father Hite left the hermitage for good after 34 years of prayer and solitude and now resides with the Little Sisters of the Poor. He is the first and perhaps the only member of the Missionaries of the Holy Apostles to serve the Lord as a hermit.