



A brief account of the
CARTHUSIAN BROTHERS

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*From a text written
by a monk of La Valsainte around 1935*

Cover illustration:

Blessed William of Fenoli, Carthusian Brother

Oil on canvas (c. 1883) by Antoine Sublet (1821-1897)
St Hugh's Charterhouse — England

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Br. Dysmas, Prior of Chartreuse,
July 16, 2021.

FOREWORD

To become a religious is to enter into the service of God and give oneself entirely.

Many men wish to give themselves totally to God, but they are not called to the priesthood because they lack sufficient aptitude for the studies or because their temperament, though attracted by a life separated from the world, is ill-suited to too much solitude and requires more physical activity.

Others are able to become priests, but they are impelled by a special attraction of grace to imitate the abasements of the Son of God and prefer the more humble conditions of Converse Brothers. This was the case of a famous Count of Nevers who held one of the most important offices in the Kingdom of France and entered the Grande Chartreuse to serve under the habit of a Converse Brother.

The life of the Carthusian monks is little known, and that of the Brothers perhaps even less than that of the Fathers. It is not surprising, since the very nature of the Carthusian vocation is to live hidden, and therefore ignored and unknown to men, like Jesus who spent thirty years of his short existence on earth in the humble house of Nazareth.

The Carthusian Brother reproduces pre-eminently this humble and laborious life of the Son of God, who came here below *“not to be served but to serve”*¹. It is in this that the greatness of his vocation consists, which is the very vocation of Jesus.

The Carthusian Brother is a contemplative religious consecrated to God by solemn profession, in the same way as the religious priests, and he lives in the secrecy of a cell; his life is one of prayer and work, in solitude and silence.

¹ Mk 10:45

In the world, in spite of attractive appearances, life is generally very hard and filled with pain and bitterness. In the Charterhouse, on the contrary, despite certain austere appearances, life, insofar as one belongs to God, is very gentle. The generous soul feels free from the subjection and tyranny of creatures; free to cling to God and live only for Him, with serenity, peace and radiant joy. The key is to bring to the Charterhouse, with an upright intention and good will, much supernatural love for God and for one's neighbour.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT HISTORY

When Saint Bruno settled in the desert of Chartreuse in 1084, he brought with him six companions, who, like him, were so enamoured of God that they left everything behind and sought out deep solitude to devote themselves to the contemplation of God's infinite Goodness. Of these six companions, four were clerics and two lay people: Andrew and Guarin. These seven founders of the Carthusian Order were driven to the desert by the same spirit, and nothing distinguished them in the contemplative ideal they pursued.

Practical necessities alone divided the responsibilities, according to the aptitudes and the education. Without Converse Brothers, in fact, the Fathers could not have led a life of deep solitude. So, from the beginning was made that distinction that started to be established in the monastic Orders. However, the Carthusian Brother, though more devoted to communal work than the Fathers, remained a solitary and from the outset was distinguished from the Brothers of all other Orders.

Thus, Andrew and Guarin, emulators of their companions in the search for divine intimacy, became the forerunners of that beautiful phalanx of Brothers who, according to the testimony of Carthusian history, brought so many blessings to the Order by

their sanctity and rendered immense services by their work and devotion. What immense benefits and precious graces has the human race itself not derived from them?

HOW THE CARTHUSIAN BROTHER LIVES

As we have said above, the life of the Carthusian Brother reproduces that of Nazareth. Like Our Lord, he divides his time between prayer and the material tasks of the house. After the example of Saint Joseph, he strives to live in constant intimacy with Jesus even during his work.

The life of the Carthusian monks is admirably organised: prayer, meditation, holy readings, manual work, moments of relaxation as well as solitude and community life, are harmoniously ordered to contemplative union with God, while taking into account the possibilities of nature and of each person. Because of this harmony, the Carthusian life, although of real austerity, can be led by men of average health or expansive temperaments.

HIS CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE

PRAYER AND MEDITATION – The main function of the Carthusian Brother consists in the exercises of the contemplative life. His liturgical prayer is habitually composed of a certain number of Our Fathers and Hail Marys corresponding to the Hours of the canonical Office; they may also recite the Office with psalms as the Fathers. On ordinary days, they perform a part of it in cell and another part in church, attending the office of Matins in the middle of the night.

On Sundays and feast days, they say all their Offices in church, at the same time as the cloister monks.

In addition to the canonical Office, they have to say the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which normally precedes it; they also have to say the daily the Office of the Dead, consisting for them of some Our Fathers and Hail Marys.

Besides, they have at least half an hour of mental prayer, which they aim to prolong, in solitude as well as in the daily activities, where it should blossom into pure love; they also have a prayerful reading of the Bible or *lectio divina*, and, in some houses, morning prayer in common.

Evening prayer takes places either in cell, or in common by attending Vespers with the cloister monks or in the Brothers' chapel, according to the custom of the houses.

SOLITUDE – All the Carthusian Brothers have their own cell in which they spend all the time they do not devote to work or to Offices in church. They must not leave it without a serious reason and, when they are not busy outside, they must return to it eagerly, “like fish to the water,” as it is said in the Statutes of the Order. They take their meals there, alone, except on feast days and Sundays.

In short, on ordinary days, they share the life of the Fathers for 16 to 17 hours, either alone in the cell or in the church or in the Brothers' chapel, which is also called the Family chapel.

They share it even more on feast days when they say all their Offices in church with the Fathers. They should stay in cell all the rest of the time, except for some special work requirements. On these days they may not even go to their place of work without permission.

SILENCE – Silence is the inseparable companion of solitude. It continues it outside the cell and allows for “heart-to-heart with God” even in common occupations. This is why the

rule is very strict in the Charterhouse. When the Brothers work together, they may only speak about necessary and useful things. Otherwise, they may not do so without permission, except in a case of extreme necessity.

PENANCE – There is no contemplative life without renouncement: if prayer lifts the soul to God, penance aims to detach it from the earth and from the selfish “I”. It is therefore not surprising that penitential practices have an important place in the Rule of the Carthusians: perpetual abstinence from meat, frequent fasts, rising at night, simple sleeping arrangements, poverty, etc. They are, however, slightly less rigorous for the Brothers than for the Fathers, and remain within the reach of average health, tempered in their application by the fair measure which is one of the characteristics of the Carthusian Statutes. It is above all the continuity which makes them difficult and at the same time effective in making the old man perish.

The Carthusian Brother cannot practise any mortification other than those prescribed by the Rule without special permission, which is rarely granted to the novices, for experience shows that voluntary mortifications more often nourish self-esteem than kill it. The exact and generous observance of the Carthusian Statutes is enough to satisfy the spirit of sacrifice of the most fervent.

As will be explained later, they find many opportunities to exercise this spirit of renouncement in the manual work which occupies an important place in their lives.

Penance is all the more important for a Carthusian as the ideal of his Order is high and as he is called to a life of deep intimacy with God. However, in keeping with the spirit of the Order, he must always consider penance with a view to union with God, which is the immediate goal of his life. Penance must not hide this goal, but remain subordinate to it as a means to achieve it. It must therefore be practised with the holy freedom and simplicity that come from the development of the divine life in us.

What has been said of penance can be said of all the Carthusian observances. If they are practised in this spirit, the novice will soon realise that they are admirably ordered, to the smallest details, to lead him to “seek God more ardently, find him more quickly and possess him more wholly”¹.

HIS WORK

Manual work occupies a large part of his life (about 6 hours daily). He must not forget that it is in this humble service that he must fulfil his vocation and continue his union with God.

The needs of a Carthusian monastery are numerous and various enough to allow each one to find an occupation according to his strength and aptitudes. The most common works are: cooking, tailoring, baking, laundry, carpentry, vegetable gardening, pantry, maintenance, beekeeping, etc.

However, it is obvious that someone who is unable of doing a minimal amount of work would not be accepted as a Brother. This would be a sign that he is not called to this vocation.

Most of the time the Carthusian Brothers work alone, or in very small groups of people, in order to favour the atmosphere of recollection and silence that should envelop them from church to work and from work to cell, and permeate their whole life.

In this way, the generous Brother can easily continue throughout the day the intimacy with Jesus begun in the church and in the cell. At the same time, he finds in this arduous life numerous opportunities for sacrifices, for renunciations of all kinds, and the practice of virtue, especially fraternal charity, humility and obedience.

¹ Prologue to the Statutes of the Carthusian Order

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS WELL FILLED

The timetable of ordinary working days is regulated as follows, except for the little modifications due to the liturgical seasons or to the climate of the region where is situated the Charterhouse.

12:00pm Rise.

0:15 am Matins in church.

The Brothers stay for Lauds on feast days and Sundays.

~1:30 Return to cell.

15 minutes of personal prayer; bedtime.

5:45 Rise.

6:00 Prime in cell. Mental prayer.

Lectio divina. Spiritual reading.

If the Brother has very physical work to do during the day, he can have breakfast.

(7:15 Mass in the Brothers' Chapel for the Brothers who do not attend Conventual Mass because of their work).

8:00 Conventual Mass.

9:00 Terce in cell.

9:45 Work.

12:00 Sext in cell. Dinner and free time. None.

1:30 Resumption of work.

5:00 Vespers.

Spiritual reading or study. Mental prayer. Supper.

6:45 Compline.

7:30 Bedtime.

Each time the hour strikes, it is highly recommended that we interrupt our work for a moment to raise our hearts to Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin and renew our good intentions. Moreover, the Brothers can make short visits to the Blessed Sacrament during their activities in the monastery.

It should be remembered that on Sundays and feast days, apart from the strictly necessary work, the life of the Carthusian Brothers is partly spent at the foot of the tabernacle. On these days, they attend all the Offices of the day (except Prime) and of the night in the church with the Fathers; the touching simplicity and austere grandeur of these offices are greatly conducive to recollection. The rest of the time, they remain in the solitude of the cell in a sweet and peaceful union with the Guest of their heart. They can devote themselves to prolonged mental prayer, recollection, pious readings, etc., according to the attraction and the grace of the moment.

HIDDEN AND SILENT APOSTOLATE OF THE CARTHUSIAN BROTHERS

Such a life, fully lived in a spirit of faith, after the example of the first Carthusians, can only be of great value in the eyes of God. Its power of intercession extends over the whole Church, as Pope Pius XI explains in the Bull "*Umbratilem*" by which the Carthusian Statutes of 1924 were approved: "It is easy to understand that they who assiduously fulfil the office of prayer and penance, contribute much more to the increase of the Church and the welfare of mankind than those who labour in tilling the Master's field; for unless the former drew down from heaven a shower of divine graces to water the field that is being tilled, the evangelical labourers would reap forsooth from their toil a more scanty crop. It is hardly necessary to say what great hope and expectation the Carthusian monks inspire in us; it is impossible that those religious should not become and remain powerful pleaders with our most merciful God for all Christendom."

Although he does not know the fruits of Faith here below, which is a sacrifice, the Carthusian Brother has the certainty that

his prayer, his daily renunciations, his humble work deserve and attract grace, light, and life for those who lack them. “By the inward holiness of those who lead the solitary life in the silence of the cloister,” says Pope Pius XI, “and by their most intimate union with God, is kept brightly shining the halo of that holiness which the spotless Bride of Jesus Christ holds up to the admiration and imitation of all.”

In the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church, the Carthusians are like hidden arteries, silently transfusing supernatural life to the other members, insofar as they are more united to the Source of Life which is Christ, more detached from all that is created and of themselves, and lead a more hidden life.

As the priests fulfil the ministry of intercession by virtue of their priesthood, so the Carthusian Brothers exercise their baptismal priesthood in an eminent way and therefore have a beautiful mission to accomplish on earth.

CONDITIONS FOR ADMISSION

Average health; ability to carry out ordinary and useful work in the Charterhouse.

A good character, simple, upright, open, flexible, capable of obedience and especially of love. Contrary to what many people think, very active temperaments and somewhat authoritarian characters adapt very well to the Carthusian life.

A good will eager to let itself be sanctified through the means proper to the Order, and also determined to overcome, for the love of God, the thousand little difficulties that are inescapable in any walk of life.

A right judgement based on common sense; no special knowledge or extraordinary aptitude are required.

Age requirement: youth is the most favourable and normal time to enter the Charterhouse. The minimum age is 20. As soon as one's intelligence is able to understand and appreciate the grace of the divine call and one's human maturity is sufficient. It is easier to accustom oneself to this way of life when one is not too old. Thus, an aspirant who is approaching 40 years of age, in order to have a chance of being accepted, must bring greater qualities, sure signs of vocation and sufficient guarantees of perseverance. The age limit, according to the Statutes, is 45 years.

Conditions of fortune: the poorest are welcomed as well as the rich, for the Carthusians have never demanded anything of their postulants. It is only recommended to bring some clothes for the first months of the life.

SUCCESSIVE STAGES

When a young man feels drawn to the Carthusian life as a Brother, he should write a presentation of himself to the Novice Master of a Charterhouse. If he seems suitable, after a period of exchange, he is invited to make a retreat of several weeks in the monastery, leading largely the same life as the Converse Brothers. After a period of reflection, if he requests to enter and is accepted, he begins his postulancy.

The postulancy lasts between three and twelve months. The postulant receives a black mantle which he wears in all the conventual activities. He is under the direction of the Novice Master in his spiritual life, the discernment of his call, and the religious formation, and of the Procurator in the work that is assigned to him.

If the postulant fits well in the life and shows a spirit of perseverance, he is presented to the community, which will vote on his admission to the novitiate. The novitiate lasts two years. The novice receives the Carthusian habit, without bands, and must

wear a black mantle for the community exercises. From then on, he is a member of the Order and is completely assimilated to the other Brothers, whose life he follows in every detail. He also assumes small responsibilities.

If the novitiate has gone well, he is presented to the community, which will vote on his admission to the first temporary vows, which last for three years (he then leaves the mantle and receives a cowl with bands). Then the same for the renewal of the vows, for another two years. And finally for the solemn or perpetual profession, which binds the monk for his entire life. He no longer belongs to himself; he has responded to the divine call and offered himself to God publicly and officially for ever.

There is also the path of the donate Brothers, who follow the same stages of formation, with more flexibility for certain observances, but who do not take vows. They bind themselves to serve the house by a mutual contract, giving them a share in the graces of our life. This contract, in its final stage, may be definitive or renewable every three years.

ETERNAL LIFE BEGUN

Happy the soul that has embarked on the royal road of the Cross, after having found the Charterhouse which is the door to heaven! The great charity which reigns between all the members of the Carthusian family greatly eases the thousand daily worries which often make life so unpleasant in the world.

In the life of a Carthusian monk, everything is organised so that he can fully realise the magnificent ideal to which he has been invited by the divine call. The distance from the world and the occasions of sin, the easy and habitual frequentation of the sacraments, sources of all graces, the direction and advice of experienced superiors, the absence of all material worries, and above all the atmosphere of piety and recollection with which

one feels constantly surrounded, all these give, with the grace of a gentle death, a great hope of enjoying the glory of Heaven: *“If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if anyone serves me, the Father will honour him”*¹.

The fruitfulness of such a life cannot be expressed. It is a total offering of oneself, that is made easy by divine grace, according to the promise of Our Lord: *“My yoke is easy, and my burden light”*². It is not the least of our joys to know that in this way we are effectively participating in the mystery of Christ’s redemption.

Moreover, the generous soul knows it already possesses the infinite Good that can satisfy its insatiable thirst for happiness and fill its capacity for love. Because of the purity of its life, it already delights in it with a simplicity and depth that no human affection can give; it goes straight to the goal for which it has been created. Conscious of the treasure it carries within itself and of God who has established his dwelling in it and who fills it with heavenly goods, it remains attentive to his voice, in a quiet and continual friendship that makes it forget that it is still on earth: it is eternal life already begun.

Soul of good will that hear the gentle invitation of the Lord: *“If you would be perfect... come, follow me”*³, give yourself completely and forever. Do not let the hour of grace slip away! Let your life be fully sanctified by responding faithfully to the gentle voice of Jesus who calls you: *“My son, give me your heart”*⁴.

¹ Jn 12:26

² Mt 11:30

³ Mt 19:21

⁴ Prov 23:26

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