

+CENTERED ON CHRIST

Class 1: Fr. Michael's Reflections for the Lay Cistercians 15 May, 2024

From the books: Forward, Preface and Chapter 1

Let me welcome each and all of you, first of all! I feel it to be a real grace to be able to share with you some reflections on the book of Dom Augustine Roberts which is meant to be a Guide to Monastic Profession but can serve very well as a Guide in your own effort to live a deeper Christian life in a wide variety of real-life contexts.

As I have expressed to Catherine Poland, the book of Augustine Roberts has a lot to offer to those seeking to incorporate in your own lives, various practices used by monks toward developing a serious contemplative life. I think it is one of the wonderful developments in the lives of many Christians today, that there is a growing desire to respond to the call to a fuller Christian faith.

I just read this morning in an article by Dr Jane Thibault called "The Spiritual Call of Later Life" about finding God within. There she writes:

"As in the development of any relationship, growing intimacy with God requires an increasing amount of the 'quality time' in solitude with God. Now it is time to stop talking (even prayerful talking) and to begin listening to what God is saying to us in the deepest reaches of our soul. As part of this deep listening we recall and appreciate what we already know about God through written and oral tradition, through observation of creation and through personal experience. Such listening remains rooted in and guided by faithfulness to communal worship and acts of love toward others."

Jane is speaking here about what can take place as we grow older but I think her insight is very valuable for any stage of our human, Christian living. At the deepest core of our being is a craving, a thirst, and abiding desire for closeness to God. After all, each one of us has been made in the very image and likeness of God and we all have the amazing potential of participating in and enjoyed the very life of God. I'm reminded of those wonderful words of the early theologian of the Church, Saint Athanasius, that "The Son of God became human so that we might become God." What I would hope from the presentations today and in the future is that each of you

may have a greater sense of your own dignity, your special calling to live a godly life in our world of today.

Your life also, is represented in the document of Pope John Paul II, called VITA CONSECRATA written for religious, for the life of every Christian is to be a life given over to Christ, made sacred by the presence and working of the Holy Spirit. Over the years I have become ever more aware of how the Holy Spirit moves through the lives of each and all of God's people. Seeing this movement of the Spirit is not easy Roberts points out, because we are living in an age of post-modernism and secularization. As I said in my notes for the Junior monks I was teaching:

“We are deeply influenced by the media we are exposed to. One can become easily engaged by modern news and all kinds of perspective about what's going on but where it incorporates gospel values is difficult to discern. We have to be really careful about what we read or watch on the computer screen.”

I'm sure each of you is aware how controversial modern media is these days. It is only with a lot of prayer and interior searching that we can make the right decisions about what we expose ourselves to. It is all too easy to get caught up into the polarization that is going on, whether this is the presidential election, dealing with the migrant issue, looking at the terrible suffering going on in Gaza, in Ukraine, the effects of global warming or the violence in our society that is happening.

In Augustine Roberts' Preface to his book, I pointed out the paragraph on p. XVI where he tells of Jesus himself being the Founder of the consecrated life as John Paul II pointed out in his document Vita Consecrata. Roberts goes on to say:

“However, the Pope's intuition goes further when he says that the source and model of profession is not merely Christ's external way of life but, even more, his continual inner experience—as a human being—of total love, radical dependence and constant docility to the Father in the Holy Spirit. This ongoing experience within the human soul of Jesus Christ is the real source of energy behind his lifestyle and underlies all his gospel teaching. For most of us it also opens new horizons for understanding any religious commitment made in the spirit of the Gospels.”

Let me suggest that when he says “any religious commitment” this means also your own baptismal commitment, your own desire to be true disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have quoted the above paragraph at length because I am firmly convinced that your own lives find their source not merely in Christ’s external way of life but in “his continual inner experience—as a human being—of total love, radical dependence and constant docility to the Father in the Holy Spirit.” This is your real source of energy as it was in Christ’s own lifestyle and supported all his teaching. It is this living contact with the Person of Christ that fuels your own inner lives, gives them their daily empowerment and meaning. What a monk’s life teaches him, I believe, is that everything that he thinks, says or does, is to flow from the heart of Christ, be fed by the presence and working of his Holy Spirit.

As happened when I worked through this volume of Augustine Roberts with the Junior monks, this theme of the daily calling of Christ to a more loving and life-giving way of life is what gives incentive and satisfaction to what we are doing day after day. Each one of our lives, as I say in my notes, is profoundly relational and is to reflect the very life of the most Holy Trinity. We have each been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and at that moment, we became living members of the very Body of Christ. Our lives are most authentic, most satisfying when we are true to this calling to be sharers with Christ in the very life of the Holy Trinity.

Augustine Roberts goes on to say in his Preface, that a true reading of the Rule of St Benedict today, will put an emphasis on the humanity of Christ. It is the source of the key elements of Benedictine life, and therefore helpful to have a deep appreciation of God’s Word taking on our flesh. For those who want to incorporate the Benedictine or Cistercian charism in their lives, Jesus reveals to us who we are if we are to be living members of his Body. This is the main reason I have often recommended that those who have come to me seeking spiritual direction, to take time each day reading the NT, especially the gospels. Exposure to the gospels and NT writings, has a wonderful way of allowing Christ to speak to our lives, however varied, and to address those issues that are most critical in our daily living.

Really this is the substance of the whole first chapter of Augustine Roberts book as is clear in the second paragraph where he says: “For the newcomer, the simple act of entry is a true experience of Jesus who loves and invites the person to follow him and, at the same time, inspires a positive response.” It seems to me as Roberts

writes in the third paragraph, that every one of you are among those of “every generation since the time of Christ...who became aware of God’s call” and are seeking to be “docile to the prompting of the Spirit” in order to devote yourselves to Christ with an undivided heart.

For me this is the wonder of what you are doing, bringing the good news to all aspects of human life in our world of today, whether it be family life, to the wide variety of places of work, every field of healthy human interest whether this be gardening, sports, care of the young and elderly, authentic news, supporting reliable political interests, bringing an end to war, fostering corporate integrity, raising awareness of global warming, helping education at all levels, becoming living examples of faith in a skeptical world. You have countless opportunities to be living examples of the Gospel message. One of the growing awarenesses in my own life is how many times each day I can be a messenger of Christ’s love if I am open to Christ’s presence and the working of God’s grace. As a number of mystics have said, a simple act of true or selfless love has far more life-giving effect in our world today than many a sermon. What I am trying to say, is that in each one of your own lives, you have many opportunities to spread the good news of the gospel, to be living witnesses of that love with which God is bringing about a new creation.

There are a lot of different aspects to our religious profession expressed in this first chapter of Centered on Christ but let me emphasize just one of them highlighted on page 4 where Roberts is quoting from the document of *Vita Consecrata* by John Paul II:

“As a result of the gift of the Spirit, a fraternal community formed around the Apostles, gathered in the praise of God and in a concrete experience of communion. The life of that community and, even more, the experience of complete sharing with Christ lived out by the Twelve, have always been the *model to which the Church has looked.*”

As anyone of us responds to the grace of God at work in our lives, we begin to have close bonds with a larger body, the Church, the Body of Christ. It is our relationships with one another that strengthen our faith, empower us to realize, in our own time and place, the work of God. In doing so we become part of a new creation, a gathering from many diverse cultures, racial and religious histories. We begin to enrich one another and form a people of God renewing all of humanity. I suspect

this is what is called the synodal process, where followers of Christ from all over the world, are sitting down together and given the freedom to speak their minds on a wide variety of religious issues. Here the Holy Spirit is bringing about a whole new consciousness of what it means to be the Church, the People of God. This alone will bring an end to war and a reaching out to the countless suffering of our world, forming one new family.