

This chapter is complex in a lot of ways, mainly in trying to present a consistent vocabulary to describe monastic and religious life. It is also an attempt to get into the early history of monastic life and show how it developed from the earliest times of Christianity. It is not easy to come up with a consistent development because of all the different factors that led to its development and because not a lot was written in those earliest years of Christianity about religious life.

The first Christians had a clearer sense of what following the person of Jesus Christ entailed because they lived in a society where being a Christian was deeply challenged by the social structures of the time, where the reality of God, especially the idea of God becoming incarnate were foreign to their whole way of thinking. Augustine Roberts gets into the Apostolic life, what is monastic life and the evangelical counsels.

Before jumping into these topics, are there any questions you have from reading this chapter that you want to ask? Early in this Chapter, Roberts tells us:

*“Conversatio morum* refers to the way of life which corresponds to the monastic calling. It is a dynamic reality, in which both personal conversion and community observances play their part. The result is monastic behavior: a joyful, obedient, persevering fidelity to the monastic way of life in the community that lives in this monastery.”

Much is implied by these few words for “personal conversion and community observances” are brought together. One can have one’s own calling but living this calling in a community context gives it a unique flavor. It is living out what one experiences as a personal calling in the context of a life in common, where one’s personal calling is always understood in relation to others with a similar desire to follow Christ more closely. Each of us experiences this calling a little differently, out of his or her own unique personal history.

1) **THE APOSTOLIC LIFE:** Augustine Roberts is intent on grounding our monastic way of life in the earliest Christian experience and at the heart of which is simply the experience of Jesus inviting us to come follow him. At the end of this chapter he asks the question I hope you have had the time to ponder. Read this on p. 45

“Have you found, in practice, that the routine daily life of your community helps you to grow in the life of Christ? Or is it more of a hindrance to such growth, an alienation? Why?” We could spend the rest of this class responding on just this one question. I want to suggest that Roberts has a good set of questions to honestly address and perhaps to talk about with your Junior Director.

Our life, from my experience, is a daily invitation to hear Jesus calling us to come follow Him. It is a personal encounter with our living Lord that is something far more than following a set of rules. The Rule of St Benedict presents us with a concrete way of living but the whole purpose is to hear and respond daily to what Jesus wants of us. Roberts is clear about this focus of our monastic way of life, of hearing Christ’s call and responding with our lives. Let’s read the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph on p. 23...

It is the love of the Lord Jesus that must inspire all that we think, do or say. Our praying the psalms all day long, our working to support our life together, our reading of Sacred Scripture and other spiritual books, our meals together, the ebb and flow of community life is all designed to encounter our living Lord and to respond in kind to the great love that has been shown us. I do not hesitate to ask Jesus to let me experience ever more deeply the love he has for me and all of God’s children since I think we are most ourselves when we know we are deeply loved by God and respond in keeping with this gift. This encounter with Christ is nicely described on p. 23, starting part way down in the last paragraph so let’s read this. Here we have a long quote from the Acts, reminding us of just how deeply our way of life is rooted in the first Christians’ experience.

In many ways our monastic life developed slowly and is grounded in the lives of the early Desert Fathers so let’s read section on p. 28, the quotes from some of their early experience. I must say that I have felt deeply inspired by these early monks, reading whole books of their Sayings.. There is just so much that reflects the life of Jesus in how they lived. A book of these “sayings” is out on display right now in the Scriptorium.

**Shared Conversatio** is the next section in the book so let’s read the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph on p. 29.. These two words, “**shared conversation**” in a way, convey a good summary of this chapter. We are all in a conversion process and so we should not

be at all surprised if circumstances arise day after day that call us into a new, more loving way of life. We are to become love even as we affirm "God is Love".

Roberts gets into the three consequences of living our way of life. The first is "one looks to the past and sees that monastic life is a deposit of lived faith, through which we touch the life of Jesus with his apostles." The second is "that the monastic observances, as well as all that happens in the monastery, especially the persons with whom we live, have to be actively and continually interpreted by the monk or nun under the light of a living faith... This process causes the monastic heart to overflow with a sweetness of love which escapes description because it reproduces something of the human soul of Christ." The third consequence is that "the believing nun or monk is convinced that monastic life anticipates, and in some way embodies, eternal life... Through their life together the brothers or sisters are united in a holy community, which is a foretaste of the heavenly community in which God will be all in all."

## **2: WHAT IS MONASTIC LIFE?**

Let's read the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph on p. 32. The vowed commitment is one that we make to God. It is a profound act of trust that if God wishes one to live differently than what one has promised, God will show us what that is to be.

Our life is one of service and beautifully described in *Vita Consecrata*: that we can now read on p. 33, "From the first centuries...prayer."

Roberts again quotes from the Desert Fathers on p. 34 but let's read the paragraph right after these sayings on p. 35 : "From such expressions..." Roberts sees parallels in non-Christian monasticism but as Christians, our way of living this life leads to "an interpersonal encounter with the life and love of the divine Persons." Again, he points out the centrality of the Person of Jesus in our living of monastic life.

For John Cassian for whom I have the greatest respect and read carefully as a young monk, monastic life is all about "the interior life of the heart." Let's read the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph on p. 36. And if we want to see the real depth to which monastic life can take us, read the 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph on p. 36 onto p. 37. For me this is clearly how God directed St Therese of Lisieux who in her deep darkness became linked to our crucified Lord in a way that has allowed her to touch millions of lives.

This is expressed in Roberts' treatment of the Rule of St Benedict in the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph on p. 38 so let's read it. "The same spirit of fidelity..." And also on p. 39 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph he gives a summary of Benedict's spirituality in the Rule. Let's read this. "To sum up..." In a quote from St Bernard at the bottom of this page we find a beautiful quote that sums up the wisdom of St Benedict so let's take a close look at it.

### **3) EVANGELICAL COUNSELS**

Finally Augustine Roberts finishes the chapter writing about the various descriptions or expressions of the religious life. He admits of a lot of confusion around the use of technical vocabulary used to describe the religious life today. He sums this up, it seems to me, in the last paragraph on p. 41 that deserves our reading. "In fact Christ's way... form of living."

He then gets into what he calls the "Umbrella Term" of "evangelical counsels." There is no doubt, that we have some confusion in the description of the various forms of religious life but I think this may be inevitable. All forms of a more intimate following of Christ can never be confined to certain concepts since our life itself is never something we can confine to human concepts or understanding. The personal surrender to Christ takes us into a loving relationship that can never be reduced to words. Let us finish with reading the last paragraph on p. 44, "Meanwhile, it is important.." Our whole life is to be one "consecrated to the Person of Jesus Christ" and as an interpersonal relationship, it is ever open to divine creativity so that we realize in Christ, who we truly are as persons destined to share in God's own life for all eternity.

Amen