

CHAPTER 2: CONVERSE WITH THE SAINTS

Read the works of our saintly forefathers



One of the greatest gifts I have experienced in my Catholic faith is the knowledge and understanding that we are not alone in this journey. I am not referring merely to our friends, family and people I see gathered each week around the altar; nor am I referring to the words of a good friend, who although separated by an ocean, often says “good-bye” with the words, “See you at the altar.” There is one Body in Christ, and this Body is not merely some institutional union of a worldwide organization, nor is it simply an invisible spiritual union for us to imagine that all believers in Christ share a common belief, heritage, and inheritance. Through the Eucharist, this Body becomes truly a singular body of the faithful, bound in ways that go beyond our shared humanity: that we walk together, hand-in-hand, fully participating in the work of salvation. In this body, we experience the moments of crucifixion, of Peter’s denial and the betrayal of Judas, along with the joy of the women at the emptied tomb, the cleansing of forgiveness and sanctifying Grace of baptism, in no way less than the experiences of our daily and ordinary life. As one body, united in Christ, we enter the union and unity of the Holy Trinity. We become more than brothers and sisters, born to a common family, in a common walk, sharing our daily struggles and the discovery of God’s very Being. There is a gift and grace of this Body that is much more and greater than even these things--something that is more clearly seen and remembered in the Eastern practices of our faith. In the one Body of Christ, we are united in both space and time.

We do not only walk with our fellow Christians who are alive today, but also with every Christian and member of Christ who has ever walked this earth. That the one Body is also one, as the apostle reminds us that Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever, means that there was not a body of Christ in the time of the apostles, then another body made up of the martyrs, another in the time of Constantine, another in the Middle Ages and yet another that is made with the faithful living today. There is not a Kingdom of Christs, one for each generation, walking the streets of heaven, nor a multitude of Sons sitting at the right hand of the Father. We

are united, one in a single body with our loved ones who have passed away; with parents and grandparents, sadly with some of our children, our brothers, sisters and very good friends; and we are joined with our ancestors we have never met and all those who have walked this Way before us. In Christ, we are not and are never truly alone.

Some have a favorite poem that is called *Footprints in the Sand*. The central theme of the poem is that when we look back at our life and the path that we have walked, at times there are two sets and at others there are only one; that it is Christ who did not abandon us in times of struggle and trials, but who lifted and carried us, so that we see only the single set. But there are so many more footprints for us to see, a truly endless and infinite number criss-crossing and walking alongside our path, because in a life that is everlasting we do not merely walk this way in a single time and moment. We are walking this Way throughout all times and in all moments; we do not blink out of existence, but persist; we do not pass by, but remain with our brothers and sisters throughout all time.

This is the infinite moment which remains much more alive in the Eastern traditions, and captured in living icons. According to this understanding, the Baptism of the Lord did not simply happen 2,000 years ago, but is happening today; the Transfiguration is not an event that passed away and needed to be memorialized by three stones (Mk. 9:2-13), but is happening today; Abraham's greeting of the three Angels, Moses' leading the people out of Egypt and Elijah's raising of the widow's, child continue to happen and live in the present; and that when we pray for those who have died, we are praying for them and joining them in that very moment of death.

We walk with and in the midst of the Saints on a daily basis, their countless footprints are dancing around us. We are never on this journey alone and abandoned, but have always their companionship, their prayers and wisdom, and while it may be easy to consign them to a distant land and place, with little in common to our world of the 21st century, we are reminded that it is One body, and not several, to which we belong; it is one Christ who was crucified, died, was buried and resurrected; it is One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who created the universe, who delivered His people from bondage, who gave to the world His Only Begotten Son, and who promised salvation through the forgiveness of sins.

There is one Way, one Truth and one Light of this world, and it is along this one common and very same Way that are saintly forebears also walked. There is no question, no struggle, nor any lesson learned that is new, that has not already been challenged and encountered. Just as it has become more popular today to say that Christopher Columbus did not discover America because there were inhabitants and people already living on this side of the world, there is nothing of God, or this life, that has not already been discovered or experienced. We may be

assured that if there is a question in our mind or spirit, one of our brothers or sisters has already asked and puzzled over these very things.

A great gift, and true grace, of the Catholic Faith is that we recognize and remember that for nearly 2,000 years now we have been exploring, sorting and sifting through these things. It is not left alone to our wisdom and intelligence to discover, but that we have the benefit of the wise and collective tradition that has sorted through these very things. This is what Tradition truly is. It is not that my family went to a particular restaurant once on a Christmas Eve, and so, as children, it was decided that we had to go to that very same restaurant every year, because that was our tradition. Rather, Tradition is the collected wisdom and experience of all the generations of humanity sorting through true and authentic knowledge of God; to test and refine as iron in the furnace; to strengthen and to purify, eliminating what is harmful, deceptive and foreign to the Love of Christ; that the first Wisdom is the Word and Holy Scripture and everything since has been our work and effort to come to know and to learn all that this Word has said. Here we may think about athletes and teams who improve year after year, and even generation after generation; or about how runners today are faster, they jump higher and throw further than the greatest athletes of generations past. Similarly, even the weaker teams of today would far outplay and likely beat world championship teams from twenty or thirty years ago. Is this because our average athletes today are simply, and by chance, better and more capable than even the finest and strongest athletes of the past? Rather, our athletes today have built upon and stand upon the shoulders of the work and the wisdom of their predecessors.

We are not alone and limited to this single lifetime in our struggles and coming to know our Lord and the Way that leads to Him. Read the works of our saintly forebears and pray with them daily as brothers and sisters, and even dear friends who have walked this Way before, who know of its pot holes, dangers, obstacles, joys and great riches. Do not be intimidated by long lists of suggested reading or daunting length. As with all things, begin in prayer and proceed with an open spirit and attentive ear. Choose one that seems inviting, or accept a suggestion that someone trusted has offered. Pray with the text before, during and after you read, for as you read, you truly are in a state of prayer, communing with a faithful brother, sister, father or mother in Christ, discussing the things that we have experienced and what has happened as the disciples discussed such things along the road to Emmaus. Do not be overcome by the number of worthwhile books to read, but comforted that there are so many good and faithful witnesses. Over time, you will gather a great collection and gain in confidence that you have not found the Way by the luck of the blind, but through the guidance, witness and companionship of those who have gone before us.

Accept the Rule according to and regardless of your station and place in life

We can neither forget, nor overlook, a basic principle that to reap the full harvest of the Rule, one needs to profess the vowed life as a brother or sister in the Order. What St. Albert has written are prescriptions for a Way of Life that if lived in its fullest capacity, results in one taking on the burdens and obligations of consecrated life, and the Order, so long as it remains true and loyal to this consecration, exists for the purpose of helping and aiding the brothers and sisters in living out this life. That we can neither forget nor overlook this basic principle does not mean, however, that those living outside the Order cannot also live a life in allegiance to Christ and glean from the wisdom and ways provided by this Rule, and so also, in varying degrees and measures, also experience the rewards and fruit of Carmel; all who love Christ, regardless of their station or place in life, can taste of the fruit of perfection. There will be some outside of the Order, who experience this perfection and love of Christ more than many inside the Order. What matters most is not that a person has merely spoken the words of profession or can claim the institutional membership of having signed one's name, but the measure and degree to which a person gives his life to Christ and to a life in love and allegiance to him; it is the Rule itself which bears the wisdom of St. Albert's journey with Christ, and while tailored to the conditions and the lives of the monks gathered around the spring on Mt. Carmel, its wisdom and fruit holds true to all people and all Christians who seek a life in allegiance to him.

Accept the Rule, its teachings, precepts and directions in a way and to the degree that is appropriate to your life, always knowing and being confident that God calls all kinds of workers and guests to the banquet, and that what matters to the course of salvation is not the particular life that each of us finds ourselves in, it is not the particular table to which we have been assigned, but our responsiveness to the invitation and attention to the Will of God that is active within our daily midst. We remember that as all have been invited, it has not been left for each to find and provide their own wedding garments, but that the host provides all who come with suitable garments. It is right for every person who hears in the Rule God's voice and call to a deeper holiness and experience of love to respond in whatever way one is actually able.

Because it is an authentic way of love and follows in the footsteps of Christ, the Rule is fitting and can be adapted to every situation and condition of life:

If one is wealthy or in the throws of poverty;

If one is an ordained priest, a deacon, or lay minister;

married, with or without children, or a single parent;

If one lives in the midst of the gangs in the Back of the Yards of Chicago, in a gated community, on a farm in central Iowa, or in a high-rise in downtown Manhattan;

Whether a college student studying to become a doctor, a corporate CEO, self-employed, or a cashier at the local grocery store;

Someone who works three jobs to keep the electricity on or lives a comfortable, upper-middle class life;

If you are a politician, a construction worker, insurance salesman, entrepreneur, soldier, teacher, cashier or student;

Whatever your situation in life is and its particular demands may be, you can bear the fruit of the Rule by adapting it to meet your conditions.

Notice here that I do not say “To meet your needs,” or “To meet your convenience.” These *adaptations* are not mitigations or easements of the Rule; we know and understand that the Rule and the Way of Carmelite life remains wholly the Rule and the life that it represents, continuing to call us ever forward along that path of perfection. This is the first condition of the Rule, that if you choose for the Rule to be your guide in life, that like those who profess a vow of obedience within the Orders, you accept the Rule and all its dispositions and teachings as the rule for your life. Again, this acceptance is not an arbitrary imposition, nor is it a mere sign of membership in an exclusive club, but is the Rule’s own recognition that in order to accomplish the task and work which we have set out upon, to live a life in allegiance to Christ and share in the harvest of the Carmelite saints, the Rule provides the advice and direction necessary to gain these rewards. Accept the Rule, not because any of us are obligated to do so, but because it bears real wisdom and will lead us to a far greater and more intimate love with Christ. It is only in its whole and entirety that it will do so (but on this point we will address and discuss in greater detail at a later time.

Accept the Rule according to the conditions and situation of your life. Not all of us can attend daily mass, possibly because we have to be at work, or take our children to school, or ourselves attend school, or our parish may not even be able to provide mass daily. Yet we can all attend as our schedule allows. Some may even be able to change their work schedule or set appointments at times so that they can begin to attend, or find a neighbor who can take their child to school on certain days, or perhaps even lead an hour of adoration, or communion service on days when the local priest is not available to say mass. Similarly one may struggle to find regular times for silence or have to work at the discipline of saying daily prayers. We cannot buy homes and rent apartments only in places that are “suitable” to our chosen way of life, but more often we can bear this in mind when accepting jobs and careers, and all of us can choose to be around friends and spend our free-time in places that are “suitable.”

It remains that to gain the fullness of this life, we need to begin each day with the eucharist, but we still gain from attending however often we can, and by arranging those things in our life that we may have control or influence over, so that we can attend whenever possible and more

frequently at times than at others. Similarly, it may not be possible to pray the full divine office; or observe grand silence from the closing of night prayer until morning prayer; or renounce ownership of all property; or to vow strict obedience to a prior. Yet it does remain in our grasps to pray as often as our life allows, to set aside times for silence, to own only what is necessary and to project the virtue of obedience. These are the dispositions of this Way of Life and our challenge, not being given the Grace and benefit of belonging to the Order, is to find the ways which are appropriate to our particular station and position in life.

In this way, if we desire to follow the Rule and reap from its bounty, we are to accept the Rule, each and every aspect, adapted to our particular circumstance and situation.