

Be a “third force” for good

Reflections from the Interprovincial Retreat with Richard Rohr, OFM

I remember well meeting Richard for the first time. A group of us in our second year of studies at Duns Scotus College asked Richard to come and give us a retreat mid-year. We gathered at Camp Howell on a snowy weekend that winter, and Richard shared with us his insights into Jesus and the Scriptures. At the end of the weekend, his final words were: “Brothers, you can no longer say you haven’t heard the “gospel,” the good news of Jesus Christ, because that is what I have been proclaiming to you this weekend.”

Many of us following that weekend became involved with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal and made the “Life in the Spirit Seminars.” This retreat with Richard opened us up to new energy and inspirations from God.

Now, about forty-seven years later, I found myself listening to Richard once again share the “good news” of God’s love and commitment to us in the human family and for all creatures and our call to participate in God’s work of love.

Contemplative Mind and Unitive Vision

During our five days of retreat with Richard at the San Pedro Spiritual Center in Winter Park, FL, Richard outlined for us fifty OFM friars from across the USA the theme of a “contemplative mind” or a “unitive consciousness” as the way into the deep truths of our Catholic-Christian tradition. The “unitive consciousness” outlook empowers a person to “participate” in the life of the Trinity and the Trinity’s “enfleshment” in all of creation.

Richard explained that one part of our brain, the left brain, is very analytical. This part of our brain divides up reality into “either/or” thinking, but the right brain works in a more unitive way seeing “both/and.” Throughout these retreat days, Richard mapped out how the more “unified vision” is really the perspective that Jesus offers us and preached from in his own life. Richard also offered an overview historically of where this “non-dualistic” vision and energy was alive in our tradition and in the world. For example, St. Bonaventure offers this unitive vision in his “Journey of the Soul into God.” This kind of “unitive vision” sees God deeply at work to bring about a “universal restoration” of all persons and all of creation. This kind of vision sees God empowering a restorative justice in our world rather than a retributive justice.

And the way into this kind of restorative energy and participative Christianity is through contemplative “practices” that help us get past a dualistic mindset that divides up reality and to move into a unitive vision of God and the cosmos.

‘Third Force’ Thinking and Holding

A key insight here for me was Richard’s speaking about the “law (or template) of three” at work in the universe that is reflective of the Trinity. Richard stressed this insight as we go forward as six provinces moving toward union.

Often as something new develops (a new affirming) in human history, there will be “push-back.” Richard pointed to our politics in the USA as an example. Just as we think we have made new strides with the inclusivity of others or with a better understanding and protection of human rights and needs, then there often can be a “push-back” (a denying) that holds for opposite views to be understood and supported. In light of the “law (or template) of three,” our hope lies in an “X-factor,” grace, a ‘creatio ex nihilo’ to come forth to be a “holy reconciling” of these two movements.

The law of three offers that a “holy affirming” comes first, and then a “holy denying.” But finally a “holy reconciling” (the earlier holy affirming being refined by the holy denying) comes forth as a gift from God to bring about a “third, new something.” And Richard shared that there is a need for persons to “hold” these first two movements, to “suffer” them ... which is the cross; and to trust together in the “grace and gift of God” to come.

Richard offered that this is truly our call as we move into this new venture of uniting our six provincial cultures into one, new Franciscan culture. What is happening now is much bigger than our ability to share the staffing of places or the streamlining of administration and finances. We are being invited into the “enfleshment” of the Trinity’s love, nuances, subtlety, grace, and compassion for (suffering with and holding of) the divisions of our world. We are being called to allow God to work through us to wait upon the “gifts” and “graces” of God in the shaping of our world and to be prophetic instruments of them.

Richard encouraged us to learn how to “hold” opposites and to teach this “holding” of opposites through contemplative practices and living together. This is what contemplation means today, Richard offered. As we learn this today and suffer the “passions” of the world, these “passions” will sink into our unconscious and transform us. We then are receptive to “letting it be done to us” by God ... to be transformed by God, to receive an alternative consciousness.

God wants the dynamic generosity of the Trinity’s heart to be in our hearts and in the world, and God chooses to work through us. This seemed to me to be the deeper call in this new moment of restructuring and revitalization that Richard was pointing out to us. This seems to me to be a worthy mission for all of us to join in together as brothers in our new, national “contemplative fraternity in mission.”

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