

Everyone Everywhere, Growing in Faith. Everyday Faith Event 2023 - Others

In coming to ponder on this question of growing faith through the 'other' I was immediately struck by the question of, what or who is the 'other'? In the first instance it would seem obvious to focus purely on the human other, those around us, perhaps outside of our immediate families and social circles. But then I thought about the non-human other, the many varied and complex life forms and forces that make up the biosphere of creation. Thus, in offering a reflection on Growing Faith through the 'other', I wish to draw out briefly both the human and non-human others with whom we can grow and nurture of life of faith. I do this with the help of a Friar and a Monk both called to a life of community and then to a life of solitude with nature, both deeply holy, and rich in faith; I speak of Saint Francis of Assisi and Thomas Merton.

Saint Francis of Assisi – Born in 1181 into a wealthy merchant family, Francis lived a life of indulgence and had few cares in life, he despised lepers and had little care for the poor. All this changed after he returned from war broken, he had seen visions and began to re-evaluate his life. The opening to his Testament reads:

'The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, thus to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body' and finally 'the Lord gave me some brothers'.

St Francis went on to do many great deeds and become one of the most popular saints of the church and founded the order of Friars Minor, which is alive and well today, with many other communities having been formed on his example. Francis provides to us an example of how our lives can be changed when we allow God to lead us, forsaking all bitterness for mercy, we can find sweetness of soul and body. As a Church we face many challenges of difference between people and groups we might easily call 'other'. Too often our discourse of faith is one that is embittered against the 'other' we find difficult to love. However, just like St Francis we are called not to bitterness, but to mercy, to be led by God to embrace the 'other' and through that experience find a deeper faith, a truer faith, a faith that mirrors the love of Christ.

Thomas Merton – Born in 1915, Thomas entered the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani in the USA aged 27 where he lived for the rest of his life. In 1965 he withdrew from community life to live as a hermit on the edge of the Abbey grounds, writing, walking in the mountains, and seeking a deeper communion with God through solitude. In his writings on nature Thomas says this:

'People who watch birds and animals are already wise in their way. I want not only to observe but to *know* living things, and this implies a dimension of primordial familiarity which is simple and primitive and religious and poor. This is the reality I need, the vestige of God in His creatures. And the light of God in my own soul.'

In the busy rush of our world it can be so easy to neglect our need for silence, for contemplation of the creation of which we are just one part. In seeking to grow our faith through the 'other', we have all around us a festival of others which are both apart from, and a part of, us. Thomas invites the seeker, not to simply observe, but to *know* the very vestige of God in creation. As the Church, one of our Marks of Mission is to 'Safeguard the integrity all Creation'. But how can we safeguard that which we do not fully know and appreciate, the call to environmental awareness is not simply a moral fad on which the Church has jumped. Rather, the call to awareness is the call from God to see clearly that which is all around us, the life of God, the vivid Creator, and the very breath of all life.

In both cases, the 'others' are channels through which we can draw closer to the life of God and deepen our faith. In both there are similar virtues required: simplicity, humility, wisdom, mercy, love, and many more. It is perhaps in these seemingly simple virtues that we can learn to connect with 'others' both human and non-human to expand our world and deepen our faith. Jesus' retelling of the Prophecy of Isaiah is as poignant today as on the day it was written, 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing' (Matt 13. 14-15). Perhaps the opportunity presented by growing faith through 'others' is to relearn how to listen, to see, to fully perceive, to know, and be known in return.

Reflection by Kieron Rowley