

Seeking the Sources of a Theologian: In Memory of Fr. Roch Kereszty, O.Cist. (1933–2022)

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Fr. Roch Kereszty long enjoyed thinking about how, and how much, we can discover the truth about Jesus of Nazareth through historical research into his earthly life. Fr. Roch also often enjoyed indicating that at least part of the answer is that research about a human being can never be content with descriptions of any number of empirical facts or ideas from that person's life. The true goal of one who writes or reads about the life of another is insight into the meaning of that person's life. Such insight is possible some extent while the person's life is ongoing, but it calls for a more decisive kind of assessment after the person's death. The meaning of a life also cannot truly reveal itself when viewed through the lens of an inadequate philosophy or theology. Indeed, Fr. Roch tended to think that philosophy itself is adequate to show that any quest to understand another human being cries out to be structured by love, or at least some form of empathy: I can truly understand another only in my proportion to my ability to discover communion or affinity with that person, to find in him or her another self who is in some deep way similar to my own self.¹

¹ Roch A. Kereszty, "The Role of the 'Jesus of History' Research within the Theological Enterprise," *Communio* 24 (1997): 297–310, at 301–4; Kereszty, "Historical Research, Theological Inquiry, and the Reality of Jesus: Reflections on the Method of J. P. Meier," *Communio* 19 (1992): 576–600, at 582–584; Kereszty, *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology*, 3rd ed. (New York: St. Paul's, 2011), 17–21. His thinking on this point was notably helped by Paul Ricoeur, "Objectivity and Subjectivity in History," in *History and Truth* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 21–40, esp. 28–29.

Although Fr. Roch elaborated such ideas to guide historians seeking to write a “biography” of Jesus, and although they make great demands of many kinds, it nevertheless seems fitting to consider them when beginning to memorialize Fr. Roch himself.

Last December, God granted Fr. Roch the gift of a passage from this life that was surrounded by the love of many people who had known him on earth. Among them were many who had known him through his theological writings and had found them to offer a special combination of intellectual vigor and personal relevance. It is a blessing now to be able to offer a short memorial for the benefit of his sympathetic readers of the past and the future. Attempting to explain the golden thread that unites his many books and articles seems unreasonable; the writings themselves remain their own best explanation. Such an approach could also perhaps suggest that we are most loved in our productivity rather than in the ways we are dependent on God and others. For both of these reasons, one good way to serve love and communion with a theologian of interest would be to portray him in some of the ways that he himself was loved, fathered forth and shaped, by the One from whom all fatherhood is named. In this essay, then, I offer a simple and very fragmented portrait of the sources of a theologian, the *fontes theologi*: the different ways that God fathered in Roch Kereszty a theological writer who was a blessing to people who read periodicals such as this one. If I provoke either fresh appreciation of his writings or deeper reflection on the variety and patterns in the ways God leads his children generally (and especially those who are interested in theology), then this act of thanksgiving to God for a good teacher will have been successful.

A Reader Raised in Rome

It is suggestive to notice that Fr. Roch was born in central Europe just six years after Joseph Ratzinger, and died seventeen days before him; their lifespans as theologians roughly overlapped and were formed by engagement with many of the same theological movements and crises. This said, moving quickly to the specifics of the person in question, it seems especially natural to attend to the character of Fr. Roch’s formal theological education. This education took place in Rome, in the company of a handful of fellow bright young refugee Hungarian Cistercians, from 1957 to 1962 (during which time he also made his solemn vows and was ordained). In those days leading up to the Second Vatican Council, theology in the Roman universities was dominated by an increasingly stale and self-contained Neo-Scholasticism. The Benedictine Athenaeum of Sant’Anselmo, where young Roch and his

peers were enrolled, was a conspicuous exception. A relatively small institution led by *ressourcement*-minded monk-professors such as Jean Leclercq and Cipriano Vagaggini, and inspired by the research of writers like Yves Congar, Louis Bouyer, Henri de Lubac, and Jean Daniélou, Sant'Anselmo was animated by the cry "ad fontes!" and sought to give its students a bracing immersion into the kind of rich study of Christ and Christianity that the renewal of studies of the Bible and of the liturgy and preaching of the great doctors of the early Church had made possible. Roch's novice master back in Hungary had already taught him about the heart of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, but one of the most obvious results of his Roman studies was the development of a lifelong *lectio continua* of the theology of the Cistercian doctor. His dissertation explored especially the relation between wisdom, knowledge, and Christian love in St. Bernard's theology.²

A closely related gift of Roch's training at Sant'Anselmo was the developed conviction that, far from being a matter of relativist historicism or of antiquarian care for museum pieces, the thoughtful study of the whole human intellectual patrimony is key to a strong and supple Christian engagement with all the possibilities of the living word of God and the living human mind:

The past needs to be known and profited from, but none of the past models may be resuscitated as it had been. Instead, we need to learn from all the constructive models of past theology; thus, we should re-appropriate the sapiential finality of patristic-monastic theology, disentangle the historical-critical method from its own rationalistic presuppositions, and include it in a theological exegesis which regards the Bible as one book, the normative, God-given scriptural witness to Salvation History. We also need a philosophy and a coherent theological method which are able to stand their ground against the Kantian opposition to metaphysics and can be integrated with an adequate philosophy of science.³

² Rochus Kereszty, "Sapientia in Experientia Spirituali apud S. Bernardum" (STD diss., Pontificii Athenaei S. Anselmi, 1962); published as *Die Weisheit in der mystischen Erfahrung beim Hl. Bernhard von Clairvaux* (Westmalle, Belgium: Abbey of Westmalle, 1963). See also Roch A. Kereszty, "The Significance of St Bernard's Thought for Contemporary Theology," *Communio* 18, no. 4 (1991): 574–89.

³ Roch A. Kereszty, "Toward the Renewal of Theology and the Theologian." *Communio* 35, no. 2 (2008): 273–89, at 277.

Even though he wrote these words many decades later, the ambition that they express was nurtured especially at Sant'Anselmo.

A Teacher Tried in Texas

So, God prepared Fr. Roch to teach and write by placing him in the classrooms and libraries of major theological visionaries. This much must be said, and it has its ways of shedding light on his writings and on our own efforts to serve similar theology today. But to focus on it exclusively, even primarily, would be to miss the formation of the human being, the Christian, and the priest. To go one layer deeper in this excavation, then, a later sequence of events will help frame why Fr. Roch became engaged by humbler, broader concerns that have often been difficult of access for the professional theologians of the Old World. First, in 1962, at the end of his Roman studies and just after the opening of Vatican II, his canonical superior, an exiled Hungarian Cistercian, ordered young Roch and his fellow Hungarian classmates, very much against their wishes, to come and join a monastery that refugee Hungarian Cistercians had founded some six years earlier in the outskirts of Dallas, Texas. Roch was to arrive in the spring of 1963, improve his English over the summer, and begin serving on the theology faculty of the nearby University of Dallas in the fall. As he would later write, "I was convinced that Texas was the wildest and the least cultured state of America and there was nothing but dried-out prairie everywhere."⁴ He was at least as convinced that he should be living in Europe, waiting to help rebuild the Church in Hungary as soon as the iron curtain fell. But most of all, he was convinced that he was a refugee religious with no realistic canonical recourse, and so he obeyed and went to Texas. From then until 1970, he found himself bringing his theological perspective into an otherwise Neo-Scholastic theology department distant from Old World ideals, but also often serving as university chaplain or dean of men, and often living in the dormitory with his undergraduates (this latter, both because of his mentoring responsibilities and because the under-construction monastery lacked rooms for the monks). It was a rocky time in pastoral and theological life, but also an exhilarating one.

Indicative of Roch's self-immersion in the thought-world of his American students, in the mid-1960s he learned that a theological movement called "Christian Atheism" was sweeping the country. It had been triggered

⁴ Roch A. Kereszty, "Autobiographical Notes," document held by Our Lady of Dallas Abbey.

by a small group of radical American theologians, been picked up by a variety of mainstream media outlets, and provoked a remarkable wave of “funerals for God” held in churches across the country. Indicative of Roch’s self-understanding, his response was to write his first book, an incisive study of the roots of “the theology of the death of God” in the thought of World War II-era Germanic Protestant theologians, and of the internal contradictions of its American representation. The book, however, was obsolete before it was finished, and at its publication in 1970, the author’s preface opens with a remarkable declaration: “Today, the death-of-God fad is dead. Its demise came earlier than most theologians and the general public had anticipated.”⁵ Although the book is in fact a fine example of mid-century public theology and it rewards attention even today, almost the only thing anyone remembers Fr. Roch saying about it is that he was so disappointed by its lack of reception that from then on he “vowed” to resist the fascination of theological fads and instead to redouble his attention to the classics and to the heart of the Christian tradition itself. While of course such resolutions could only be so effective in the foment of theology following Vatican II, it is also true that virtually all of his future book-length works emerged from his teaching of the fundamentals of Catholic theology for seminary-level audiences, an attempt to provide reliable and nuanced education on the core questions of Catholic thought, especially in Christology, ecclesiology, the sacraments, and interreligious dialogue.

A second “humiliation” from 1970 left an at least equally decisive mark on his writing: persuaded by his fellow monks that he was truly needed, he accepted a full-time appointment teaching theology at the middle and high school for boys that his fellow Hungarian Cistercians had founded on the model of the educations they themselves had received as children. This reduced his role at the University of Dallas to moonlighting as an adjunct professor for one course per semester; this role, combined with daytime immersion in the lives of high school boys (and, before long, mentoring young monks as the abbey’s novice master), would characterize his teaching life for almost fifty years. Schoolmastering resulted in various personal trials and rewards. “Things went alright at the beginning, until my students observed that when they misbehaved I got confused and unable to control them.”⁶ But across the years, his students showed a growing tendency to regard his foreignness with reverence more than revilement, such that, within

⁵ Roch A. Kereszty, *God Seekers for a New Age: From Crisis Theology to “Christian Atheism”* (Dayton, OH: Pflaum, 1970).

⁶ Kereszty, “Autobiographical Notes.”

fifteen years, the following profession appears on the title page of a key school publication: “The class of 1985 would like to dedicate this yearbook to Fr. Roch Kereszty, who turned out to be not such a bad guy after all.” Questions of classroom management and personal respect aside, he sometimes described his feelings about being made a full-scale priest-schoolmaster as dominated by the thought that he had been “sold at a discount” to a work that was beneath his training. Nevertheless, it kept him in close daily working communication with the school’s headmaster, Fr. Denis Farkasvalvy, his most important long-term theological interlocutor.⁷ More intrinsic to the new role, Fr. Roch also began to find that his stable presence in the holistic formation of young adolescents provided him with lifelong loving relationships, and evangelical opportunities, that he would not have had as a graduate professor. And even from the specific point of view of his writings, he would happily report that it was in facing the questions of his rebellious and needy teenagers, rather than those of his more devout and self-sufficient students in their twenties, that he was pushed to do the deepest thinking, and the most important work in setting his priorities as a theologian.

A Boy Born in Budapest

Even though many kinds of omissions are necessary in a short essay, and even though he itinerary of Fr. Roch’s adult life could not have been foreseen on the basis of his early years, it would be especially misleading to offer these reflections on the shaping of the adult child of God without also reaching back to consider some aspects of how God first conceived this child who would one day teach and write about the Father. After all, the agenda for many theologians is set long before graduate school, if they even go. “Theology is not some abstract discipline meant for the academic elite. It is quite simply the study of God, which is the task—and the joy—of every single person. . . . Our minds reach after the divine and, in Christ, receive the fullness of the Creator himself. All who pray are, in a sense, theologians.”⁸

András (Andrew) Kereszty was born in prewar Budapest to Romantic, progressive parents who loved him warmly and imparted to him a delight in the green world of the outdoors. Religious instruction was not a gift they sought to offer their child, but the educators they chose for him, persons in

⁷ As a sign of the significance of this theological brotherhood, it is instructive to page through the footnotes of almost any of his books, but in particular his memorial article, “Denis Farkasfalvy on the Theology of the Bible,” *Communio* 47, no. 3 (2020): 577–98.

⁸ Denis Farkasfalvy and Roch A. Kereszty, *Theology in Practice: A Beginner’s Guide to the Spiritual Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2023), 9.

whom they must have recognized something deeply good, did so in their place. András's first Christian memory recalled when his devout nanny, "Bibi," took him into a church to visit "little Jesus" in the tabernacle. An excellent and saintly first-grade teacher, Kápolnásy Hermin, further nurtured his growing faith. He always venerated these two women for giving Christ to him by their teaching and their prayers. They were spiritual midwives and mothers to a Christian vocation that eventually included "professional" theological teaching and writing.

A decisive step in the young man's life occurred in 1943 when his parents enrolled him in the widely esteemed Cistercian school of St. Imre, where he thrived intellectually and spiritually, especially under the tutelage of a young Fr. Placid Csizmazia.⁹ But already in the spring of 1944, instruction was radically disrupted by the great traumas of the city's takeover by the German army, accompanied by American air raids and ultimately yielding to Soviet shelling and siege. The Keresztys and the faculty of St. Imre remained committed to surviving and building a future, and Fr. Placid often visited his young ward in the bomb shelter to give him homework. School resumed in early 1945 after the Soviet victory; András continued flourishing under the guidance of his Cistercian teachers until June of 1948, when the Hungarian communist regime deprived the priest-schoolmasters of their schools, going on in October 1950 to imprison their abbot and deny them any right to live together or wear the Cistercian habit. Young András's response was to cling all the more tightly to the extracurricular tutoring and mentorship his beloved Cistercian former schoolmasters continued to offer, operating in an ever-more clandestine fashion as informants multiplied and persecution became more sophisticated.

Around 1950, András's Cistercian teachers introduced him to Fr. Lóránt (Lawrence) 'Sigmond, who soon became the decisive spiritual father of whom this son would never cease to speak. After years as a successful teacher of Hungarian and French literature at the St. Imre school, in 1946 'Sigmond had been called back to the motherhouse in rural Zirc, where he served as master of the abbey's booming formation program. In 1950, after the suppression, he became the vicar of the imprisoned abbot, responsible for some two hundred dispersed Cistercians across the country, and focusing his personal attention especially on the needs of the elderly, the sick, and those in formation. Living mostly in Budapest, he posed as a quiet, poor member of

⁹ Csizmazia (1915–1999) would join the Cistercian monastery of Dallas in 1965, where he lived in the company of his former protégé and taught a variety of languages at the University of Dallas, with legendary skill, until his death.

the working class so that he might go from meeting to meeting undetected by the secret police. Although he was never an instructor of theology or a writer of books, his vigorous Christian intellect (and love of poetry) was closely intertwined with his heroic faith and priestly shepherding. One suggestive detail: he was known to wrap his original-language volumes of writers such as Bernard, Aquinas, Thérèse, or Claudel in brown paper so that he could read them on public transit with reduced fear of being noticed.

In 1951 'Sigmond accepted five young men as the inaugural members of an underground Cistercian novitiate program in Budapest; András was among them, receiving the religious name "Rókus" (Roch). Brother Roch lived in an apartment with a Catholic family and enrolled in a Budapest university's program in library sciences to avoid attracting attention. 'Sigmond conducted instruction during discreet urban meetings and occasional group retreats to private, rural locations. He focused the attention of his protégés on becoming strong in the naked core of monastic life, stripped of all outward security and splendor: daily meditation, spiritual reading, assistance at mass, private recitation of the divine office, a vigorous practice of poverty, careful attention to the instructions of the superior, courage and discretion in adverse circumstances. Fr. Roch later wrote that, although he originally had doubts about joining an order in which he would have to be a schoolmaster, after his first rural retreat as a Cistercian novice he became convinced that "God bestowed on me a pure and great grace to be educated by a true saint, Fr. Lóránt. I had to sober up from my romantic dreams of religious life and learn the 'little way' of St. Thérèse of Lisieux: a simple, down-to-earth way of love and trust. I knew this was real, this would lead to God."¹⁰

'Sigmond's spiritual fatherhood left a decisive mark on Roch (and on his other novices, the most widely known of whom are Blessed János Brenner and Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy).¹¹ At the core of this blessed and evangelizing generativity was his heroic way of life: "The way a Christian lives and acts, suffers and dies, bears witness to the reality that what he lives and dies for is more precious than his earthly life."¹² As a priest who loved the intellectual life, Fr. Lóránt also gifted his charges with an *understanding* of the Christian faith, teaching them insights into the Gospels, conversion, the meaning of monasticism, the thought of St. Bernard, and filial responsiveness to God's

¹⁰ Kereszty, "Autobiographical Notes."

¹¹ Denis Farkasfalvy, "New Cistercian Martyr: In Celebration of the Beatification of John Brenner Anastasius, O.Cist. on May 1, 2018," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2019): 99–108.

¹² Roch A. Kereszty, *Rekindle the Gift of God: A Handbook for Priestly Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2021), 61.

real providence. Indeed, at one point in a 2022 interview with Fr. Andrew Summerson entitled “Adventures of A Primary Care Theologian,” Fr. Roch attributed his *understanding of the understanding* of faith, which is to say his whole vision of theology as an outworking of Christian discipleship, to Fr. Lóránt’s early theological insight that, as Fr. Roch wrote in his own name elsewhere, the mission of teachers of Christianity is not simply to speak about God, but to allow the Spirit to open up “their subjectivity to be united in faith with the true and transcendent theologian, Christ within his church.”¹³

For Br. Roch, this period of clandestine Cistercian formation under Fr. Lóránt lasted until the Hungarian borders briefly opened during the ill-fated 1956 Hungarian revolution. ‘Sigmond told his bookish son: “If I thought you would be a good soldier I might tell you to stay and fight for our freedom, but since I don’t, you should leave and study theology and come back some day to rebuild.” Although ‘Sigmond’s protégé was never able to return to Hungary for anything longer than a vacation, writing quality theological literature in the language of this people group, made up of about as many people as the state of Ohio, remained a priority of his into the last year of his Texan life.

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This reflection has sought to communicate to theologians some loving insight about the ways that God led a member of their guild whose keyboard has now fallen silent. His life, in its own unrepeatable way, follows recognizable patterns of blessing and testing in Christ. Like him, we are all responsible for fashioning ourselves, but still more deeply, our selves are gifts from “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars,”¹⁴ who cultivates and summons each of us by confronting us with other influencing selves and events. Central among these selves is the form and model of all, Jesus Christ: “By assuming as his own a human nature, the eternal Son has become the transforming center of all history, and confronts every human being. For those who accept him in faith, the entire Christ event becomes transformative and therefore contemporaneous.”¹⁵ Expressed as it is in myriads upon myriads of ways, the Father’s love and providence in the Son, through the Spirit, is the key to the meaning of every human life, and especially of those he invites to speak and write with unusual directness about Jesus Christ himself. N.V.

¹³ Kereszty, “Towards the Renewal of Theology and the Theologian,” 289.

¹⁴ Dante, *Paradiso* 33.

¹⁵ Roch A. Kereszty, “Contemporaneity: The Mystery of Liturgical Time,” *Nova et Vetera* 18, no. 2 (2020): 505–19, at 519.