

Doctrine with Calmness and Clarity

The Catholic Review

Last week's Catholic Review related the return to the Church after many years of the best selling novelist Anne Rice – make that Anne O'Brien Rice (no relation)! Married to an atheist in her late teens and now 66, she described most of her adult life in terms of “despair, guilt and search for meaning and faith.” Best known for her New Orleans-based vampire novels, many of Rice's dark characters reflected her own sad years away from the faith and the light of Christ.

Her return to the Church (in 1998) is reflected in her two recent and spiritually rich novels, “Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt” and “Christ the Lord: The Road to Cana.” Though novels, they bring alive the culture in which Jesus led his early life and her next two works will seek to depict the Holy Land during the Lord's public life. It was her preparation for these books that helped her back to the Church. Through her research and reading, Rice came to understand not just about the culture of the day but a much deeper truth. Christians of today are interconnected with those throughout the last 2000 years because of the faith that has been passed down through the ages—and that the one constant that has endured is God. “When I got to the first century and began to study what was going on in the Roman world at the time, I began to realize that I saw a pattern that I could not explain, except that God was working in history,” she said.

Pope Benedict XVI touched upon the same principle in an address to ecumenical leaders during his visit to New York last month. The Pope referred to it as “diachronic koinonia—communion with the Church in every age,” and it applies to more than the fallen-away believer now seeking the spiritual nourishment and wholeness that can only be fed within the maternal embrace of the Church. Serious students of ecumenical dialogue cannot speak of an isolated theology, vacuum-packed in 2008. Rather, we are all called to recognize the depths of the spiritual ties we share, returning to the origins of our Christian teaching and practice. There we will meet Christ and be confronted with the community he left behind to continue his mission. That which took form as the early Church was composed of hierarchical,

Eucharistic-centered communities, with scripture-based moral teaching in strong support of marriage and family, respect for human life, and clear lines of demarcation between Christian and secular values. These characteristics were then and continue to be the sure sign of God's presence within the Church and have carried the Church for the two thousand years since her founding.

In two addresses while here, the Holy Father set out challenges for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

- Discussions among faith leaders should not settle for only the pursuit of mutual understanding and collaborative strategies to address society's needs;
- Differences should be addressed "with calmness and clarity" attempting to identify common values, then probing the ultimate foundation of these agreed upon values;
- The discovery of truth should be the common aim of those in dialogue: truth concerning the meaning of life, the origin and end of humanity, the reality of good and evil, etc.

Don't be intimidated by doctrine based on apostolic teaching emanating from Scripture and enlivened by the sacramental life of Christians, the Pope advised. And beware both of individual opinion in discerning the truth and of a secularism that accepts only scientifically verifiable truths while relegating religious truth to the sphere of merely private feelings. The determined search for truth must be the heart of the ecumenical and interfaith dialogue if it is ultimately to lead us to a deeper understanding of God who is all truth.

I am prompted to recall these observations of our Holy Father by a most impressive commencement ceremony last week at St. Mary's Seminary and University. Some twenty-one students, Protestant and Catholic, of the University's Ecumenical Institute received diplomas and degrees. I know that the Institute, celebrating its 40th anniversary, will be encouraged to continue on the path of true ecumenical dialogue as called for by our Holy Father, ever mindful of and obedient to Christ's Last Supper prayer - that all may be one. This call to unity and to truth guides the Church as it does each of her members, and, just as it did for Anne Rice, it will help

the Lord draw all of us ever closer to himself.