

Living the Canossian Charism in Contemporary Australia

When asked to share something about my experience as a younger Religious in contemporary Australia, I hesitated out of the competing fears of inauthenticity and a preservation of the ideal. I realise both fears are manifestations of the False Self. So, I sit and write now, and hold this tension in a space that seeks to simply tell my story situated in the context from which I find myself in this moment.

At Xavier Catholic College, an Aboriginal Catholic Community School in the Tiwi Islands, the students learn in both Tiwi cultural ways and standard subjects similar to that which you would find in an urban Catholic school. In a sense this dual educational experience reflects a broader picture, where these young people are dancing, sometimes elegantly, sometimes with uncertainty, between the convergence of cultural worldviews at play in their community. A phrase that often arises pertaining to this metaphoric dance is that of 'walking in both worlds'. I have the great privilege of teaching in this community as my current ministry and am learning to walk alongside these fantastic young people.

In a different way, I too feel at times as though I am navigating how to walk in both worlds – that of a vowed Canossian life, and of the cultural complexities of contemporary Australia. As a Canossian educator I strive to accompany young people with love and humility in imitation of the Crucified Christ, our foundational charism. I believe one's life of consecration is ever evolving in dialogue with the society in which they live, while remaining grounded in their particular charismatic norms.

Yet along the way, I am finding that the students impart to me new imaginings of what a Canossian educator concretely looks like; it is experienced as a symbiotic process of learning. There is some comfort in aligning this phenomenon with the desire of our foundress, St. Magdalene of Canossa, to respond to the 'signs of the times' – and the nature of the response becomes embodied and embedded in the every day. It is a dynamic process in which I find I am often thrust outside my comfort zone, in a space of unknowing and accompanied by the full spectrum of emotions that are part of life's story. Perhaps the dynamic nature of this ongoing learning is also an indication that, despite sometimes presenting as different worlds, the Spirit is alive and active, weaving my calling and ministry into oneness and fuller actualization of my life of consecration. On rare occasion this sense of oneness reveals itself to me, though often it does not, I am left needing to trust that God is working through it all.

The shape of my personal prayer and meditation also has shifted in response those I encounter. Canossians are to 'look and do likewise, according to the model' (that is, to contemplate the love of Christ Crucified and act on this love). In coming to sit with the challenges of the day, which sometimes can be overwhelming, there is the invitation to come to sit alongside the Crucified One present in that challenge. The call to live as both the apostle and contemplative is sometimes experienced as a tension, even as polar opposites, and there is a constant search to find the balance. Paradoxically, though, as I reflect now, I can see that the interconnection of the two indicates a unification of both dimensions of my Canossian life. It is only my preconceptions of what a unified and coherent Canossian life looks like that prevents me from recognizing Jesus. It is a bit like an ongoing Emmaus walk – Christ reveals himself again and again, walking with me on the road. The important thing is to keep walking - trusting, seeking, acting with an open heart.