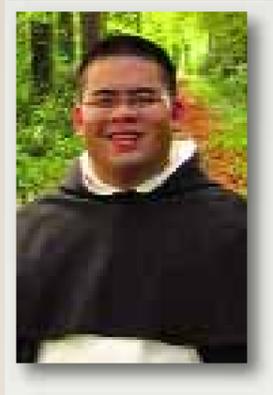


# A journey in to Religious Life

by Br. Lawrence Lew, O.P.



“If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). These words are apt for a reflection on religious life, for at the foundation of religious life is the longing for home.

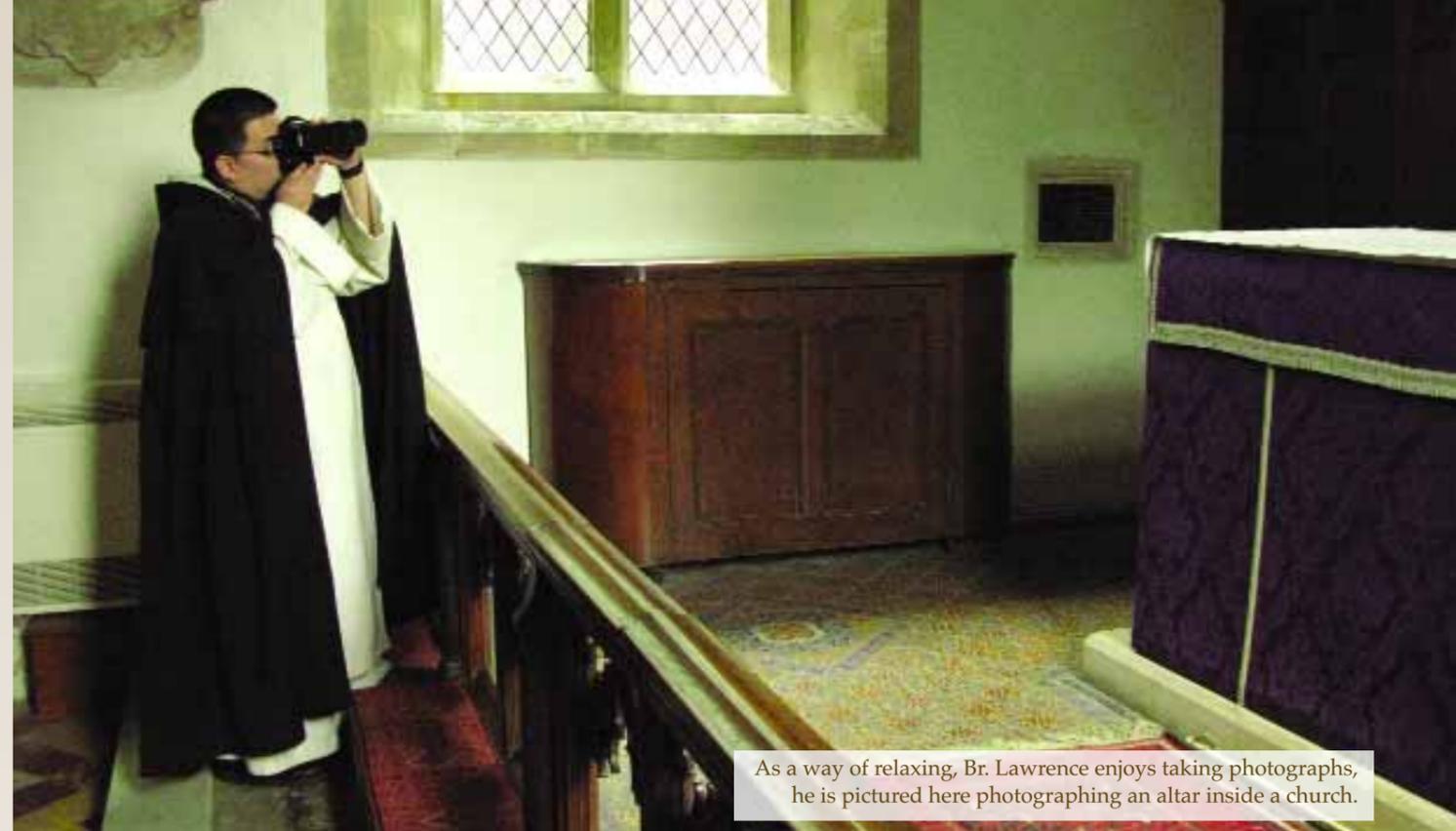
A home is not just a place in which one lives, but it is where one feels ‘at home’. There is a sense of ease, of belonging, and of being loved. So, we are able to love those with whom we live, despite any differences and difficulties. In my experience, discovering the gift of religious life and growing in it is a kind of home-coming. It begins with an awareness of God’s abiding love, and as one gradually learns to love oneself and to love God in return, one can truly give of oneself. As such, we respond to God’s graciousness with love, particularly by giving our whole selves entirely to his service. Living, studying, praying and preaching alongside others is formative, and so our Dominican life is likened to a school of virtue in which I can learn (albeit slowly and often, poorly) gradually to grow in God’s grace and to follow Jesus’ example of obedient service. Insofar as religious life schools one in virtue and enables one to grow in Christ-like charity, then, St Thomas Aquinas, O.P. called it a “state of perfection”.

Finding myself at home as a Dominican friar began in the first home God gave me: my family. I was born into a devout Protestant family, and they shared with me the gift of faith and an attentiveness to God’s word as well as a zeal for sharing it. However, it was only years later that I discovered the fullness of the Catholic faith when I was sent to a school run by LaSalle brothers in Singapore. There, I developed an interest in what Catholics believed and felt comfortable and supported in exploring my faith. In the course of my reading, and speaking with the

LaSalle brothers and my Catholic friends, the Holy Spirit opened my heart to God’s presence in the Church and I longed for the sacraments. At the age of 16, I was baptised, confirmed and received the Eucharist; through these sacraments, God himself made his home in me. Becoming a Catholic is a life-changing event, and it is a commitment that continues throughout one’s life, so that even “if we are faithless, [God] remains faithful for he cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13).

It is a sign to me of God’s faithfulness, that he has repeatedly reached out and found me when I have veered off-track. Through the ministry of his Church, through the inspiration of his living Word, and through the people I have met, God has actively reminded me of his love and of my need for him. He has strengthened me in hope and faith when I am weak and when I am despondent he is my refuge and sends me a friend’s comforting embrace. In such ways the Lord continually acts to recall us to himself when we stray, and to deepen our friendship with him so that we can truly be at home with him who has made his home in us.

After my graduation, I was admitted to seminary but I did not feel at ease there. Someone there once said to me that perhaps part of the problem was that I was trying to build a community, a home, where it was not to be found. I remember another occasion when I asked an Englishman who had found his vocation as a Benedictine monk in the U.S.A. how he knew he was in the right place and why he had to go so far away from his family. He replied: “You just know because you feel at home”. Some years later, I understood what he meant when I began exploring a Dominican vocation and spent some time in our priory in London. Seated around the dinner table with the Dominican friars then, I felt at ease and



As a way of relaxing, Br. Lawrence enjoys taking photographs, he is pictured here photographing an altar inside a church.

attracted to their way of life. I could see myself at home in their company, for here was a community who loved Christ and who were committed to being attentive to God’s Word and to preaching the truth of the Gospel “in season and out of season” (2 Timothy 4:2).

However, a wise Dominican, who is now our Prior Provincial, advised me to take some time away and just be myself rather than a law student, or a seminarian, or an aspiring friar. I spent a year in the Philippines working alongside the Dominicans in their parish in the slums of Manila. And there, I began to feel ‘at home’ with myself. For the Filipino people unconditionally opened their hearts and their homes to me, and I had time and space to think, to pray, and to reflect on God’s goodness to me, on who I was and on how I could serve him. Knowing God’s loving kindness, I was able to respond in love and to give of myself in the Dominican Volunteers International project. After that year abroad, I applied to join the Order of Preachers in England, even though my family live thousands of miles away, for I knew after much thought, prayer and advice that here, with the English Dominicans, is my home.

People, including my parents, sometimes ask me what motivated me to become a religious, and I can think of only one answer. Love. Only love for God, and the consequent passion to follow him and to keep his Word, can lead one to begin and to persevere in this ‘strange’ way of life. But religious life is only strange when seen from the perspective of this world because it is not at home in this world. In fact, it belongs to the world to come. As St Paul says: “our commonwealth is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20). So, we are mere pilgrims in this world, whose destination is heaven, where we can rest in our

Father’s house. Religious, at their best, are focused on this goal and so, the Church calls religious life an “eschatological sign” because it points to the perfection of the heavenly life with God, which is the ultimate home and destination of all who are baptised as Christians.

But we know that we are not perfect signs of this state of perfection! St Paul said, reflecting on his own frailty: “[The Lord] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Hence, each religious vocation preaches a sermon of God’s love and fidelity. God, in his faithfulness to sinful humanity, never abandons us. In the case of those who live a vowed life, he gives us grace to persevere and to follow Christ who was obedient, chaste and poor. And he accomplishes this in the face of our sinfulness and pride, our weakness and struggles, if we are open to the action of his Spirit. There will always be much to learn throughout my religious life – from the people I encounter, their experiences, challenges and questions, and it is here that I hope to be schooled in virtue and to grow in faith, hope and charity. However, no matter what trials and difficulties have come and whatever may come, I trust in the mercy of God and my brothers, for I have made my home with them, and God has made his home in me. May “he who began a good work... bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

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This well, inscribed with the words: "Hic natus Santus Dominicus" is in the crypt of the nuns' church in Caleruega, Spain. As it says, it is believed to mark the spot where St Dominic was born c.1170.

It is customary, when visiting Caleruega, to pray in this holy place and to drink from the well. I was privileged to spend over an hour alone in the crypt and prayed for my Dominican brothers and sisters around the world, sang the 'O lumen' antiphon to St Dominic, and drank from the well.