

Fr. Roch András Kereszty, O.Cist. Feb. 6, 1933 – Dec. 14, 2022

Fr. Roch Kereszty was born in Budapest, Hungary on Feb. 6, 1933 to Ödön Kereszty and Margit Csighy. He made first vows in the Cistercian Order on February 12, 1953, at the age of twenty, and he zealously persevered in his vocation for almost seventy years, until his death in the monastery of Our Lady of Dallas on December 14, 2022.

Fr. Roch's parents were not actively religious people, but they provided him a very loving childhood that he remembered as a kind of paradise. His mother was a Biology teacher and early on taught Fr. Roch a love of plants and animals that endured throughout his life. She often moved the family to new homes that were closer to wooded areas, and she insisted that the young Fr. Roch spend almost half of every day outdoors. Fr. Roch's father was much older than his mother, who was his second wife. He was fifty years old when Fr. Roch was born, and, although he had a hard time coming up with work later in life, he had been a highly decorated hussar (light cavalry) officer on the Russian front in the First World War. He imparted a love for physical fitness and activity and the discipline to overcome fears, and he charmed his little son with heroic tales of war and with pride in the historic sites of Budapest.

Fr. Roch remembered a first moment of religious formation, when his beloved nanny Erzsébet Kosztolánci, whom they called Bibi, led him into a Catholic church and showed him the tabernacle, saying, "Little Jesus is there!" This nanny eventually became a nun. Fr. Roch also attributed great importance to a saintly woman, Hermin Kápolnásy, who taught religion at the special "alternative" elementary school he attended that fostered the inner lives of its students and promoted communal learning rather than strict regimentation. Fr. Roch believed that if he ever merited to see Christ face-to-face in heaven, the Lord's face would somehow resemble the faces of these holy women who, in this life, first showed him the Eucharist and introduced him to the mysteries of the faith.



Because it was known for academic excellence, Fr. Roch was sent to the Cistercian school of St. Imre in Budapest in 1943, where his Form Master was the brilliant Fr. Placid. When German forces occupied the city in March 1944, and the Allies began their bombardment, Fr. Roch could continue his education because of Fr. Placid's radical devotion to his task. In fact, Fr. Placid would run from bunker to bunker, or assemble small groups of students from various shelters, to continue classes, and after the Communist state's seizure of the schools would offer additional lessons to compensate for the weakness of many of the official teachers. In the time after the war, it was Fr. Placid who recognized a change in Fr. Roch's spiritual life and guided him toward Cistercian life. The change began when Fr. Roch was recovering from scarlet fever in a hospital and his favorite teacher, Fr. George Ferenczy, gave him a copy of Franz Werfel's novel, *Hearken Unto the Voice*, a fictional account of the life of the

Prophet Jeremiah. Fr. Roch was captivated by this description of the prophet, and began to consider how the reality of God might transform an individual's life. He even began praying at night with his arms outstretched while all others slept in the dark hospital ward. When he recovered, he began going to daily mass, reading theology and philosophy, trying frequent meditation, and by the age of 14 had settled on the idea that he was called to be a priest. Fr. Placid noticed this change and invited Fr. Roch for a conversation. Fr. Roch was convinced that he should be a Jesuit, because he was interested in the advanced scholarly pursuits and severe spiritual formation of that Order more than in secondary-school teaching with the Cistercians. But Fr.

Placid did not give up, and introduced Fr. Roch to Fr. Lawrence (Lóránt). Out of real interest but also out of what he called "inertia" about applying to other Orders, Fr. Roch applied to enter Zirc as a postulant in 1951. He was quickly surprised by the great grace God had given him: to be introduced to monastic life by a man who was truly a saint. Since the monastery was closed and the abbot imprisoned, the program of formation took place in secret, often even in the woods. Fr. Lawrence taught them how

to rely not on external structures, which were gone, but on essential practices of meditation and reading, of Mass and recitation of the office, of keeping track of expenditures and saving as much as possible for the communal needs. Fr. Lawrence, and reading the life of St. Therese of Lisieux, transformed what Fr. Roch called the "Romantic narcissism" of his notion of becoming a prophet like Jeremiah, into a humbler path to God, not a game but a dying and rising to new life.

During this time Fr. Roch was enrolled at the university to study library science, not because it especially interested him but because it was ideologically neutral and a good cover for his spiritual

formation – while else would a young man be carrying around so many books? Fr. Roch finished his degree, and a one-year practicum at a country library, in 1956, and was promptly drafted into the obligatory ROTC program. Thus, he was stationed on a military base in Vaskút near Baja when the uprising of that year toppled Communist control of the country. He liked to tell the dramatic story of the moment when his unit refused to fire on the crowd of revolutionaries who came to appeal to them for help, but instead joined the side of the Revolution. Fr. Roch's unit was then ordered back to Budapest by the new government, to help maintain order and hunt down members of the secret police. He was there when it

was announced the Russians were coming to attack the country, and Fr. Roch was in a quandary – he did not want to fight, but be a monk. He tried briefly to enter medical service, but after he could not manage to find a post, he went to Fr. Lawrence and asked what to do. Fr. Lawrence said, "If I thought you would be a good soldier, I would ask you to fight," but wisely sent Fr. Roch home instead.

In November of that year, Fr. Lawrence approached Fr. Roch to tell him that the border with Austria was open and that he should leave now

to go to Rome to study theology. (Fr. Lawrence had to go himself to convince Fr. Roch's mother to let him leave.) At that time, Fr. Lawrence told Fr. Roch that he should return to Hungary afterward if possible, or go to another monastery in Europe, but not go to America, where other Hungarians of Zirc had recently established a new monastery. Thus Fr. Roch left Hungary for Vienna, and after a wonderful welcome at Heiligenkreuz, made his way to Rome, where he arrived on December 7, 1956. He had left a country being rolled over by Soviet tanks for the comfortable auditorium where he could attend the lucid lectures of great theologians in those years leading up to the Second Vatican Council. But in addition to the



many marvels and opportunities afforded him by the Eternal City, Fr. Roch also faced a great many trials. First and foremost, the Generalate was a community of migrants, with superiors but without the kind of true spiritual father that he had known in Fr. Lawrence. Then, in 1958–59, after a schoolmate and novice-mate had succumbed to paranoid schizophrenia and been sent back home, Fr. Roch began to develop significant anxieties, sleeping less and less and obsessing over his own mental health and the feasibility of a vocation. He, like the other Hungarians, was submitted to extensive psychological testing to establish their viability for ordination in light of their traumatic past. The doctor was very unsure about Fr. Roch, and in addition to that Fr. Roch's mother seemed to have become almost suicidal about the idea of his becoming a Cistercian and not staying with her in her old age. In 1959 Fr. Roch's temporary vows expired, and even after a one-year extension the problems with his mother had not been resolved. Then he had to exchange his Cistercian habit for a simple black cassock – “I became literally the black sheep of the community” – and preparations were made for him to leave the Order and join the archdiocese of Vienna. But on the very day when he was planning to depart the Generalate, a letter arrived from Fr. Lawrence, who had been working to convince Fr. Roch's mother, saying all had been resolved. A great burden was lifted from Fr. Roch's soul, and with help from the Procurator General, he was joyfully received back into the Order to make his solemn vows without repeating his novitiate and temporary vows. Fr. Roch came to see that God was instructing him through this period of suffering and confusion, teaching him to accept the gift of religious life and priesthood from the hands of God rather than as something he could lay claim to on his own.

After these many trials, Fr. Roch made his solemn vows at the Abbey of Lilienfeld on September 18, 1960, and was ordained a priest on October 2 in the private chapel of the episcopal palace in Sankt Pölten. He returned to Rome for a few more years of happy life studying St. Bernard and writing about Wisdom in his theology, time during which he, along with other students, could witness the opening of the Second Vatican Council. He often recalled his experience, comparing his earlier vision of the ethereal

Pius XII being carried on the portable throne to his witnessing of the heavy-set John XXIII's kneeling down to recite the Creeds of the Church before all the world's bishops, who then responded to him. Fr. Roch finished his dissertation in late spring of 1962 – or rather, he finished all but the conclusion, which Fr. Denis typed directly into the final copy, using Fr. Roch's outline, so that he could turn in his dissertation in time to join the others on a trip to Sicily.

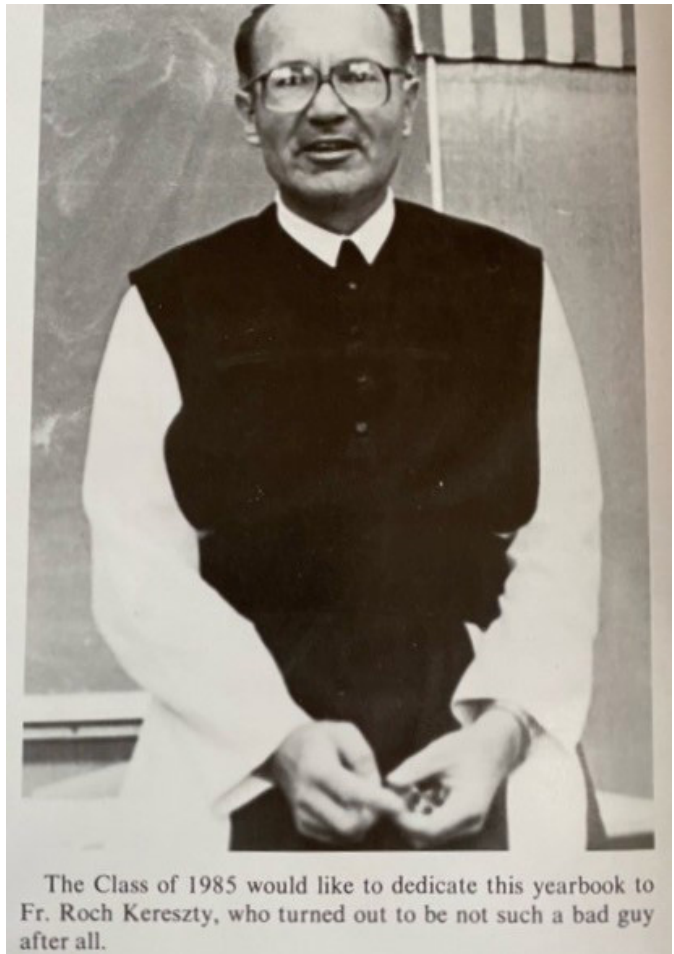
As his period of studies approached its end, Fr. Roch along with the other Hungarian students in Rome faced a dilemma: their beloved Fr. Lawrence had told them not to go to America but to return to Hungary or at least remain in Europe, but now that they were outside of Hungary their superior was Prior Anselm of Dallas, and when he visited them in Rome he insisted that he truly needed all of them in Dallas. Although Fr. Roch worried that Texas was just a vast dry prairie, the wildest and least cultured place on the continent, and could not imagine himself adapting, he dutifully arrived at Love Field on May 1, 1963, to start a new life at the age of 30. It was a difficult situation: the community of refugees was naturally divided by age between those who had been monks of Zirc before its closure and those like Fr. Roch (“The Romans”) who joined after the monastery had been closed; and the community was divided between its two demanding projects, the foundation of its own school and the opening of the University of Dallas. In addition, they barely even had a monastery building and, in the immediate aftermath of the Council, faced many questions about how to structure their lives. Although Fr. Roch never became a superior in the monastery, he gradually overcame his misgivings about this new home, and it is undoubtedly due in significant part to his lifelong dedication and heroic zeal that the community came to flourish as it did.

In 1963 Fr. Roch began his lifelong work of teaching theology, first at the University of Dallas, where he was also briefly chaplain, and from 1967 onward also at the Cistercian Preparatory School. He taught full-time at UD until 1970, when he took over as Form Master at Cistercian, but he continued teaching one course each semester at UD until his retirement in 2019. Fr. Roch was delighted to teach Theology, “almost drunk with excitement,”

he would say, because he was able to throw out the old neo-scholastic books and formulate a new approach based on what he had learned: renewal of theology through a proper return to the sources, to Scripture, Tradition, and the Liturgy, in a way that responds to the actual existential questions of people today. Throughout his career, Fr. Roch produced a series of textbooks to fill whatever gaps he perceived. With important works on Christology, on the Eucharist, on spiritual life, on the nature of the Church, on the priestly life, on Christianity's understanding of itself in light of other religions, and with other writings and efforts, he established himself as one of the preeminent Catholic theologians of his time. Inspired by his model, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Fr. Roch aimed to speak of theology in a stalwartly orthodox but also spiritually open way, in which the mysteries of the Christian faith were not abstract ideals but true experiences and encounters with the Person of Jesus Christ calling the soul to life. As he writes in the introduction to his Christology volume: "Theology... is not a mere mental construct based on a number of dogmatic definitions (even less on consensus statements of biblical scholars) but intellectual reflection on the reality of the crucified and risen Christ who lives in his Church and, through the Holy Spirit, he himself guides the Church's understanding of his mystery."

Over his long career, Fr. Roch left a profound impression on many students not only intellectually, but personally. His students eventually began to perceive that, behind his rough exterior – the imposing presence, the deep, loud monotone of his voice (made all the weirder when he had to use a microphone box to amplify it), the face that turned to a scowl whenever he tried to smile – was a man deeply in love with all that was good in those around him, and whose hopes for you always exceeded your own, which is why he could freely be so tough on you. He could also be unintentionally hilarious in his attempts to speak at young people's level, creating curious mixes of technical language and idiomatic speech with his greeting, "Hey, sir," or his transitional "So then, really," and with his creation of a generic student with the improbable name of "Mürphy." When he would reprimand his younger students, he would not simply tell them, "Stop doing that!" but would exclaim, "You don't!" as if his momentary irritation somehow also reflected the categorical imperative. By the time he was serving for Form Master for the Class of 2001 – after '73, '78, '85, and '93 – he had so overcome his earlier obstacles as a teacher that the young men would regularly greet him by crying out, "Let's give it up for Fr. Roch!" and loudly cheer and applaud, as if he were stepping onto the stage of an arena tour. He saw vividly in his own life how God rewards with hundred-fold blessings those who give up everything to follow him.

Fr. Roch never viewed his profession as a "career"; his intellectual life and scholastic work were always also part of his greater mission to draw all God's children back to their loving Father. He encouraged his students to be strong, independent, generous in their love for each other, striving for excellence but in charity, not ganging up on people; he wanted you to overcome doubts not by passively receiving information but



by real wrestling, including occasional physical wrestling at class outings. He was not afraid to present us with the highest, even with absurd, ideals. Fr. Roch lived out St. Paul's words, "With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us" (1 Thess 2:8). To countless people – children, students, alumni, married couples, priests, and friends of all faiths and none – Fr. Roch became an invaluable and beloved spiritual guide and friend. He was never a passive listener, but demanded to know exactly what you were doing with your life, and would always tell you what he thought of it. When a former student would show up after years away, he would press his fist against your chest and say, "You scoundrel! Where have you been?" and promptly open his heart to all the deepest joys and sorrows of his visitor. He always required of himself that, as best he could, he be open to a new understanding of you, and of himself, and of the reality you were approaching together. He knew that teaching alone is never enough; rather it is by passionate insistence and loving devotion to others that we can help them on the path to God.

In the monastery, Fr. Roch served for a long time as Novice Master, including for the new generation of monks who began to enter after the year 2000, among them several of his own former students. He knew how much he had gained from the Cistercian Order and his fellow monks, and he was eager not to squander any of God's gifts. He loved knowing what was going on in the lives of the monks, and when he was confined to a wheelchair he would often park it right in the doorway so that no monks could get around with him without his having a chance to confront them about their lives and the events of the day.

Fr. Roch lived out one of those puzzling expressions of St. Bernard which he so loved reminding his students could only be appreciated in the original language: "Causa diligendi Deum, Deus est; modus, sine modo diligere" – "The reason to love God is God himself; the measure in which to love him, is to love him without measure." In his zeal for souls Fr. Roch strove to love without measure and to give himself fully, because he believed that only the free gift of love could truly open the human soul to itself, to others, and back to God. With the unflagging zeal of a true apostle, he handed on what he himself had heard and experienced.

In his last weeks, Fr. Roch was confined to bed, but was surrounded by a stream of visitors young and old. Even when he could no longer speak, he would look into your eyes and begin mouthing words. He died peacefully on Dec. 14, right after the Cistercian students finished their first day of final exams, and on the eve of the feast day of Bl. Janos Brenner, a Hungarian Cistercian martyr murdered in 1957, to the promotion of whose cause Fr. Roch was especially dedicated.

