

1. Could you please introduce yourself briefly to the readers?

Fr. Peter: I am Fr. Peter Verhalen and I am the abbot of Our Lady in Dallas. I graduated from our prep school in Dallas in 1973. I went to college for two years and then I decided to enter the monastery in 1975 and I have been there since. I taught in our school: English, Latin and Theology.

Fr. Paul: I am Fr. Paul McCormick, the headmaster of Cistercian Preparatory School in Dallas. I came to the monastery in 1992. I was ordained in '97 and began to work in the school that year. I have been what we call a *form-master* (very similar to the head of the class [osztályfőnök]) two cycles, so sixteen years. And I have been headmaster for thirteen years now.

2. How have you arrived at your vocation as a friar? What led you specifically to the Cistercian order?

Fr. Peter: I suspect two things ultimately lead me to the monastery. One: I went to the school, I became familiar with the monks and I very much admired several monks who taught me... for a couple things. One thing I admired very much was the generosity of their lives. I understood, even as a little boy, that they were refugees and have left their country behind. I understood as a little boy that they had survived the 1956 revolution and they were very generous in giving their lives in spite of all of that loss and suffering... and still giving their lives away. That one thing impressed me very much, that they were very generous in giving their lives to Christ.

The Second thing that very much impressed me was that I understood that my teachers at Cistercian were there, because they wanted to serve boys. I understood that they could have had more impressive jobs. Fr. Dennis or Fr. Rock [3:26] could have taught theology in Rome, but they chose to be in Dallas, teaching little boys. And that, again, generosity impressed me. But they also—and this is the second thing—joined together reason and faith. So Fr. Dennis taught math, he taught me Algebra. And I knew that here was a man who gave his life completely to Christ, and he saw no conflict between that (the experience of faith) and the experience of being very rigorous and logical in mathematics. So that was impressive. So that was one side.

The other side was just religious experience. I had the feeling... I knew from several experiences that Jesus wants a relationship with me. I had that experience when I was seventeen and again in college, when I was 19-20.

Fr. Paul: My story is very similar to Fr. Abbot Peter's, but in the reverse order. I am not from Dallas, I'm from New Houston, very far away. In the fifth grade, as a ten years old boy, I had already discerned a desire to become a priest. I was always looking for confirmation that that desire was from God, but I was always open to it and enjoyed going to the masses and Bible studies. I just enjoyed living the faith. To go to university, I went to Dallas. The University of Dallas was founded by the

Hungarians (with Dominicans and others). And there for the first time, I discovered monasticism. So in my mind, to be the priest is to live in the parish and to administer the sacraments. I did not know you could live in a community, I did not know you could teach. And I know my experience with my own parish priest, I thought that he was a little bit lonely and maybe a little bit intellectually frustrated. So when I met the Cistercian community, it appealed to me. And then—as Fr. Peter, so also with me—you get to meet these individual members of the community and they were just very impressive men, for the very reasons Fr. Peter suggested. I had the same impression they were heroic and that they were so talented and so larger than life. And so I felt like I could grow as a person and as a priest and in my own faith by living amongst them and learning from them.

3. What is your message to Hungarian Cistercian students who are discerning their vocation?

Me: How many novices do you have currently?

Fr. Peter: Ten. (chuckles) But who's counting?

Fr. Peter: In your school, Szent Imre, my advice would be to talk to [Perczel] Tamás. I would love for you all, so students of Szent Imre, or students of Budapest or Hungary, to have a Cistercian monk to whom they could speak about a vocation and specifically about a cistercian vocation. And perhaps one can do that now by Zoom or by Skype. Perhaps in the near future there would be a Cistercian monk from Dallas, who might be interested in living here for a period of time, who could help the young man or the young woman discern.

Fr. Paul: And I would echo everything that Fr. Peter said. Now the only thing I might add is that when I joined the monastery in 1992, it was a time in which, despite the wonderful men and wonderful priests and ministry, there were very few vocations... very very few. And there was a sense at the time, in '92, that the community may not survive. But I wasn't dissuaded by that, and subsequent to me, nor were others. No doubt that if one can discern a vocation, God will provide. The people or the support that you need to find the community that can help you prosper in that vocation and develop that vocation. And I think Fr. Peter gave some concrete examples of how we could be available as Cistercians.

Fr. Peter: So Fr. Nevard. He is a junior monk, he's made temporary profession. And he's going to the Sapientia and finishing up his theology. I don't know exactly the timeline, but I think that he would be ready for ordination in two years, so he is almost finished with theology. So he would be one to talk with here.

4. The Cistercian community of Dallas is clearly blooming...What is the secret to your success?

Fr. Peter: I was just at a meeting for the Benedictine abbots in America and the person leading the meeting asked for all of those abbots present, who have more than five men in formation, to raise their hands. And there were three hands that went up. Dallas, plus two Benedictine abbeys. Then, he asked each of those abbots: “What’s your secret?” It was very interesting. There were things each of them said in their own way. One was community: they felt that they had a strong community, that the monks—even though there were always little conflicts—liked each other, worked together and were trying to take care of each other as together they were trying to come closer to Christ. So one thing is community and I think that’s happened in Dallas. By God’s grace, the whole monastery—we have a twenty-two year old young man, and we have ninety-three year old men—is together, which is very cool.

The second I think is what I call “meaningful work,” maybe especially for men. The monks in Dallas take a lot of responsibility. So Fr. Paul said he was a form-master twice. He was responsible for the growth of the young men, and so if they were struggling with mom and dad, if they were struggling with classmates, if they were struggling with Algebra, he was there to help them. And we all know how dangerous it can be if a young boy or girl feels all alone and the pressure is coming down on the kid. So I think people see how our job in Dallas is really important.

And then I think a third thing is just the prayer life. We have our faults, we have our weaknesses, but I think that the monks really do try to pray to Christ and to come closer to Christ through the divine office and through the mass. Everybody is really there. I mean there’s somebody one day and somebody has to be out the other day, but by en large everybody attends the divine office, everybody attends the mass in the morning. So there’s three things: community, serious work and prayer together. And we have a very good cook. (chuckles) **Me:** That helps :D

Fr. Paul: I obviously agree with everything that Fr. Peter. With so many middle-aged, forty and younger monks, when a young person comes to explore the possibility of vocation, it’s much easier for them to give it a chance. But in the early years, in ‘92, ‘93 and ‘94 to 2004, we tried different things, but no fruit [came] until—I think—two things [happened]. One thing is that the abbot at the time, I think, started the adoration. As a community, we would pray every day for vocations. And the second... I’ll let you tell the story (Fr. Peter), because you can tell it better than I... Fr. Dennis’ prayer in front of the grave of Fr. Lóránt.

Fr. Peter: So Fr. Lawrence was the previous abbot. He did start adoration and also rosary: so we were praying the rosary. It was voluntary, but there were people praying the rosary for vocations every day. But he also began praying to Blessed John Brenner and to Fr. Lóránt Zsigmond. He was the novice master for Fr. Dennis in the underground novitiate (in Zirc). Thanks to the intercession of the saints, the abbey received fifteen vocations in five years. It was a miracle. Eleven of those vocations are still with us, so they are running the school now. I think it was the intercession of Fr. Lóránt and Blessed János.

Fr. Paul: And he [Fr. Dennis] made that prayer here, when he made a pilgrimage to Zirc to visit the gravesite. As I recall, he prayed to receive five vocations in ten years... I think Fr. Lóránt misunderstood, because we got ten vocation in five years.

But once you have those—and they stayed and lived their lives authentically—now young people come and they say “Ah, I could do this.”

5. How should we go about the ‘new evangelization’ encouraged by Saint Pope John Paul II.?

Fr. Paul: I would say start small. It’s hard to evangelize the country. Evangelize your friends! Evangelize your classmates, your teammates, your family members. And do so with humility, generosity and understanding... with authenticity. If you have a relationship with Christ and you find peace and joy and meaning, even in suffering and disappointment and stress, then people will ask you. You don’t have to go to them, they will come to you: “Why?” or “You are very talented, educated... you could be a great engineer. Now why would you even think about a vocation?” and you have to explain to them who Christ is, and who He is for you. And I think that’s how you begin to evangelize.

Now with social media, I don’t know (chuckles). That could help. (**Fr. Peter:** (chuckles) Right. Put it up! Yeah.)

But I think that’s how it works in the United States. As Fr. Peter might say, there are pockets of young people and old people, and women and men, that come together and support each other in living the faith authentically, and others hear about that and are “jealous” or curious. And I think that’s how that works.

And I do wonder, you know, sometimes. It’s not a numbers game, that “Everybody was Catholic.” Well, maybe they were all baptized, but did they all have a personal relationship with Christ?

Me: Well that’s actually what’s happening in Hungary right now. According to the data, a very high percentage of the country is Catholic, but it doesn’t seem to be that way. We have a predominantly Christian culture, and we have a lot of nominal Christians. How do we evangelize them?

Fr. Peter: I think Fr. Paul’s right. One of the things that one of the headmasters—I don’t remember who it was, maybe from Pécs, or it might have been Mr. Barlay—said that it was his hope for his school that it would slowly evangelize and Christianize the culture. In little ways... to teach Hungarian literature in such a way... you don’t need to talk about Jesus Christ, but you can talk about the experience of being alienated, or the experience of guilt, or sin, or the experience of joy and of the transcendent, and the experience of wanting to share that. And I think that’s really important. And then to introduce and talk about explicitly Christian authors, who are Nobel laureates. For example Gertrud von Le Fort (she was nominated for the Nobel prize)—she wrote a great trilogy about Rome in the 1920s—or Sigrid Undset—she

has a beautiful novel about Catherine of Sienna, but she also has this long trilogy about Kristin Lavransdatter.

In any case, to do what you will. So to be a student or to be a teacher, or to be a doctor or lawyer in an explicitly Christian way. I mean you don't need to preach Christ, but you need to serve your clients, if you're a doctor, and realize that they are more than just a body to be fixed.

Fr. Paul: I remember... I studied in Rome with a class of missionaries. Everybody in the class spoke English, but they were from all over the world: from South Africa, England, you name it. And the teacher said that he was sent to India to evangelize in India. And he would go to a village with all the Hindus and would not say anything about Christ. He would just look for the guy with a flat tire and try to help... look for the guy who needed help in the garden... And before long, they asked him "Why are you here?" He said "I'm here to love you." They asked "Why would you care about us?" —**Fr. Peter:** That's mother Theresa of Calcutta.— And he made a big difference in India.

6. During your visit, what stood out to you about Hungary and about our school community?

Fr. Peter: I was very impressed. On a very superficial level: there seemed to be so many talented, so many happy boys and girls in the school. And you probably know that you can enter somebody's home and very quickly sense if it's a happy, healthy family, or if it's really tense. And you can enter a school and very quickly get a feeling for the success of the school... that the faculty are trying to do their best to teach their subject, to take care of the boys and girls. That was beautiful.

The other thing that struck me, and I know it struck Fr. Paul, was seeing the Ember group [Parázs csoport]. And what I liked there very much, was the puzzle... that when you go in there to say a little prayer, you can put a piece in the puzzle and so you're schoolmates know "Oh, I'm not alone. My classmates and schoolmates are also praying." It's very cool, I was very impressed.

Fr. Paul: And how was it different, than last time?

Fr. Peter: This is subjective, but I felt there's so much more sense of love... I felt that things are happening in your school. I felt that this is one of the pockets that I see in America in different places. I felt that in your school. There's a little pocket, and that's because of Mr. Barlay, because of the teachers, because of the students. It was inspiring. It was imply inspiring. And that's more so now... I've visited two or three times in the past.

Fr. Paul: The first impression I had is just how big it is. (chuckles) Our school is 360 kids, very small: pretty much one story, or two storeys and only boys. You have 900 students. So that was the first thing, it was big. But as Fr. Peter mentioned, as you, András and Izsák took us around, everywhere we went, people were so friendly...

everywhere we went. And also, watching the kids being so engaged in their work... We went past them and they were working hard. So it's clearly a school with academic excellence. But with all the stress that comes with pursuing academic excellence, there was happiness. And we walk in to visit the teachers and they sing us a song (Fr. Peter chuckles). You know, they were clearly very happy to see us, to share that joy. I think that the Dallas teachers would never [do that].

And Fr. Peter mentioned the Embers, which I think is a beautiful [initiative]. I was most impressed that the young people came in and we had to finish so that the older students could begin to work with the young people... taking care, sharing their faith and encouraging them. I thought that was just huge and wonderful.

7. Can you tell us about how the prep school works? What makes it unique?

Fr. Paul: I think that we're very spoiled in a sense that we have twenty monks working in the school and some teach math, some science, some history, some do PE and sports. And so what I think makes our school unique in the United States and maybe throughout the world, is that when a young person gets to know the Cistercian monk, there is no "This is what a monk is." There's a lot of diversity. Different personalities, different likes and dislikes, different interests and talents. And the young people can discern that you don't have to be "this" to be a happy, successful Cistercian monk. You can be yourself. And it's very interesting that of these monks that are teaching and working in the school, so many are alumni. So just like in your school, so many alumni come back to teach. We have alumni, who come back to teach, and some alumni who come back become monks. That makes us very unique and very special.

Fr. Peter: The other thing is very obvious. The school is right next to the abbey and part of the abbey is a beautiful church. The boys come over to the abbey at least once a week for mass. Each class has its own mass once a week. Something that I think is also very valuable—and that's why we will remain small—is that there is one form per grade level. (So, as I understand, you have four at Szent Imre.) They are broken into two sections, but they think of themselves as a single form. They never say "I belong to 3A," they say "I belong to the third form." We have one man as the form-master for all of those forty boys and I think that's also beautiful. It's enough boys for there to be a great diversity within the classrooms: so religious diversity, racial diversity, socio-economic diversity. But it's also few enough for one form-master really to get to know and to take care of each of those kids.

Fr. Paul: And like your school, we are blessed with wonderful lay men and women. Men and women who have the cistercian charism and who are experts in their field... math or science or art. And we could not be who we are without these wonderful men and women who have given their lives to their vocation: to form and shape these young people.

And the last thing, that I would add, that I think makes us unique—and that's our inheritance from Zirc and from Budapest—is that like you, we have a very high expectation for academic excellence and the autonomy of reason. So as the Cistercian, you don't just teach the Bible, but you understand Calculus and you understand Physics... And you find God, without even mentioning Jesus, in your love for math, in your love for history, literature. If you do it rightly, it should all lead you to beauty and truth and so I think for our kids and for you here, it's not like faith is opposed to reason. But without even thinking too hard about it, you just breathe it in that truth is one, God is one. I think our kids are spoiled in that.

Thank you so much for the interview! And for your visit!!