



Sherry Castello photo

An interview with Gordon Cosby

Co-founder of The Church of the Saviour

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*Pictured above is Christ House,
which provides residential medical
care for homeless men and
women. It is one of the ministries
of The Church of the Saviour.*

Just before his 90th birthday, the innovative pastor and reformer, Gordon Cosby, shared a meal with a group of Baylor social work and seminary students at The Potter’s House in Washington, D.C. Potter’s House is the bookstore and café that serves as the outpost for more than 20 other ministries and nine D.C.-area fellowships in the tradition of The Church of the Saviour. Gordon and Mary Cosby, who founded the church in 1946, continue to live out the call that first led to the creation of this missional church.

Gordon remains steadfast today in the belief that our vocation, our journey outward, is deeply tied to our journey inward. He shared some thoughts with us over that lunch and several of our students joined in the conversation.

For years to come, the gift of this conversation with Gordon will be an influence on the journeys of the servant leaders who attended that day. We hope it has a similar influence in preparing you for the journey inward and the journey outward. —Jon Singletary, editor

Q: Many of us are new to the tradition of The Church of the Saviour and its focus on understanding our identity and vocation as Christians. Tell us what this discernment process means for the churches and ministries that have come out of this tradition.

A: We started the COTS in 1946 and officially came into being in 1947. We’ve been around for 60 years, but we officially went out of existence in 1994 because we thought we ought to exist in new forms and not the old

forms, and that if we wanted to live out our call in the old forms, we wouldn't be able to do it.

We work on the principle that living out God's call means that our forms are always open to change. Groups are always changing, so when people ask me about the COTS, I ask them, "Which one?" If someone asked you about Baylor University, I think you'd have to ask which one because there are different Bayers in different periods of history – each living its essence but in different forms.

It is important to make a distinction between the essence of an institution, what makes it what it is, and the forms of that institution. What is the essence of the institution or the church with which you are working? And then, what are the wineskins through which you channel who you are to the world, to give yourselves to the world?

It is very difficult to talk about the essence, the spirit of anything. If people ask me what I do, I ask them if they have a week or two to talk about it. If anybody dares ask me who I am, I have to start pondering. You all can tell me what you do and how busy you are, and what you are studying, and all the rest, but tell me now who you really are? Beneath the doing and beneath the knowing, what is there? What is your essence? What is your being? This is the most important thing to talk about. We need to make this distinction between being and doing.

You are all very young, so you have a lot of doing out ahead of you. You are also very smart, and this culture is addicted to knowing and to doing, so we have a hard time getting to the being because everybody wants to know and do more. We want to read the next book, get the next degree, but that is not what is most needed.

I was a chaplain in the Second World War, dealing with Hitler's Germany. This was the most educated nation in the world that produced Hitler's culture. Today, we are an educated nation, but ... our city is tragic. One-third of our children live in poverty. There are 3,800 people over in the city jail. Our educational system is among the worst in the world. Here is a nation, an educated nation, yet

when you look at life in our cities, it is tragic.

Q: When I hear you talk about our knowing who we are, about our being, I think of your image of the journey inward. Is this what you are talking about?

A: The journey inward is a journey into knowing who we are, who we really are, and who we are intended to be because our Christian faith says we are made in God's image. Therefore, built into us is God's own being, God's own image. The question is whether we are going to become who we are intended to become in the few years that we may have.

Do we, in this period of time, cling to being? We talk so much about what we do, what our job is, or how impressive our job has been, about how much credence people give to what we have done, our career. But not so much is said about who we are. And that is a much more basic question than what we do.

The inner journey is to help us work with who we are. We all have different ways of working with these things, but we have to work with it.

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Q: (from a student): In thinking about who we are, I think about our wealth and the poverty of people all around us. What is our responsibility to people who live in poverty, who suffer in our culture from injustice?

A: It's important to understand what is happening, to know the situations facing our communities. ... We want to care about the people Jesus cared about, the least of these, and give them a chance. Say we are Christians, and Jesus taught us to pray that God would bring to earth that which is in heaven. What do we want to see when we claim this as a city of love based on what God is doing? What would it look like if the Kingdom comes on earth as in heaven?

Before I go to a church in another city, I have a friend who can find for me on the computer information on the needs of that city. I go down and too often I know more about that city from 5 minutes online than the ministers who live in that city. I'll

ask about the housing situation, and the ministers will say, ‘We don’t know about our housing situation.’ I say, ‘Here’s a little information.’ The same is true for employment, education, and so on.

I feel that we have to get specific on what is and what, by faith, we want to be. And then we must work with our inner selves to decide whether or not we are going to claim what God says God wants to do based on who we are.

We have to get serious about that prayer we pray weekly and sometimes two to three times a day: ‘Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ We don’t even have any idea what it would look like for God to answer our prayers. God wants us to be co-creators with Him or Her. God would like us to know who we are so that we can better know what we are to do with God.

God would like us to have knowledge, but we have to go beneath the knowledge. What does our faith say is possible? Are we going to claim it? Is Washington going to be a city of love? Are we going to care for all of its people, which is what we mean by ‘city of love?’ Are we going to claim the city for God? Really? Is this the case with your city? What does God want there? This seems to be what your School of Social Work ought to be all about.

Q: We are trying to develop an intentional focus on vocation at the school. We have spent more time recently reflecting on who God wants us to be and then what that would mean to live out what God wants us to do. How do these journeys relate to your focus on discerning vocation?

A: Once you get ahold of what you are intended to be, you ask, ‘What is the appropriate doing for that being?’ What were you intended to be in each period of life, and what are you to do next? What I am intended to be is different now and has been different at every stage of life.

I just marvel at who is sitting around this table. I really do. But I don’t have time to really get to know you in the rest of my life, but you have to know yourselves.

We know that the inward work always issues an active outward work. This is what Jesus said: ‘I abide in my Father.’ ‘I dwell in my Father.’ When he would separate himself from the others, he was keeping the connection with the Ultimate. Out of that, he knew what he was to do. And at times, even Jesus resisted it.

That is a part of what the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is about: ‘Is it really the best thing for me to die now? Because these disciples that have been hanging around for three years, they don’t have a clue. Am I going to give them a clue best by dying, or should I hang around a couple of more years? All I have to do is just slip over that hill.’ He had to decide, even until the end, what is the outward work. Each of us has to decide these things.

Do we want to live an impressive life? Or do we want to do what Jesus said, to abide in the Father?

Q: (from a student): There is a constant pressure, from within the church as well as outside of it, to measure up to a standard of success that is different from what we are talking about. How do you handle this?

A: It gets back to deciding whether to trust God or the culture. Too often we live as though the culture is much stronger than God. . . . We have to get straight where we take our cues. I have to look at my life, at who I am, and then decide what I want to do and if I’m doing it on the basis of achievement, on the basis of culture. Or do I want to look at my life, at who I have been, and ask if I’ve been faithful.

If I look back on my own life, I am not the least bit impressed with what I have done. I’m really not. Often people comment on our work here and I thank them for being impressed, but I say, ‘Can we talk about what has produced this?’ So, let’s get back to the being. What is the ultimate source of life? Do we want to live an impressive life? Or do we want to do what Jesus said, to abide in the Father, to dwell in the Father, and to abide in Jesus? That’s where the answer must be found.

Q: Gordon, you make it sound so easy, but I know it’s not. I can talk about following, but am I ever going to be willing to do so? As the church, are we willing to

make the commitment to follow in this kind of way? I guess that's the real challenge of the Gospel.

A: That's right. What Jesus said, and what we say to each other is, "Are we talking about something important or is it just talk?"

That is what Jesus was doing with the people who said, "I want to follow you." He would ask the people who said they wanted to follow if they really did. They were deciding if they would get in the boat with Jesus. He was so clear in saying, "Let's think about it first." One guy said, "I'd like to go. It's pretty interesting what you're talking about, but I've got to tend to some family responsibilities." Jesus said, "This boat's leaving. When you get back, this boat won't be here."

And that's the same struggle today. New birth is never easy. This way is probably more difficult for smart people, for gifted people, for efficient people, for hard-working people. You take those of us who can pull it off, but we don't try to pull it off. Rather, we commit ourselves in faith to a God who says He or She will pull it off. And then pulls it off by dying. I agree, living this kind of commitment to this kind of God is hard.



FIND OUT MORE ...

The Church of the Saviour
www.inwardoutward.org

Recommended books:

Journey Inward Journey Outward
by Elizabeth O'Connor

A Call to Commitment
by Elizabeth O'Connor



The Confession

When we pray "Your kingdom come, Your will be done," we acknowledge the existence of other kingdoms and pray for God's purpose only to be done.

God of life, because Jesus teaches us to trust you in all things, we claim Christ's words and share Christ's plea:

**Your kingdom come,
your will be done.**

Where food is scarce or wasted, Jesus says, "Feed the hungry."

**Your kingdom come,
your will be done.**

When your people are excluded, Jesus says, "Let them come to me."

**Your kingdom come,
your will be done.**

Whenever communities are divided, Jesus says, "Love one another."

**Your kingdom come,
your will be done.**

– Sharlande Sledge

