

Mark Longhurst: Well, so Fr. Richard I wanted to thank you for taking the time to speak with me and to the Alumni Living School community. We're all excited about your book, *The Universal Christ*, and I know many of us have pre-ordered it and maybe we're coming to the conference. And then beyond that many of us have been listening to your teaching on the Cosmic Christ and cosmology for many years. So, we're excited, and I just want to start off and say what are you excited about with this book releasing.

Fr. Richard Rohr: Well, it thrills me that this has meant something to the students of the school, because you're a select group that we believe is getting a little more in-depth education and this in some ways is the summary of that, I really feel. You've probably heard me mention how incarnational Christianity is the unique thing that I think we're overall emphasizing, well, in all of its implications. And finally in this book I get to talk in a very foundational way how real the incarnation is and how universal the incarnation is. And knowing that most of us Orthodox Catholic or Protestant were not told that. No.

Mark Longhurst: The subheading is *How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*.

Fr. Richard Rohr: Isn't that presumptuous?

Mark Longhurst: It is a big – it is a big vision. So, there's the – there's the life-changing reality but there's also the forgotten reality, and what is it that has been forgotten do you think by our church bodies, in our institutions, our religion that has forgotten this Christ?

Fr. Richard Rohr: Well, you heard me say in the book that I do believe even from the very beginning apart from Colossians and Ephesians and the Prologue to John's Gospel and several other passages like Hebrews and 1 John, this is not plugged into in the early church except in the East. Athanasius, who we call the Father of Orthodoxy, it seems to be rather clear to him, but shortly after that – Here's my interpretation. I can't prove it. But I think we were so both enamored with Jesus and needing to prove that Jesus was the Son of God, that He was the incarnate one, that we narrowed the field from a universal message to a personal message. And that was true even though I praise the Eastern Church deliberately and intentionally. By the 7th-8th century it's a subtext in the East too. It really is. Only the Mystics, again, like we are always saying at the school. You'll see it recur in the Mystics. But once we both align with Empire after 1054, the East with Constantinople, the West with Rome, we needed an appropriate God figure. And that figure was Jesus. We didn't like universalism. We needed tribalism to be justified. And of course, those of us in the school who know spiral dynamics we know that history was at that point at the red-blue levels. So, you know, the Universal Christ is yellow and turquoise levels and the churches just weren't there yet. The amazing thing that, and I'll stop with this right now, is that it even made its way. How did Colossians get written? How did Ephesians get written? And how did the Prologue to John's Gospel get written? Who were these geniuses at the end of the 1st century who already have the Cosmic Christ? But then in general it slowly gets lost.

Mark Longhurst: There's a footnote that says you separated out the word 'every' and 'thing'.

Fr. Richard Rohr: Oh yes, right toward the beginning.

Mark Longhurst: It's towards the beginning, and I really loved that. And knowing your theological background as a Franciscan there's something very specific and incarnational

about things, so I wanted to ask you, what is the specificity of things and how is that important in this vision?

Fr. Richard Rohr: You know that only hit me after I had gone through the third or fourth redaction of the book, and I don't know if I said it in the course of the book. This was the hardest book I ever wrote. It went back and forth between me and the publishers and editors, I guess, eight, nine times. I never did that with any previous book. And I was getting sick of it, frankly. "Oh no, I have to go through this text one more time." And then surely it must have been the sixth or seventh redaction I noticed that I'm not really talking about everything as much as every-thing. In other words, it's precisely thingness, facticity, reality, materiality that is the Christ. And for me – and I'm so glad that it hit you. That's a crucial distinction. Because we've tried to make concepts and theories and theologies into the Christ, and I don't think they are. The word became flesh, you see. And how much our seminaries taught us to idealize semantics and words and theories. They are a few steps removed from facticity, the realities. A little lizard, the little leaf, a big tree, that's the body of Christ; materiality.

Mark Longhurst: Wow.

Fr. Richard Rohr: And when people get that, as apparently you did, there's a big light that goes off about what I'm really trying to say in the book. So, thank you.

Mark Longhurst: Yeah, sure. The thematic scope of the book is rather breathtaking. I found it enlivening and inspiring and a few points just very eye-opening. You cover everything from the substitutionary atonement to Mary to the resurrection. And to get to this thing question you do so in a way that is not overly heady, and I think with a topic like this it would be easy to sort of be lost in the theological clouds, but you somehow managed to in this very inviting way keep it really grounded. And so, I wanted to ask you –

Fr. Richard Rohr: I hope you're right, Mark. I hope you're not just being kind, as I think you are.

Mark Longhurst: No, I don't – I'll tell you. Well, I'll get specific and I'll tell you what struck me that you have prayerful sentences that made me as a reader start to slow down and experience what you're saying. I found it also a little bit more personal of a book. You shared some personal anecdotes.

Fr. Richard Rohr: Yes, yes.

Mark Longhurst: And so, it did hit me in a personal way and poetry and – so, I wanted to simply ask about the writing process and how did you manage to hold this large vision and the specificity of things together in an inviting way.

Fr. Richard Rohr: You're right. In so many ways the book became high-level concept, and yet that was precisely the thing I didn't want to say. So, I kept the dance back-and-forth between Jesus and Christ. Jesus being the personal, Christ being the universal, as you know. And when you keep that volley back and forth I think you've got a really healthy religion, which is how I like to understand Christianity. As you know, Mark, I operate intuitively, not logically, not rationally, not systematically. There was never any outlined book. I just started writing, and then I said, "Oh, that's becoming a new chapter. Let's make that separate." That's why it took so many back and forth. It took a full year-and-a-half. That's

much longer than any book I've written. So, I don't know if I answered your question there. I hope I did.

Mark Longhurst: No, I think you did. It sounds like you were intuitively trying to hold together relationship with Jesus and the Christ.

Fr. Richard Rohr: Yes, yes, thank you if you heard it that way.

Mark Longhurst: Can you say more about the importance of the personal vision of Jesus and the universal vision of Christ, and why is it so important that we hold both those together?

Fr. Richard Rohr: Without the personal Jesus the whole thing becomes literally ungrounded. It becomes theoretical, abstract, conceptual to universal with no place to stand. The rubber hits the road in Jesus. Like, you can make, as I think we have, people who've loved the John's Gospel too much without the balance of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. You get into this, what you were trained and me in theology, to call high Christology. You know, a very wonderful but almost no talk about the poor or immigrants or sexism or homophobia or any of the issues that are tearing our world apart. It becomes an overarching grand scheme, which pleases the intellect but I don't think engages the heart and the body the way the three Synoptic Gospels do. It's very concrete Jesus touching concrete people, addressing concrete issues. So, now I just see the inspiration of having four gospel texts. And only one of them being Christ, three of them being Jesus, because it's almost as if they intuited the human temptation to make religion out of Christ. Cosmic religion and no concern for concrete people, concrete suffering, that's what Jesus does for us. And then at one point, I don't know if it's toward the end of the book, where I hope I say it well, and it only hit me later, was if Christ is the life principle, the life principle being positive, evolutionary, unfolding, moving then the hard word is the death principle, the crucified Jesus that has to be then added on to that. If you try to define the life principle in some glorious seven life, forgive me if you're seventh. You do that without the cross. That that loss is a part of renewal two steps backward, or a part of three steps forward, you're in trouble. So, it really works for me. Now, I had years to think about it. But if you can hold the life principle together with the necessary death principle you've got a pattern of unfolding, a pattern of evolution, a pattern of growth and change that is indisputable, even though we don't like it, you understand, the death part. Yeah, the cross part, it's the pattern of everything. And here's where science is really helpless too.

Mark Longhurst: You talk about the Big Bang as the first incarnation.

Fr. Richard Rohr: First incarnation. That's right.

Mark Longhurst: And for many people who just in the popular culture might assume, "Well, never heard that before." I've even said it in our church, "Never heard that before." So, how did you come up with that synthesis where your spirituality and theology assumes the insights of science in so thoughtful of a way?

Fr. Richard Rohr: You wonder, "Are we the first?" And I think we are the first generation that has the mind that can think this way. I mean, just because of words like the Big Bang. Like, I've said to very sophisticated groups in the last year, "If we don't make the incarnation starting with the Big Bang you do realize 13.7 billion, billion, years of geological time are

empty of God. God is doing nothing, saying nothing, just waiting for Jesus." And boy, people get that. And then when you start making a very concrete – I was just down to Mexico for two weeks. I don't know if you know. I saw all of the various – you know, it's not just the Aztecs and the Mayans. There's 40 other tribes who had women and children and families and life and death and triumph and failure just like every other human being does. Am I supposed to believe that these were throwaway people? Am I supposed to believe that they were not children of God as much as we are? And I seldom say that to any crowd where I don't get the nods I'm seeing on your face right now, "This has to be true." You know, I think I say in the book, "Science is giving us the how and all religion is saying is what we believe is the ultimate what." Well, then we don't know the how at all, and when you put the what and the how together you've just got a good partnership. I think that's what makes this book so pleasing to a lot of people that they're not feeling they have to throw out their rational, logical, scientific, geological, evolutionary mind, but my god it all works. It all fits, you know. That God has been unfolding and revealing for 13.7 billion years. And our only way of saying that, like Ephesians does, is "from the foundation of the world." From the beginning, you know, which we of course know nothing about what it really is. Except we believers except, as I do too, that whatever the beginning is God was involved. God was the starter, you know, but how? That's science's explanation, how did God get this thing started.

Mark Longhurst: You had a definition of a Christian that you mentioned at the latest CONSPIRE Conference and then it's in the book too, and it is a mature Christian sees Christ in everything and everyone else.

Fr. Richard Rohr: It all sounds naive, doesn't it? And I mean that. "Come on, Richard, you could come up with a better – " But I think that's true.

Mark Longhurst: I found it really liberating to think about it like that. So, what is it about seeing that is so important to this vision, seeing Christ?

Fr. Richard Rohr: Well, let's get back to the Trinitarian God. If God is relationship itself then seeing is a relational concept. There's the subject doing the seeing, there's the object that is seen. Now when there's conformity between the seer and the scene when I can see the Christ that I am over there in the other that looks different than me then it seems to me the circle is completed. So, you could use other senses like touching or hearing, but, yeah, seeing seems to be the dominant one. I don't mean to exclude blind people. They must have a hard time with that, but they've found their own way of seeing. So, it's tied into the relational definition of God. That God cannot be known outside of relationality, the Trinity says. Why weren't we told that? I thought I could stand as a long believer and have my clear Christian faith without loving anything. You know, I just got a book sent to me by a wonderful Protestant minister. I already thanked him for it. I guess, I took it home. And it's called Mean Christians. Mean Christian. And he's very fair. The guy doesn't have an ax to grind or anything, but he just asked the very real question, "How did we produce so many heartless, mean-spirited people who call themselves Christians?" It's because it was a one-man show, a one-woman show. I could stand alone apart from the way I see other people and call myself a Christian.

Mark Longhurst: Yeah, so it's all vertical and it wasn't very different.

Fr. Richard Rohr: All vertical.

Mark Longhurst: Yeah, and there's an intimacy with everything, I'm the hearing you say that if Christ is not just between me and Jesus, it's all reality is intimate.

Fr. Richard Rohr: Perfect. Thank you. I can always rely on you to understand. Thank you.

Mark Longhurst: Well, yeah, you know I'm a fan.

Fr. Richard Rohr: Well, you've got a good theological mind. I guess, that sounds egocentric on my side. It takes a good theological mind to understand what I'm saying, but thank you.

Mark Longhurst: Well, it's touched many people and I really think this book will touch many people. I really believe it. Here's a bit of a curve ball question, but I think it's relevant. One of the themes of this end of February alumni newsletter for The Living School is contemplation and parenting, and so we've got some articles and a few poems on that. And I try to filter theology and spirituality through, "Does it make a difference with my very busy life and my two boys that are chaotic and running around?" And so, for the parents or for people involved in parenting in some way what is the Universal Christ have, and you've said it already, but how might it apply to parents who are listening?

Fr. Richard Rohr: Let's get back to relationality. And this is where – you know how The Living School and the Center has evolved even – you were in the first class or the second?

Mark Longhurst: Yeah, I was the first one.

Fr. Richard Rohr: First, yeah, you were the first class. Since that first class I'm sure you've heard some of the work of Barbara Holmes.

Mark Longhurst: Sure, yeah.

Fr. Richard Rohr: Yes. This is a huge and important leap for us, because for all of our appreciation for centering prayer and sitting on the mat for 20 minutes, we've just gotta be honest. After my two weeks in Mexico the hordes of people, almost children everywhere, women holding babies all the time, our rather monastic, rather Buddhist; nothing against monks or Buddhists, but just can't be adequate to the description. It can't be or 99% of the creatures God has created can ever know God. So, once you get into a more, well, I used to call it in your class great love and great suffering. Once you get into great love and great suffering then every time you let your kids pull love out of you, you let your wife pull suffering out of you. You're in relationship, do you understand? There's not the lone Mark standing there. He has to submit to flow. He has to. I almost wish I could live 10 more years to develop this more, because I do think the first 20 years because of wonderful teachers like Thomas Keating for all of the wondered gifts they've given us it's still monastic, celibate, which is a luxury. I know I enjoy that luxury. So, I found it easy to talk about it. But then most people I'm talking to are like you. They have a wife and children and a job and a house to fix up and all the rest. So, I think it is really important that the CAC and The Living School broaden the definition of contemplation to a Trinitarian understanding of God. Of God as flow, of stopping the flow and allowing the flow. And once you could do that a father like you is going to spend his day feeling guilty because he didn't do his 20 minutes on the mat.

Mark Longhurst: Yeah, I didn't do it today. I had to take my kid and bring his coat to school, you know.

Fr. Richard Rohr: I hope you can do once in a while. Yet still especially for those of us like you and me who are teachers that we get up in pulpits and we have to leave the rest. So, I think those who are going to take on the role of teaching it's probably doubly, triply important that they have a disciplined practice. But once then we think it's our job to pass on that same disciplined practice, so-called, to married people, to children. I just think we're setting ourselves up for delusion, just delusion, you know. And when you can let the love flow toward your little boys, the love flow toward your wife in your moment of contemplation, you'll keep growing. Now, let me say that as a celibate, monastic type we're not really monks or friars, but recognizing how many laypeople, as we used to call them, are far more mature in the spiritual life than those of us who have all these accoutrements of celibacy and monasteries. It just doesn't bear out in my experience that maybe we become sometimes better teachers, but very often we become slovenly ourselves, those of us you have all the ease. And you have an object of love that keeps you growing because you're committed to that wife and those children. I don't have an object of love like that. Now, I thought I had Venus for 15 years and then she passed, and you know I have this wonderful staff here who I think love me. I surely love them. But, you know, I don't have to love them. I can go home and shut the door. You can't go home and shut the door.

Mark Longhurst: That's true, yeah. You know, it's so refreshing to hear you just talk about that and it seems to me that we're in a really exciting moment of the expansion of contemplation, contemplation is for everybody who wants to receive and participate, and that means that I can participate with God too, you know. Barbara Holmes's work of drumming and the suffering of contemplation, the crisis of contemplation. I mean here's the off-the-wall just question from the hip. What are you excited about or where do you see this expansion going now in the next 20 years? Or if you could work on something in the next 20 years, what would you do?

Fr. Richard Rohr: Well, you're leading me down the right road. I don't know if you heard us, several of us, quote Parker Palmer's new book where just hidden away in the middle is this wonderful one sentence definition of contemplation. This is almost a direct quote. I hope I'm remembering it. "Whatever helps us to knock on hard reality and to overcome our delusions is contemplative."

Mark Longhurst: Wow.

Fr. Richard Rohr: I just think that's brilliant, you know. And I want to keep moving with that because just the suffering of your mother dying or whatever it might be. These are things that force you toward a contemplative mind, because they force you to knock on the hard reality of existence and for you from your delusions. Both elements are there. I really think he's right on. Fortunately, he sent the free copy to me to write a blurb for it, and I discovered this early and I shared it with the whole staff and they all were delighted that this is a broader definition of contemplation that we at the CAC are perhaps most equipped to accept, because we're not a monastic base. We're still grateful to the monastic teachers. We're still grateful to the Buddhist teachers. But they're really not the whole enchilada. I don't think they are. Life is the whole enchilada.

Mark Longhurst: Life is the enchilada. "That's tweetable," as the people more proficient in social media would say than me. So, a couple more questions about the book. The chapter on Mary just kind of blew me away and was like an aha. Can you say more about – because Christ is not just a masculine principle, right? So, say more to her about how Mary is symbolic in this Christ's vision.

Fr. Richard Rohr: You know, here's one of the things the editors took out that I wish I had rebelled against and insisted on. I had a quote somewhere in the middle book from the Jungian psychotherapists James Hillman. You've probably read some of his stuff. I gotta find the quote again. But here's what he says. He says, "The evidence of all mythology, storytelling, novel writing ritual in all of history says that to understand the reality it has to have a face. Human beings give a face to every concept. And until it has a face that they can relate to they don't get it." Well, that should have been my key idea in that Mary chapter, because as you see at the beginning I, as a Catholic, am trying to struggle with what is this dang fascination that we Catholics have with Mary, and you almost get it from your mother's milk. I mean, people who are raised Catholic even though they haven't been to church for 20 years will have this softened heart about anything to do with Mary. So, you know you're dealing with an archetype, or James Hillman or the Jungian would call a 'face'. Reality needs a face. So, if the Christ is beyond gender, which I strongly have to insist on. Jesus has gender, the Christ is beyond gender. Now, Jesus became the personification of the masculine. Frankly, death principle. The little naked boy, the crucified naked Jesus at the end. It's the death principle. But there wasn't a feminine face for it and I believe intuitively, not rationally, not logically, not even theology – well, it was theological, but we started this fascination with the feminine Christ and that was in fact the first incarnation Mother Earth, Mother Mary, you understand? Now, that's why we started treating her and you good Protestants well-recognized it as if she was God. Archetypally it works. Theologically, we both know it's not true. Mary is not God. But then when we see how patriarchal the Christian religion became male, male, male, male, male, you can see how they were trying to redress the imbalance. By this emphasis, and I think I say in the book, "It's always the plural pronoun, Nuestra Señora, Notre Dame, Our Lady, that gives away we're dealing with archetypal truth." It's a logical truth. She's the symbol of all of us, do you see? She's the one who receives the Christ the way you and I have to receive it, by a simple yes. So, I'm so happy that was meaningful to you coming from the Protestant tradition, because we've wasted too much time. We by overdoing the symbolism without critique and then the Protestant period overreacting against it, because we didn't have archetypal psychology. It's nobody's fault. Because it clearly looked, and it still does look – I mean, I just came from two weeks in Mexico. I mean, the Virgin, she is God in Mexico. There's no doubt – she's everywhere. She's on bathroom walls, she's on fences, she's in every church. The Virgin of Guadalupe. We Franciscans, do you know we were the first priests into Mexico that 12 first Franciscans walked from Veracruz to Mexico City? I mean, this is the first 10 years and already then we're having little luck baptizing the Aztecs from 1521 to 1531. We have no luck in baptizing. Guadalupe happens in 1531. I don't know if this can be proven apparently historically. From 1531 to 1541 we baptize perhaps 20 million Mexican-Indians. There's no baptism like that in the history of the world, you know. It's exceptional. And all we did to these illiterate Indians was hold up this image of this Brown Madonna with skin color like they did, and say, "She's the image of God." She was the image of God. The Aztecs, the Mayans, the Meztecs, the Toltecs, they have no trouble. And you've almost got to travel Southern Mexico to see this devotion. It's embarrassing to me as a Catholic, because it looks like idolatry. This devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe. But let me end just by saying when you see that you know you're dealing not with logic or reason, you're dealing with archetypal

symbol. And they trust their mother. They couldn't always trust their dad, I'm sorry to say.

Mark Longhurst: Yeah. Well, even as a Protestant I've known that lack of archetype in my own spirituality, and of course Cynthia's book on Mary Magdalene has been – it's the watershed book for many of us, but, yeah, I mean I'm even guilty of being a little sappy and opening my heart a little bit to the image.

Fr. Richard Rohr: That's no sappy. That's good.

Mark Longhurst: How about different religions affirming the Universal Christ is a – would theoretically be a very friendly affirmation with other religious believers, but oftentimes it doesn't get seen that way because of the imperial and tribal history. So, can you say more about how this helps affirm interfaith friendships?

Fr. Richard Rohr: It reaffirms the Christian religion in what we used to call natural religion. What some of us now call nature based religion. That it isn't based on a specific revelation. Now Jesus is, but the Christ is a universal revelation available to anybody with eyes who can see the spiritual character of a frog or a sunset or the earth itself. They've already begun to see the Christ the moment they kiss it, the moment they respect it, the moment they honor it. So, this takes away any exclusionary claims from Christianity. It makes us – that's why I chose the title *The Universal Christ*. It makes us into a universal religion. And of course, as a Catholic I'm quick to point out that is what the word Catholic meant; universal, and then we realized we didn't know how to be universal. We only knew how to be a domination system, not an inclusive system. So, that would be my fondest hope from this book that we could lay a foundation for an honest interfaith interdenominational, of course, dialogue that most of the reasons we have divided our Christian churches are based on pure accidental historical things, not on the incarnation, on the word became flesh, and flesh being a generic concept. And what I noted in preparing for this book that the word 'Jesus' isn't even mentioned till the end of the prologue. The word became flesh. It doesn't say the word became Jesus.

Mark Longhurst: Yeah. For alumni who have read the books, we read *Ilia Delio*, we read *Panikkar*, and we're going to read this one.

Fr. Richard Rohr: I know.

Mark Longhurst: How do you hope this impacts the alumni who have been journeying with your teachings for a while?

Fr. Richard Rohr: I'd love it. I mean, this is being probably too optimistic. But if it could re-stir the first love in some of our students who all have already in some cases gotten bored with the message or tired of the message or thinking it's not revolutionary. It is revolutionary, what we're trying to teach in *The Living School*, and it's orthodox. When you see the little piece that our staff is going to put online for the book, it's really well-done. It's got so many parts to it. But our good scholar and librarian Lee Staman, do you remember Lee?

Mark Longhurst: Oh, sure, yeah.

Fr. Richard Rohr: He's pulling out Athanasius and all these Fathers of the Church to really

give this whole thing credibility. This is the first book of mine that I've insisted on a bibliography. It's quite a lot of pages at the end. But I want our students and I want any casual reader of the book to not think this is just my opinion. Who cares about Richard's opinion? I do whatever I can to show we've always had that, and that's why we used the word 'forgotten'. We had it but we forgot it pretty early. It was in my opinion just too big a message. It's too big to hold on to. We took all of our effort just to hold on to Jesus.

Mark Longhurst: Yeah. Wow.

Fr. Richard Rohr: Yeah. So, we made Christ his last name.

Mark Longhurst: Yeah. You know, whenever I use that line and I always credit you, it always gets a chuckle in church.

Fr. Richard Rohr: It does. It always does, yes.

Mark Longhurst: Final question. Just like one or two mystics, and mystics in the broad sense. It could be anybody that you have journeyed with in the writing of this book that have helped you?

Fr. Richard Rohr: You know, one lesser-known, again because he's an Eastern Father is a name called Maximus the Confessor. Maximus the Confessor thoroughly understood the Cosmic Christ. So, if that intrigues anybody study him. I guess, we consider Athanasius more a theologian than a mystic. I think the reason I've always been fascinated by Julian of Norwich is I think she was not systematically trained, thank God, and so she got this intuitively, the inherent holiness of everything. The universal character of the message. The universal mercy of God and love of God. She really was a Universalist, and you know when she speaks of the great deed she never goes so far as to say what it is, but all of us who are scholars or students of Julian are convinced the great need is universal salvation. God saving history. God saving a society. God saving humanity. God isn't saving you apart from me and me apart from you and this competitive mode that we put it in making it largely a moral contest has gotten us nowhere. It has gotten history nowhere. So if our students and any readers of the book recognize this as a message that any thinking person would welcome. There's nothing to fight here. There's nothing to portion out or divvy up. It's a statement about the shape of reality. Christ is the shape of reality. Christ is the forgotten future brought early in time so we can see where history is going, and it's going toward resurrection. So, for our students if that stirs their early love of the message here I'll be entirely happy.