



# LUKENOTES

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## CASE STUDY

### **"Brother Rob" • Individuation and Connection**

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Br. Rob is 35 years old. A year ago he made his first profession, and since that time he has been assigned to his congregation's high school where he is both a teacher and coach of the soccer team. As a new teacher who has a second and time consuming position, Br. Rob is usually quite busy and is struggling to find time for himself. Recently, when he was asked by the principal to help with the school musical, he reluctantly agreed because he did not feel he could say "no." Since that time, Br. Rob has been increasingly irritable at school and at home. Recently, after returning from a community gathering where he felt compelled to say "yes" to being on the vocation awareness team, he hurt his hand when he punched the wall in his room. Br. Rob has decided to talk to a counselor because he realizes that he is becoming more and more angry. When he met with the counselor, he shared "I feel that my life is not my own because I am not free to consider requests; rather, I feel compelled to say yes. I don't want to be angry."

As he began to work with a counselor, Br. Rob soon realized that being angry and his inability to say "no" were not new issues. As he spoke about his childhood, he realized how he learned to be responsible for others. At age five, when his father became disabled, Br. Rob became "the man of the house." He was responsible for tasks formerly done by his father and had to grow up quickly. He learned that it was his job to respond to his father's wants and needs and that his own needs and wants were secondary. As his father coped with being disabled, he became both depressed and angry in response to so many losses: physical wellbeing, financial security, meaningful work and ways to enjoy life, and significant changes in relationships with his family and friends. In addition, his father struggled with being vulnerable and not knowing how to ask for what he needed in a direct and respectful manner. He was overly demanding and often responded with aggressive outbursts. As Br. Rob talked about this time, he realized that he has developed a similar pattern of dealing with frustrations and losses; he too has difficulty asserting himself, becomes mad when he is sad, and at times expresses his pent-up anger aggressively, either in words or behaviors.

As he continued in counseling, Br. Rob came to some powerful and painful realizations. First, he saw that he tends to develop similar relationships, whether with the men in his community or with the women that he dated during high school or college. These relationships are one-sided and lack mutuality in which both individuals' needs are met. Rather, he seems to be drawn to relationships where he loses himself as he responds to the

needs and wants of others, often resulting in feelings of frustration and anger that he does not know how to express in healthy ways. In addition, Br. Rob also realizes that he does not have a good sense of himself and that he has poor and often porous personal boundaries. He does not know how to assert himself or to negotiate relating with others in his ministry or in his personal life. Br. Rob also realizes that he is quite lonely because no one really knows and loves him.

### **Individuation and Connection**

Br. Rob's realizations are providing a great opportunity for personal transformation. He is moving away from the roles he was assigned in his family and is living more authentically. One way to understand this journey of conversion is to explore the dynamic relationship between individuation and connection.

**Individuation** refers to a person's ability to have and maintain a separate self, to care for one's self, and to develop and maintain flexible and fluid boundaries. **Connection** refers to a capacity to relate with others in adult, mutual, intimate ways, to be close to others and let others be close to you. Individuation and connection are ongoing developmental tasks (we should get better at these as we mature!) and need to be negotiated in every relationship. Too much of one dimension and not enough of the other will lead to less-than-satisfying relationships and a failure to develop an authentic self.

Br. Rob has learned to believe that others are more important than he is. He has difficulty maintaining separateness while staying connected to others. As a result, he is more likely to relate to someone who needs him and eventually come to resent the lack of mutuality that everyone needs and that he desires. One of his current tasks is to learn to be **self-referent**, i.e., to know and value what he thinks, feels, wants, needs, and dreams and then be able to negotiate with what others think, feel want, need and dream. In order to be self-referent, Br. Rob will need to grow in self-awareness which will require his getting in touch with his inner self. Taking time for himself, journaling, paying attention to feelings, especially those in the anger family (e.g., rage, frustration, disappointment, and hurt) and talking with significant support persons (his counselor and spiritual director) will assist him to become more self-aware.

Br. Rob also needs to learn how to be close to others, without losing himself, i.e., to be in authentic communion with others. Developing and maintaining healthy personal and ministerial boundaries will be crucial to achieve this goal. In addition, as Br. Rob learns to consider his own needs, he will grow in his capacity to be responsive to others rather than being responsible for others which will help him to develop more satisfying and adult relationships.

When individuals are able to maintain a separate sense of themselves as well as develop healthy, mutual connections with others, they will more likely be characterized by the following: emotional honesty with self and others, an ability to care for self and others, appropriate self-disclosure, flexible and fluid boundaries and an increasing capacity for empathy- the capacity to "walk in another's shoes." In addition, their self-definition will change from being the hero/rescuer or victim to being a "person in relationship."

Healthy adult living is characterized by a dynamic, interdependent, and shifting balance between individuation and connectedness with others, while unhealthy living results from being stuck/fixated on one of these dynamics and lacking the skill to shift gracefully to the other dimension when needed.

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