

Monastic Scribe XLIX: April 14, 2023

I'LL DO IT MY WAY!

Nelson Mandela liked to explain the African concept of ubuntu. It is an expression to describe humanity and is usually translated as “I am because we are.” He came from a culture that was very community minded where people really looked after each other. As Americans it often takes a crisis for us to recognize and act for the sake of others in need. We have developed a strong individualistic culture. Alex deToqueville, nineteenth century French philosopher, in his monumental work on American Democracy praised the new experiment of our nation but worried that our individualism might someday undermine continued democracy.

The teachings of Jesus and the Gospel speak against a rugged individualism. Our faith is based on a three-in-one God and we are made to live in union with all of God’s creation, humans, animals, plants, and all that exists. The world is given to all of us as we pass through it in our brief lives. We are made to live in relationships. The story of the Good Samaritan reminds us that everyone is our neighbor. There is not anyone who is truly an “Other.” Jesus prayed that we all may be one.

Catholic Social Teachings have advanced the ancient teachings of the early church about social matters. While neither condemning private property nor advocating socialism, this teaching sees the importance of the common good which sometimes overshadows individual rights.

Saint John Chrysostom was one of those who taught that the superfluties of the rich are the necessities of the poor. For the affluent to give to the poor is not charity but justice. The first principle of Social Teaching is the dignity of each human person and the basic rights to such things as food, water, shelter, health care.

Before we begin the necessary legislation to create boundaries to receive migrants we need to recognize these basic human needs and respect all people. This pertains to civil society, to local communities and, of course, to the Church itself which must recognize the equal rights of men and women, blacks and whites and everyone.

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Another area that strikes me where we need to recognize the common good, traditions and customs is that of Spirituality. At least some of those who claim to practice spirituality but not religion determine their own spirituality according to what pleases them and gives them peace and satisfaction. Thirty-five years ago, Richard Rohr, Franciscan Friar, founded the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. It has become a vibrant spiritual center that educates, trains and offers real leadership in sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ to all who want to deepen their spiritual life. But he insists that the most important word in “Center for Action and Contemplation” is “and.” Both are needed for a balance of spirituality. Activists need to develop a contemplative prayer life or they will burn out or get stuck in their own ego-centered projects. And contemplatives need to engage in works of mercy and compassion or they will be fleeing the gospel and get stuck in their own individual ways.

Balancing self and community also applies to all our prayer. The Eucharist with reception of holy communion is not just a “me and Jesus” affair. I celebrate the Eucharist in order to be one with the entire body of Christ, head and members. The closer I get to God, the closer I am to all creation and to all creatures in whom God dwells.

With the example of Thomas Merton plus our new awareness of practices from the East, especially Buddhist meditation, we have become more aware and sensitive to the reality of the mystic as a radical prophet. The life of mystics bears this out. Julian of Norwich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Howard Thurman, Dorothee Soelle, Leonardo Boff and the liberation theologians, Abraham Heschel, all demonstrate this as well as Thich Nhat Hanh and his “engaged Buddhism.” They are all examples of this both/and approach to the spiritual life.

The ways to pray also reflect this both/and approach. We practice both “apophatic prayer” in centering prayer and other contemplative practices of silence and stillness when we go beyond all words. But we also have “kataphatic prayer” where we use words of the liturgy, scripture and our own heart-felt words of prayer to God. Both these types of prayer can be individual or communal in expression but, ideally, always both. Prayer is not an escape; it is an engagement, a relationship.

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Some of this may be new or confusing to you. I hope you get the main point. Religion and spirituality cannot be merely individualistic; we need to be in union with others if we want to be in relation to God.

You can agree or disagree with me at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org Meanwhile let us pray for each other.

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Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.