

## Monastic Scribe LII: May 26, 2023

### WHAT ARE MY VALUES?

As I study the early church I find it amazing to see how rapidly and widely this new Christian Way spread. The earliest Christians had no power, no political base, no modern media, and little money. It had former fishermen and farmers spreading the word. It had the zeal of a Saint Paul who convinced people of their dignity as based in Jesus Christ. The new church spread to Rome and beyond. And then there followed periods of intense persecution as under the Emperor Diocletian (245-313). The age of the martyrs is filled with great faith and courage. We remember many of them in our liturgical calendar – Lucy, Stephen, Agatha, Agnes, Lawrence, Felicity and Perpetua.

Some things changed when Constantine became Emperor in 313 and issued the Edict of Milan which granted religious freedom throughout the empire. He called the Council of Nicea in 325 to help settle disputes among the Christian people. It would be under a later Emperor, Theodosius (379-398) that Christianity would be declared the official religion of the empire.

After the early centuries of struggle, many felt Christianity was now too respectable and easy to embrace. The Celts spoke of the need for continuing martyrdom, adding to red martyrdom (shedding of blood) now recognizing green martyrdom (life of penance) and white martyrdom (pilgrimage). The monastic movement flourished as many went to the desert and isolated places to live lives of penance, prayer and service. People wanted to live ascetical lives to be like Jesus.

The centuries went by and many things happened, both good and bad. It is a miracle that the Church still exists. I hear some people at times decry that the church was never the same after Constantine. Issues of power, prestige, money became too important for the church leaderships. That may be all true. But I would like to direct your thoughts to something happening today.

We live under another emperor today. It is even more insidious than Constantine for it appears that this is all for our good. This new empire is unfettered capitalism with its uncritical confidence in market culture. This empire is hand in glove with the growth of our global empire and reliance on the arms race, and the denial of

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the Earth's climate crisis. Its religion is consumerism which keeps on pressuring us on television, through social media, and many forms of advertising telling us that we are what we possess. We are good, important, lovable if we have the latest cell phone and other up to date gadgets.

I want to be clear that I really believe that most people are truly good. I see acts of goodness and kindness every day. But we live in a culture of fear of not having enough, of losing what we have, convinced that we live in a world of scarceness and no longer the abundance of God's creation. The reality is we have been given this world for the sake of all, to be commonly shared. But the rich have been getting richer and the poor poorer. So people are afraid and, perhaps, they have become accustomed to some self-indulgence and affluence. We have abused the earth and its resources and the earth seems to be striking back but only the rich can stay comfortable. We always have room in our national budget for the military budget but not for health or education, especially not for the poor.

I also believe our children are suffering from our misuse of God's world. They sense our fears, our insecurities. They feel the pressure of keeping up with our way of living. We are grateful to the young for their sensitivity to the climate crisis, for their rejection of racism, for their acceptance of LGBTQ people and immigrants. They also are rejecting their elder's structures and institutions, including the church. But they are suffering. The rates of youthful suicide, self-mutilation, depression and other mental problems have increased. God has been eliminated from the culture and our young have nothing beyond themselves to cope with the realities of our world. TikTok holds up the "stealth wealth" and "quiet luxury" of TV's "Succession." The weekend with Taylor Swift, a great celebration for the young, also demonstrated the luxury style of many attending and the crush of the merchandise sales at the event.

What can we do? First we have to wake up to the realities of this world and the power of our culture to enslave us. We need a deeper interior life that knows our God is within us and we have the inner strength to cope if we rely less on things and more on love and caring for each other. We have to be more in tune with nature and the wonder of it all. This may mean some counter-cultural adaptations. We may have to simplify our lives and depend less on gadgets, things, possessions. We need our spiritual resources to deal with an overly materialistic world. We need to be our true selves who are filled with God's Spirit.

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I am sorry if this is too harsh. Maybe I am overdoing it. But we do need to face some realities that are not pleasant. I offer you my opinions; forgive me if I am mistaken. I can be found at my desert monastery where I attempt, not always successfully, to live a countercultural life. I am at: [joycet@glastonburyabbey.org](mailto:joycet@glastonburyabbey.org)

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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.