

Monastic Scribe LIV: June 23, 2023

AM I LEFT OR RIGHT?

Recently a woman started attending Sunday Mass at our abbey church. She is quoted as saying that her own parish was too conservative and we are more liberal (or was it “progressive”?). While that was meant as a compliment, I feel I do not want to be labeled either a conservative or liberal. These are principally political labels, joined today by “neo-liberal” or “neo-conservative” which seem to wed rational beliefs with capitalistic economic beliefs, including Christian Nationalism. It is all a jumble. You can throw in the “woke” folks which, it seems to me, are any people with whom we disagree.

Pope Francis has said that he is neither liberal nor conservative but embraces the radicalism of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That’s what I aim at too. I feel it is important to be faithful to our Benedictine tradition. It is deeper and older than what many Catholics practice. There are many Catholic traditions noted especially by Religious orders – Franciscan, Dominican, Ignatian, Carmelite, Marian, etc.

The richness and diversity of Catholic spirituality tended to be lost in the post-reformation era of defensive uniformity. This move to exclusivity was furthered by the enlightenment, industrial revolution, scientific positivism, French Revolution and nineteenth century reaction to these developments. That century through the mid-twentieth century saw an approach that accented one, uniform way of being Catholic. And it neglected much of the deeper sources of Catholicism in favor of devotional practices such as the parish mission with accent on sexual behavior, the Rosary, novenas, apparitions and miracles. Mary and the Saints became more central than Jesus. I do not mean any of these were wrong but they are all secondary Catholic practices after the liturgy, scripture, tradition. They also inculcated a more individual and passive way for the laity in the church.

Our Benedictine approach is somewhat different, though we have also embraced the devotional revolution at times as well. Since we go back 1500 years and follow Saint Benedict’s Rule, written about 540, we are very centered on liturgy, scripture, community, hospitality.

Liturgy has not meant simply going to Mass and receiving communion, but embracing the life and mysteries of Christ throughout the liturgical year. Praying

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the Psalms has been central, as well as lectio divina which is the prayerful reading of scripture. Prayer in common and in active participation go with this approach. Mary is important in bringing us to Jesus. The Saints are important for guiding us on our way, not for special intercessors to help us get what we need.

The Reformation cast a shadow on contemplative prayer and mysticism. Thomas Merton in the fifties helped all Benedictines in re-finding our mystical path. The opening to Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, helped many to find meditation as they had been unaware it was part of their Christian tradition. Monastic guest houses helped many to develop their silent, mystical side to prayer. Monasteries have also been centers of liturgical worship with active participation of guests through chant, good ritual, good art. Saint Benedict counseled his monks to treat working tools the same as vessels of the altar. This is a sacramental approach to all reality, both sacral and sacred. And we promise stability of place which means we don't move around but are part of the land, an eco-spirituality. This stabile, open community is open to many guests who share community with us.

This is, more or less, the Benedictine tradition. Not all monks and nuns have been faithful bearers of it and there are times when reform of monasteries and a return to the spirit of Benedict becomes necessary. We have been helped by the Second Vatican Council which has called us, and all Catholics, back to the basis of what our Catholic tradition is truly about. There is resistance to the Council and the call to both *aggiornamento* (attention to signs of times), and *ressourcement* (return to gospel, early church and longer tradition of the church). An ecumenical council is the highest source of teaching in the church. Those who oppose it can hardly call themselves conservative. In this sense I believe a Benedictine monastery is not spiritually liberal or progressive but truly conservative in the best way.

Richard Rohr, great spiritual leader, calls his theological approach to Christianity "an alternate orthodoxy." It is based on Saints Bonaventure, Duns Scotus and the Franciscan School of theology which emphasizes love. I like to think, as I write this blog, that I am speaking from another alternate orthodoxy, one that is based on a longer, deeper, scriptural, liturgical, community based, contemplative tradition of the church which has not been the common Catholic approach over the past couple of centuries. Does this make sense to you? You can always contact me at: 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.