

Monastic Scribe LXVIII: February 23, 2024

LET'S BE POSITIVE!

I recently came upon an old (1990) book, "Sin and Fear: the Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture 13th– 18th Centuries" by Jean Delumeau. The book is over 660 pages with small print so I may not get through it all. But I am skimming it and find the premise very interesting. The more I learn about our Christian tradition, the more I have become aware how far we have gotten from Jesus and the early Church. I know that Saint Augustine had a preoccupation with the need for grace to overcome sin. Martin Luther and John Calvin stressed this sin focus and believed that humans were basically bad needing grace to overcome their badness. (This was certainly different from Saint Thomas Aquinas who believed humans were basically good). I also have thought that the black plague in the fourteenth century cast negative views on us on earth in "this valley of tears."

Perhaps, because of the so-called dark ages and the great number of peasants who joined the church because of their King's direction, they probably had to be guided by fear of hell and eternal damnation to live good, pure lives. The Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution all pressured Catholics to remain faithful through rules, obligations, fear of eternal punishment. This book seems to explore many other factors as well. But I also know that the nineteenth century was full of rumblings, and theologians began to uncover the real church in studies of liturgy, scripture, the mystical body of Christ, the priesthood of the laity, social justice issues. It was slow going for the Teaching Church to accept much of it. But an astute historian such as Pope John XXIII, following some small openings from Pope Pius XII, knew exactly what he was doing when he called for the Second Vatican Council in 1959. The rest, as they say, is history though, as with all Councils, it takes time to absorb the worldviews uncovered by the Council.

Why does this matter you might ask. It matters a lot. The rise of science, the new cosmology of understanding our universe, the global world open through the world wide web – all these have challenged some of the underpinnings of our worldview. We understand ourselves, nature and creation, the human mind and psyche much better. We know now of other religions and how they help to explain what Christianity really means to us. We have come to see that science and religion need each other.

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Let me make this more specific. We are now in the season of Lent. Remnants of how we grew up in Lent still remain but are not sufficient. We grew up in the sin and fear church, controlled by priests, necessitating keeping the rules and memorizing the doctrines. We were certain that we had the right answers. But the breadth of the questions has shifted. Some people still want that old certainty and the old church. But so much of this is passive and negative. Christ was not the center of our religion but is now. The love of God for us is always there, always a merciful God no matter how we stray. God is not the distant far away God but is everywhere with us all the time.

Does this mean that sin is out? In no way! We must face our sins, our addictions, our prejudices not because of fear of punishment but because they are barriers to the love of God and because they block our own human development. Getting into our interior life, coming to really know and accept ourselves (even the selves we do not like), admitting the barriers of sin: these are the ways to be our true selves, our free selves. Confession of our sinfulness is a big step in knowing ourselves, even if we have to confess the same sins over and over again until the light of God helps us to see that the real culprit is our self-centered ego. God's love is free. The world in all its beauty and diversity of life is all free. Have we built up substitutes for what God wants to give us?

And, please, don't fall back into thinking your sins require a guilt trip or shame. You are not bad. You are imperfect, still growing, still deepening your relation to God. Admitting our sins is a way to stop acting them out. It is a first step in growing up spiritually. We don't want to be sin-centered but merely accept reality and trust God to be able to live more fully.

Along with the sin-centered church, we have also been prone to thinking we have to earn God's love and our own salvation. We say certain prayers, do certain practices (e.g. keeping the nine "first Fridays") thinking that will guarantee our way to heaven. God is thoroughly merciful, is totally loving. We just have to get out of the way to accept this love and mercy. We need to seek quiet and solitude to just be with this God. We are called to a relationship with God and, through God, with all people and with all creation. God and grace are all around us, in the very air we breathe. Gratitude, awe, praise are all part of who we really are to be.

Here is my summary of what I am trying to say:

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Negative religion: do needed, required activities for fear of hell or even perhaps just to lead a good life. Keep the rules. Impress the children.

Positive: Become the true self you are created to be through deep knowing of oneself, warts and all. Know Jesus as a friend and hear “come, follow me.” Celebrate the events of Jesus’ life in the sacraments with other members of your faith community. Live for others and not just yourself. Spend time in letting God gaze on you and you gaze on God in return. Put your heart into it!

What do you think? 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.