

Monastic Scribe LXXi: April 5, 2024

BELIEVE AND LIVE YOUR FAITH!

To be patriotic was important in my growing up. Catholics were still proving themselves to be good Americans, especially after the rejection of Al Smith for President in 1936. The FBI, as well as police and fire departments were filled with good Catholic boys. Then Post World War II America saw the break-up of ethnic Catholic neighborhoods and their assimilation into the general culture. The election of JFK in 1960 largely ended any estrangement. Catholics became rather similar to most other American groups. In fact, the big up-grade in their affluence and education saw them very much part of the power structure of the USA.

American Catholics were divided by the civil rights movement, many becoming more conservative, followers of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. They had difficulty dealing with the sixties, which has since been called “the Second Enlightenment.” The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) emphasized neglected parts of the catholic tradition – liturgy, scripture, social justice, engagement with the world. People liked the change from Latin to English in liturgy but gradually became aware of the challenges to the narrow post-Reformation, anti-intellectual, devotional, exclusivist piety that characterized immigrant Catholicism in the inner city ghettos where Catholicism thrived, despite slowly increasing engagement with the society around them.

All of this summarizes my own view of the Catholic world in which I have grown up. I personally took to the Second Vatican Council and found joy in the more expansive understanding of Catholicism, which, unknown to many, represented the older, earlier Catholic traditions, including those going back to Jesus Christ and the early centuries of the first millennium. I am trying to understand and position what is going on now. Is it the rejection of change that is impelling the resistance to a deeper form of the Christian message? For what I behold is that many Catholics have joined with Christian Evangelicals in a rejection of any change. And this is joined to what is called Christian Nationalism. Now that ethnic Catholicism is beyond us, the state has become the new religion, and patriotism is more important than loving God “with all my heart, and all my strength.” Conservatives and Liberals are not part of Christianity – radical acceptance of the gospel is! The word of God in the scriptures now seems to give way to devotion to one’s country. For some, this is taken to extremes and they want the country to become a Christian country governed by what they think and select to be the

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religion of Christianity. The American Bible, which contains the Constitution and Pledge of Allegiance, is close to idolatry.

I have my own theory of what is happening. Ethnic Christianity provided an identity and program of meaning. Their religion was a culture that provided a sense of belonging. Many practices were geared to overcome or atone for one's sins and the fear of punishment in the next life which was a force to help us live a good, moral life. I suggest, however, there was something missing in the post-Enlightenment, post-Reformation Church. I think it was faith.

Religion was built on knowing the doctrines of religion and keeping all the rules. But knowing and loving Jesus Christ was not a deep reality. Knowing and living the scriptures was exceptional for Catholics. Being aware of the 2000 year history of the church seemed to disappear in the story of the Counter-reformation. I am not advocating scholarship or deep knowledge. I am talking about love and awareness of all that Jesus taught and did. We often adored Christ as God but did not know what it meant to follow him. We often relied on what the church, Bishops, priests, told us.

The Second Vatican Council brought us back to the real roots of Christianity beginning with Jesus Christ as the "light of the nations." It taught us the real meaning of liturgy, scripture (divine revelation) as well as an openness to the world, other religions, Jews and Muslims. But many people today seem to reject the Council. They choose to pray and act in the ways that preceded the Council in liturgy, dress, piety. Recently a number of Catholics, including bishops, have spoken against the Pope, mocking his teaching and his person, the unifying center of the Church. They choose their own way, centering on a nationalist, individualistic spirituality that might yet drive them into schism.

History can help us. The first centuries of the church were difficult for the new Way. There were persecutions and anti-Christian treatments of the Christians, a lot of tension with the state.. Then the fourth century changed it all. The emperor, Constantine, became the protector of the church. From then on church and state were melded together. This close union broke down with the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the rise of science. Some bemoan this loss.

The Old Testament as seen in Solomon and other Kings, had to be challenged by the prophets. Jesus challenged the empire of his time.

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More recently religion and state have been respectable bed fellows except for those who dare speak up on behalf of the real gospel. I believe we all need to accept the call to be prophets that was given us at Baptism. We can be patriotic and love our country but not agree with all it proposes and acts. We can respect our leaders, civil and church, and yet disagree with them. We have been passive in how the country treated Blacks, Jews and other minorities. We Christians must positively accept what Jesus and the Gospel really teach us and be prophets in our day. These are some tentative thoughts from joycet@glastonburyabbey.org Give it some thought.

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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.