

Monastic Scribe LXXX: October 18, 2024

ELECTION DAY IS COMING!

We have an election coming up. Ready? I want to address some issues on my mind. I won't tell you how to vote. In fact, as a Catholic priest, I am not allowed to tell you how to vote. If any clergy-person, bishop, priest, man or woman, tells you for whom to vote, that person should be reported as breaking a law. They can lose their tax exempt status for doing so.

While we are not allowed to publicly enter into partisan politics, that does not mean we are forbidden to, or even discouraged from, speaking about political issues. Many political issues are moral issues. The Catholic Church, along with other Christians and religious people, sees abortion as immoral. But they also see discrimination, racism, refusal of an employer to pay just wages, degradation of the natural world, dissemination of falsehoods, and many other issues, also as immoral.

Pope Francis, commenting on the American scene, said both major parties lack a pro-life agenda. He advised voting for the lesser of the evils and cautioned against one-issue voting.

Our religious traditions believe in the importance of the common good while western culture has become largely individual. Both American political parties indulge in liberal individualism. None of our social concerns of religion are new. Attention to the needs of the poor, income inequality, respect for every human being and giving them their just rights has been part of our religious traditions. Saint John Chrysostom, for instance, said in the third century, that the superfluities of the rich are the necessities of the poor. For the rich to help the poor is not charity but justice. Likewise, unlimited rights must cede at times to the common good, such as in laws governing the use of deadly weapons. Some will cry "communism" but neither communism nor unlimited capitalism can claim any moral superiority. Other social forms may be more in tune with social justice and morality.

One large moral issue is absent from the present campaigning. Pope Francis in his encyclical, "Laudato Si," focused on our obligation to care for nature and the environment of the earth and universe. But this issue it is not to be heard in

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public discussion probably because of fear of loss of rich benefactors. Maybe also because the American people do not consider this an important issue.

There is another issue that, this year, must be acknowledged. Our country is in a state of frozen polarization quite evident in our political parties but also affecting the churches. Our church differences are often political differences, e.g. liberal or conservative. I believe our true religious traditions can help us and our country in the future. We can begin with this present moment. How will you react if your candidate for President loses? Our religious beliefs cannot be implacable ideologies in a pluralistic society that is open to all religions. Christian nationalism is not a choice for those who live respect religious values.

If Donald Trump loses, will you accept the choice of the majority of your fellow-citizens? Will you eschew any forms of violence or enmity? Will you give yourself to the mending of a fractured nation?

If Kamala Harris loses, will you succumb to despair and disassociation? Will you flee to Canada or some other country and leave the poor, who cannot move, to their plight? Or will you be like the early Christians who lived in a political state where they were an unwelcome minority and even persecuted? Will your faith and trust in God be real?

I have been reading memoirs of Alexei Navalny, the Russian opposition leader, who died in prison this past year. He openly opposed the inhumanity of Vladimir Putin but kept his love of his homeland. After an assassination attempt and recuperation in Germany, he voluntarily returned home when he could have lived safely in exile. But he was arrested immediately and spent the next four years, often in solitary confinement. He established a "Prison Zen" to survive with good spirits and love of his fellow citizens, encouraging them to be brave. He missed his wife, two children, parents and brother, and died after four years, in a prison camp above the Arctic Circle. He never lost faith or even his sense of humor.

Here are some excerpts from his memoirs. "If your convictions mean something, you must be prepared to stand up for them and make sacrifices if necessary.... Don't be afraid of anything. This is our country and it's the only one we have. The only thing we should fear is that we will surrender our homeland to be plundered by a gang of thieves, liars and hypocrites."

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His “Prison Zen” consisted of two techniques. The first is to imagine the worst thing that can happen and accept it. The second, for Alexei, was religion. “You lie in your bunk looking up at the one above and ask yourself whether you are a Christian in your heart of hearts. Are you a disciple of the religion whose founder sacrificed himself for others, paying the price for their sins? Do you believe in the immortality of the soul and all that cool stuff? If you can honestly answer yes, what is there to worry about... My job is to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and leave it to good ole Jesus and the rest of his family to deal with everything else. As they say in prison, ‘They will take my punches for me’.”

I am inspired by his words and example. How about you? Send any comments to me at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org. God bless America!

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

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.