

Monastic Scribe II: May 14, 2021

Future Church?

The feast of Pentecost which takes place next week on Sunday, May 23rd, has been called the birthday of the Church. It celebrates the presence of the Holy Spirit working through fallible, limited human beings (who have been mostly men). But there is a lot of concern today about the future of the Church. Some think it will die. Worse, for some, is the possibility it will revert to the good old days of power and prestige in a centralized church.

A recent poll indicates that only 47% of Americans attend a church regularly. This is a decrease from the 75% that was prevalent a half century ago. Those who say they practice no religion, the “Nones,” are rapidly increasing. The Catholic Church has particularly been hit by the loss. There is one Diocese that records the departure of 900 Catholics the day after the Vatican decree on not blessing gay couples. Some main-line Protestant churches are still thriving but, I suspect, at least partially because they have picked up disaffected Catholics. I will hazard a guess on the reasons for this abandonment.

First of all, we now live in a secularized culture where God does not seem important for daily human life. It takes more effort to remain a faithful Catholic. But there are obstacles to this happening. The sexual abuse crisis has been a scandal, a source of hypocrisy in the eyes of many, especially young people. The cover-up by Bishops and church authorities has been a disgrace and a loss of credibility.

Bishops are also largely obsessed with the one issue of, not just opposing abortion (quite reasonable) but also seeing this possible only through a legal way that seems to be rejected by a pluralistic society, even by people who are anti-abortion. Priests, under a lot of stress with fewer of them, are often blamed for poor sermons, clericalist and authoritarian ways of dealing with lay people, haughty and arrogant procedures. Yes, there are good priests and good parishes and people are grateful for them. And there are poor ones.

One of my favorite writers on the church scene these days is Massimo Faggioli, a theologian and ecclesialogist who teaches at Villanova University. He is persuaded that there is already a soft schism in the American church. The split is more political and cultural than religious. People apply the conservative/liberal split in

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American politics to the church. On one side are the bishops, and those people who want to go back to the old ways, reject LGBTQ people, want a more exclusive church. Some reject the Second Vatican Council and liturgical changes. Many of them are also against Pope Francis and his attempt at reform and change. On the other side are Catholics who uphold the rights of individual people, whether gay, black, Latino, as well as Jews and Muslims. They have appreciated the Second Vatican Council. Social Justice issues predominate. The first group often are afraid of any change. The second group want change on many different issues such as the place of women, the right to choose bishops, etc. The latter are often weak on Catholic identity and the universal community. All of this is not a sharp either/or distinction. Many people fall in a spectrum between these two sides.

I don't know how this split and scandal are going to be healed. I believe the Pope is trying. Our bishops and all of us need to get behind him. What I am sure of is that it must start and center on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and one's own acceptance as a chosen, beloved disciple of this Lord. "Who do you say that I am?" is the central question. We must know Jesus well, know the scriptures, know some history and an awareness of the church throughout the world. We can't rely on the Boston Globe to know any of this. And we need to accept the mission as adults to share our Christian Way of life with others.

What are your thoughts on any of this? Does it matter to you? Drop me a line at: joycet@glastonbury.org And a happy Pentecost! May the Force be with you.

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.