

Monastic Scribe XV: November 12, 2021

TRADITION!

November 1, 1982 is etched in my memory. I was studying in Rome at the time. On that particular day a group of us had the use of a Van to go to Assisi for the day. Nicholas, Richard, myself, and some other monks from Sant' Anselmo set off for the Umbrian hills. The trip there was easy and we proceeded to have a wonderful day in the home of Saint Francis. In the evening we started our way back to Rome. But this was not to be an easy journey. The traffic was horrendous and we crawled back, soon in the dark, and it took hours. We discovered the reason was that all Italians were returning to their home villages to pay their respects to their deceased parents and ancestors, a custom for All Souls' Day.

I lived in New Orleans for three years. Cemeteries there are built above ground since the water level is so high. Every Fall there is a lot of attention given to sprucing up the monuments in the cemetery, white-washing or painting them. On All Souls Day people gather for a Mass in the cemetery. Of course, New Orleans is also known for its jazz funerals – going to the cemetery, with the body, the band plays slow, mournful songs. On the return it is time for “Saints Come Marching In” and other joyous songs.

Mexico has its Day of the Dead on November 2nd. Altars laden with food to greet returning deceased members are put out. In its usual Latin style, this is a joyous feast with people exulting in honor of their deceased loved ones.

All these celebrations, and many more, have been part of a Catholic Christian tradition and passed on in Catholic cultures. Besides All Souls' Day, other celebrations of patron saints, feast days and fast days, processions and regular rituals were part of the Catholic fabric. Crucifixes, holy pictures and statues, holy water fonts bedecked our homes.

Why do I bring this up? Obviously these customs are dying in many places. Secularization is a heavy pressure of our western culture. We barely celebrate Christmas as a religious event. Catholics can be embarrassed to acknowledge their faith and traditions. I have heard that some do not want to offend atheists by bringing up religion. Catholics do not only no longer observe holy days but don't even know when they are celebrated.

Monastic Scribe XV: November 12, 2021

Could this be the end not just of a Catholic sub-culture but Catholicism itself? After all, Catholicism is imbedded and lived in sacraments, rituals, customs, color, song and dance. Are all these ways to die?

Here is what I think might be helpful in our personal spiritual lives and the life of the church. We can't wait for the institutional church to change all its ways. The Catholic faith must begin in the home. The family and home are the primary churches, as history does testify. Parents and grandparents are the first teachers. They can speak of God openly, not in theory and doctrines, but in personal belief. They can bless their children and remind them of God's presence. Why not rituals such as Advent calendars, Christmas crib, Saints' pictures and sculptures? Stories shared could include that of holy men and women of every age, including our own.

In the future a second level of Christian life may well be the Latin American experience of Base Ecclesial Communities where groups gather to read the scriptures, pray and talk of their lives. A priest is not needed for any of this. The third level would be to keep in touch with the universal Church, gather with other Christians, celebrate the Eucharist. The larger tradition of unity with people throughout the world includes demands of social justice, and an awareness of what the Catholic tradition really means with its support in identity, belonging, and meaning. The Big Church is important but must be built on a more fundamental base. And please realize that I am not talking about returning to a ghetto experience and withdrawing from society. The larger society should be built on the diversity of many traditions who respect other traditions working together for the common good.

Are you concerned about losing the traditions of Catholicism? What practices do you have to preserve your heritage? Drop me a line at:

joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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.