

Monastic Scribe XVIII: January 7, 2022

“I DID IT MY WAY!”

This title is the name of a song that Frank Sinatra sang and with which he became highly identified. I may have agreed to this belief at times myself. I thought of this temptation when I read, in last week's newspaper, of a person who was exploring how to be the best American. The context, inasmuch as I could figure it out, was an anti-vaxing attitude that believes that a person, especially an American, should be free of all external restrictions and have the freedom to decide values and practices for oneself. This is especially evident now in regards to rules from the federal government which some believe should be as few as possible. Nobody can tell me what I have to do!

This dedication to freedom is, indeed, a great American achievement. We have set the standard in the west and in much of the world for individual rights. However, along with it, we have developed a high degree of rugged individualism. No other country has reveled in individualism as we have. I want to do what I want, when I want and go where I want when it pleases me. I am not saying I haven't appreciated and benefited from such American values. As so many others have done, I have drunk in these cultural tendencies. Though I am a Catholic I have also embraced the Protestant proclivity to have my own right to determine my beliefs.

Neither the Church nor any other body tells me what to believe or do! And it is also certainly true that you must be true to your conscience and that, on the gut level, if you really know yourself, you often know what is really right to do. But something is wrong with all of this. We are in a freefall of common values so people feel they can determine their own values. I believe we are hitting a wall of doubts, confusion, a loss of meaning.

And it is precisely a matter of identity and meaning for which we still feel a great need. Exaggerated individualism leaves us spinning and grabbing on to new and easy solutions. Some people belittle others who are different. They are rude to people who request something of them. There are legitimate differences of opinions and insights, of course, but today differences and conflicts often lead to abuse.

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We are losing what we have in common. And that first means a shared humanity. We are all members of one human family, sharing one common home of the earth. Being human means, we are not God. We are limited creatures, given the earth to share with one another. We are bodily, sharing a material world with all creation. Our bodies are gifts to be cherished, each one a thing of beauty and we don't have to compare ourselves to others. Being bodily means we share great joy and exultation in meals, sex, natural beauty and inter-relational human endeavors. It also means we feel pain, sadness, suffering, diminishment, and death. Bearing all of this is the privilege of being human. But we also have an eternal and transcendent dimension in our beings. Thomas Merton identified the "point vierge," which he meant the spark of the divine deep within us. In his epiphany in Louisville, Merton suddenly realized what a glory it was to share humanity with all the people he saw. In the monastery he had thought he had chosen a superior life but it was his common sharing of humanity that was his true glory.

Jesus Christ taught us about human life and proposed the "kingdom of God" as the image of what we should be together. He lived an open table fellowship in which he invited all and every person to share a meal together. He refused to condemn an adulterous woman. He gave us the injunction to pray for our enemies. We are not on this earth just to build a prosperous lifestyle. We are here to serve and love one another. We are here to learn how to really love which, inevitably, includes a broken heart along the way. Christ embraced suffering and death to show us the way. In short, Christ became human to show us the way to really be human and, by so doing, to share in the divinity of God. When we rejoice or when we suffer, God does it with us.

The pandemic has been revealing our connectedness as people of this planet. Separation and isolation are the biggest anti-human ways we sin. Unity (not uniformity) shows how we are created in the image of God – three in one, different but the same. We share many gifts but one humanity.

Merton, after his Louisville experience, reflected that we are all shining like the sun and, if we could recognize that, we would bow down to each other. But the way to know this is by really knowing ourselves. Self-knowledge opens knowledge of God. And this means being open, vulnerable, honest. We can accept our shortcomings and faults for they are the opening to God's grace. Self-knowledge takes

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work, silence, humility. Are you working on better self-knowledge? I pray you do. And you can always share anything with me at: joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

Let's create a better, human, loving world together!

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.