

Monastic Scribe XXI: February 18, 2022

LOOK, MA...I'M PERFECT!

Once upon a time, in some parallel universe, in an exclusive Roman Catholic church, in a country still heavily Protestant, I was ordained a priest. Paul Blanchard, Marilyn Murray and many others at the time doubted Catholics could ever really be Americans. This didn't bother most Catholics who were sure they were the only true Church and questioned whether non-Catholics would ever get to heaven. To be an ordained priest was the top post for Catholics. We were supposed to have all the answers or could get them from bishops and popes.

But I did not feel so confident in being a priest. I found that I was being hung out to dry on some high pedestal. Yes, there were some nice privileges in being a priest but some of them made me uncomfortable. I was really a boy, inexperienced but treated like some unhuman idol.

Jesus taught, in words recorded in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:48), "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect". And then, as a monk, we learned that the religious life was known as the "State of Perfection". (Actually Thomas Aquinas called it "the state of acquiring perfection.") Geez, I was supposed to be perfect? I think now that the sexual abuses by priests in years to come followed this self-image of being perfect and inhuman with no sexuality admitted.

So that now that I have had some years to work on this perfect life, what do I really believe? Here are some scattered thoughts.

God did not make a perfect world. If this world were perfect, it would not change or grow and so would have to end. But we know the universe is still expanding. God is the power of love in evolution that is still creating. Many bad things happen because we are in an imperfect world. Imperfection means suffering, heartache, disappointment, poverty, death. What God expects of humans is to be part of that creative, evolutionary process and help bring our earth to a just and peaceful improvement. We are not here just to be comfortable.

Jesus did not found a perfect church. Many lives of the Saints portray people that seem never to have had a bad thought or word. But the scriptures show the people of God as being saints and sinners. The attempt to portray the church as the "immaculate spouse of Christ" is delusional. Popes, Bishops, Priests, Sisters as well as all church people need the humility, honesty, openness and vulnerability to recognize their imperfection. The irony is that this is the only way to really find

Monastic Scribe XXI: February 18, 2022

God in one's life. God loves us as we are, not as what we think we are or think we should be.

No one is a perfect Christian. (Or perfect Jew or Muslim, etc.) We have all been scarred in our growing up and have our defects, prejudices, denials, insecurities and fears. We may firmly profess our faith, but we have our doubts too which tests our faith. "Seven times down and eight times up" is an old Japanese proverb. It is all part of learning to love which is what we are here for. Love demands effort, tolerance, patience, not blaming or judging, making mistakes but admitting we are wrong and apologizing. Relax and be your true self. Give up trying to be perfect, secure, afraid to make mistakes.

This isn't just for priests and professional religious people. It is the human way. Writing in the March issue of "US Catholic", Kathleen Bonnette has an article entitled, "To be a Perfect Parent, Be Imperfect". She says the most important virtue to model is humility. Don't grovel and put yourself down. Be truthful about your virtues and about your vices. Be grateful for life and all your gifts.

So what do we do with Jesus' admonition to "be perfect"? Greek philosophy which influenced the early church believed the virtues, such as humility, existed in some pure state somewhere. We humans had to pursue the path to grab hold of this ideal and embody it in our lives. Then we could be perfect. But "perfection" in the Semitic mindset is more like being what you have been made to be, reach for the completion of your humanity. We have been made in the image and likeness of God. Jesus showed us how this is lived out in the human story. This is the way of love, justice, mercy, forgiveness, compassion.

I no longer try to be the perfect monk, priest or Christian. As Thomas Merton once experienced, I now know it is my glory to share humanity with everyone else and with all creation. I don't care if you call me "Father" or "Reverend". I don't want to be on a pedestal or be above other men and women. What do you think? Drop me a line at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org That would make my day perfect to hear from 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.