

Monastic Scribe XXIII: March 18, 2022

GETTING TO KNOW ME

I have read that Saint Francis used to include, in his night prayers, the short prayer, "God, who are you? God, who am I?" If you have done any soul searching in your life, you will feel some identification with this prayer. Most of us go through a number of identities in our life in our search to really know ourselves. When this first happens to adolescents, it can be very painful. It takes a lifetime to really grow into the depth of our being and we make mistakes along the way. Socrates, hundreds of years ago, used to repeat to people seeking his wisdom, "Know thyself" ("Gnose auton!") Perhaps you have not given this much thought, but self-knowledge is crucial in deepening an interior life, a life that touches the God life within us.

Thomas Merton labeled the phenomenon of our different selves as the "true self" and the "false self." These labels have stuck in much spiritual writing today. Our true selves are who we really are, created in the image and likeness of God, always growing deeper into this oneness with God. Our false selves are the selves (or "masks") we put on to function in this world. This self may be the person that our parents wanted us to be. It may be the person we want others to see in us. It may be the look that we believe will make us acceptable to others.

We also put on masks when we work, take part in any social activity. I want to be and to be seen as a good mother, teacher, educator, businessman. We really have to put on masks to function in life. There is nothing wrong with that. The problem is when we really believe we are that person we are trying to show. It is also painful for some people to know they don't live up to the selves they want to be but can't quite make it. And the saddest reality, which is very real, is that people may not really know themselves at all.

Being my true self is really just accepting who I am. But letting go of taking of the false selves takes some work, pain and sometimes failed attempts. Usually some experience of great suffering or great love is needed to set me free from the false self. But there are some proven ways to let go of our false selves. First you have to really know that self. There has to be some interior life, some interior awareness and consciousness of the manner in which I think, speak, work. The first way this often happens is when I examine what annoys me in another person. Does someone who is always late really irritate me? What might that be telling me about myself? Why do I get upset?

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This gets more serious when I am disturbed by people who are different – Blacks, Latinos, Asians, gays, immigrants. Why do they threaten me? Why do they scare me? A Black movie director was recently arrested, handcuffed and taken away when some neighbor saw him. This neighbor is not a free person.

Silence and reflection are also needed to know myself. To ponder nature, other cultures, other ages may shed new life on how small my vision is. If your world is always noisy, always plugged in to some gadget, always tuned into your television or talking to Alexa, you will not hear yourself and thus not hear God. Carl Jung called the part of ourselves that we do not want to see or acknowledge as “the shadow”. It contains the aspects of ourselves that we would really like to deny or ignore. And Richard Rohr calls the work we have to do to acknowledge our shadow and bring it into light, as “shadow boxing”. It takes work, silence, reflection. And a sense of humor too – laugh at yourself! “Oh, what an ass I am!”

What does all this have to say about God? We may be very good at praying and doing churchy things. But to what God do we pray? God is a great mystery but Saint John tells us, “God is love”. God is absolute love and loves us all the time. This means God loves us as we are, now, with imperfections and even sinfulness. We reject this loving God if we reject ourselves. So the great irony is that we aren’t loved by God because we are perfect and sinless. God wouldn’t recognize such a person. Rather God loves the real, struggling me. We have to accept that real, true self if God is to find us. Stop trying to be perfect. Stop pretending you are anything but that which you are. Be truthful, utterly honest with God and yourself.

Thus Saint Francis prayed to know himself. Years before that, Saint Augustine prayed, “Noverim me ut noverim te” which means, “Oh that I would know myself so that I might know You.” Saint Thérèse, the Little Flower, prayed to bear the displeasing parts of herself. If I love and accept my true self, I will also accept the real selves of others. I will not judge or discriminate against others. Dualistic thinking, that is “either/or”, “in/out”, “superior/inferior” may work in the world of business, machines, theories but it doesn’t work with God and people.

I do not write to you because I think I know myself now. I still become surprised when I get an insight into myself. “Why didn’t I see this before? Why did it take me so long?” I thank God who is patient with me and allows me to make mistakes so I may grow up. I love God and myself more and I become a freer and a more

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relaxed person every time I realize this a little more. I hope you have come to that also in your life journey. I'm always glad to hear from you at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org

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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.