

Monastic Scribe XXXI: July 15, 2022

Shall We Get Together?

I grew up in a pre-Vatican II Church. We lived in an Irish-German neighborhood and much of life revolved around our Catholic parish. We walked to Church, fasting before communion. In a pre-television age, weeknight devotions (e.g. to Our Lady of Perpetual Help) brought people out for social contacts. My brother played basketball in the CYO league (Catholic Youth Organization). As an altar boy, I was treated to such events as a yearly visit to the Ringling Brothers Circus in Manhattan. Many social events took place on the parish level too. For instance, among other events, there was the regular blackface Minstrel which I thought funny at the time. When my father lost his job after the depression, the parish helped us to pay the house rent. The old church, largely ethnic and immigrant, was strong on communal identity, if weak in openness to others.

Catholics, at the time, were still defensive of being truly American. Prejudice towards them was still alive. Then a torrent of social changes also changed parish life. The GI Bill of Rights helped Catholics, among others, to get a college education. John Kennedy was elected President. People, in post-war prosperity, moved to the suburbs. The inner-city parish shriveled. Common identity was no longer so strong. Some of Catholic identity then came from being what we opposed. This included anti-communism and later anti-abortion. The country became more secularized and God was no longer an important part of our common life. The sexual abuse crisis and poor leadership put the church in poor esteem.

There is a crisis of loneliness in our society. Many people seek community but find it hard to live because we have developed such a strong individualism. My own rights and freedoms trump the common good that has been part of the Catholic ethos. Newly aware issues such as women's rights and acceptance of gays now make the church look out of touch and hypocritical at worse. The institutionalized church has been slow to respond. The shortage of priests and the building of mammoth churches hardly promotes the community which so many desire. In most suburban churches it is a handful of people, 10% at best, which are really involved in a parish. Many remain passive spectators.

Not everyone wants to return to a church community. Some may feel beyond it now and have family and friends for the support systems they want. Others, meanwhile, with some hope in a new, renewed church, look forward to a revival

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of what seems now to be a dying church. What might we look for? I don't think we can revive the pre-Vatican Church. It was a church, often strong in piety and faith, but expressed in devotions and not plugged into the Scriptures, liturgy and the paschal mystery. It was a passive, priest-centered church where laity were asked to "Pray, pay and obey." That won't work anymore.

Can we learn from the church in South America with its "Base Communities"? These are small groups of men and women who gather to read and pray the scriptures and apply them to their lives. These groups also join together with other groups for Sunday Eucharist. Will we Americans, so enmeshed in our individualism, be able to develop such small groups? In all events, some such structures must be developed that call people together, clerical and lay, men and women, rich and poor, perhaps ecumenical as well, to each other on an ongoing basis. Is the Synodal system and forth-coming 2023 meeting preparing us for this?

Here are some possible things that I think might happen in communities that form a renewed church. There may be other things besides these. First of all, it must be an adult centered church requiring a true conversion of adult Christians who embrace being disciples of Jesus Christ. Karl Rahner, a Jesuit theologian in the mid twentieth-century, said the people of the future church would be mystics or would not be Christians at all. I believe this is the time for mystics. Taking part in a small group would challenge one to be so. Secondly, Catholics have to come to know the Bible. This would not be to have an answer book to all life's problems but to share a story, a common narrative, of how God has been with God's people. Thirdly, we have to be people of justice, people who act, people who follow the "see, judge and act" paradigm of being alive in the Spirit.

Are these dreams? Well, Pope Francis says "Let us dream." We don't have to wait for someone else to act. The question is whether we are up to pursue such a dream. What do you think? Contact me 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.