

Monastic Scribe XXXVI: September 30, 2022

THE WAY(S) TO GOD

For Christians, Jesus is the way, as well as the life and the truth.

The early Christian movement was called “The Way”. Together we belong to a community of faith, the Church, which we recognize as the Body of Christ. We try to become more like Jesus in our thoughts, words and actions. But there has not been only one Christian spirituality. There is not a uniformity in practices but many ways have been the way in different countries, cultures, historical eras and centuries.

For four hundred years after the Protestant Reformation there tended to be one recognizable way to be a Catholic. Reactions to the demands of the Reformers led to a fortress type of mentality in which everything was sure and certain. The Church prayed in Latin and the faithful attending Mass were entirely passive in worship. The texts were unknown and Missals with translations of the Latin prayers were not allowed until almost the 20th century. People did not receive communion regularly and often, when they did, only after going to confession. So many prayed the Rosary during Mass. Devotions, novenas, private practices, apparitions, became the main piety of many people. Passivity to the words and actions of the priest was complimented by an individualism. It was all between me and God. Religion became a way to assure the way to heaven after one’s death. The times were also characterized, as Richard Rohr writes, “by belief in an angry, punitive God and validation by personal good behavior”.

In the nineteenth century, the awareness grew that we had neglected the depths and history of our faith. Is what we developed, some asked, the way to be Christ in the world? We then saw Catholics looking into liturgy, scripture, early church teachings, Christ-centered theology, social justice, contemplative prayer, the mystical tradition. Much of this rich Catholic tradition had been neglected. It was not that the devotional and personal life of the church was wrong and to be discarded. They may all still be practiced. It was rather a matter of finding the deeper, authentic tradition of the Church. Thus began the road to the Second Vatican Council which opened the rich tradition of the Church to all the People of God. Now we still struggle to find the depths of our faith and change our comfortable ways of passive and quiet devotion.

Fifty years after the Council we see many changes as well as many retrievals of the deeper aspects of religion. It is not that a one way for all conformity has evolved but rather a richness of prayer, understanding and practice. The Religious

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Orders have particularly shown a variety of ways to be Church. After the Council the Jesuits once again emphasized the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. Benedictines refound Lectio Divina as the ancient way of scriptural prayer. Religious Women turned to the unique charisms of their founders. And a profound sense of variety in oneness, a pluriformity in being one people.

The center of Christianity is a relationship to Jesus Christ as the way to the Creator God and enabled by Jesus' Holy Spirit. It is a communal awareness of being the body of Christ, all of us embodied parts of the created cosmos and partners with all people, all animals, all creatures, all of the universe in praising God. It is richer but, of course, also more demanding. It is easier to be on one's own private way, praying but not sharing how we pray and how we act. I wonder whether it is a coincidence that the years of private, individual devotions of being Christian have been years of being unaware of the kind of Christianity we were living – racism, white Christian supremacy, a closed, exclusive attitude to “others” whether of gender, race, ethnic group, nationality, and a closed way of domination of the rest of the created world?

Christianity is a relational and embodied religion, based on a relational three-in-one God. We can't go it alone. We are responsible for one another. Pope Francis has taken a mammoth step to change how we, as church, work together and attend to the needs of our world together. The Synod, now to begin its second phase of preparation, is not so much a way to make individual changes in the order of the church, but a way to be church. Clergy and laity have to learn to actively work together, listen to each other, care for each other in this church and for our world. We need the resources of our faith tradition, taught in the Second Vatican Council, to truly be the Body of Christ in the world today. There are those who oppose this development. They would rather be left alone in their piety, remain passive in worship and community. Will there be a future for this Church? There are many who question whether there will soon be much of a church left. You can let me know some of your thoughts by writing me at:

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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.