

## Monastic Scribe XL: December 2, 2022

### REALLY REAL RELIGION

Christianity is a very demanding religion for some people. It has been a religion of doctrines to believe and rules to keep. Accept these requirements and you have a ticket to heaven. High on the litmus test of doctrines is the need to believe first in a Three-in-One God and, secondly, in a human being who is both man and God. These beliefs and practices were sustained in former years by a strong, local community church, based not only on faith but on ethnic cohesiveness. The parish, for immigrants and Catholics in a new Protestant country, was the social, educational, entertainment center as well as the religious focus of their lives.

There are still some good, vibrant parishes. And some people are attracted to the warmth of community. There are even some attempts to reconstruct the parish of yore and try to be isolated from the culture. (cf. Ross Douhart, "The Benedict Option"). Some of the old, fine devotional ways do hang on. But the ethnic, inclusive parish in which I grew up is more or less gone. Most practicing Catholics have a different view about the obligations of faith and practice, including Sunday Mass. And, of course, many no longer practice their faith at all, except, maybe, in a private way. There are probably as many former Catholics in our country today than those who practice regularly. And we have lost the younger generation completely.

Now there are many good reasons to abandon the institutional church. Many people have been hurt in various ways. Many turn away feeling they do not get anything out of attending church. What I wonder about is whether most of these people also leave behind Jesus Christ when they leave the church. I may be wrong but my suspicion is that personal commitment to Jesus was not always the center of faith. In the centuries after the Protestant Reformation, Protestants put their faith primarily in the Bible, and Catholics in the Church. With good intent they felt they were doing what God asked of them in light of eventual eternal life.

In many ways we are today back to the early centuries of the church's history. It is no longer a politically correct thing to do to go to church. Society does not encourage or even approve religious practice. We live in a secularized, often anti-religious, world. And we have become absorbed into the general culture. Black Christians, as well as Jews, seem to have a stronger religious identity because they

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have been persecuted minorities. Becoming comfortable, more affluent, in an individual-centered society makes religion less a demand.

What is the future of religious bodies? I can't tell for sure as I believe God, the Holy Spirit, can surprise us. But I tend to believe it will have to start with real commitment to God, which for Christians means Jesus Christ. He is the image of the invisible God and shows us the way to be truly human beings. But it has to be more than professing a doctrine. Perhaps Jesus Christ, human being, has not been a real human being for us. We accepted him as Son of God and thereby placed him on another, unreal plane and often ignored his teachings.

I think, if we recognize that we are back in the early days of the church before it was officially recognized, we will get back into the mentality of the early followers of Jesus. Place your belief in him as God temporarily in the background for that is a matter of faith. But come to know and love Jesus as this extraordinary person who excites us as the one we want to follow. Be like the apostles and women disciples who regarded him as Rabbi, Teacher. See him in the scriptural mold of the great prophets, whether Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah. Take his example of the human who arose early to spend time in prayer and also spent nights on a mountain in contemplative prayer. He is the paragon of the mystic. Accept your humanity with him and call him brother. Appreciate his calling us his friends, and be his friend.

In reciting the official Creed of the church, we have left a hole in our understanding of Jesus. The Creed reads "...I believe... he was... born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate..." Huh? What happened in between? What does he teach us and show us? How does he give meaning to our lives? Mahatma Gandhi was awed at Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" (Matt. 5-7). Jesus taught and showed love, non-violence, compassion, forgiveness, a simple lifestyle a reaching out to the poor and marginalized. Gandhi said he would have become a Christian if he witnessed Christians practicing what Jesus showed us to be the way to fullness of life.

What our baptism called us to was conversion. A call to a new way of life, a new way of thinking and seeing reality. We must first really know Jesus intimately and give ourselves to follow him. We must keep his memory alive by our taking part in a community which shares the scriptures and the breaking of bread. It may be my fantasy but I believe the church as it is may die but Jesus Christ is alive and still

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with us. A new church will be born where we are really his disciples. With Christmas coming, we can delight in the birth of a baby. But do we know the adult Jesus? You can contact me at: [joycet@glastonburyabbey.org](mailto: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.