

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

January 5, 2020

Spiritual Ponderings

How Christianity Saved Civilization...

As we enter into the month of January and a new civil year, I am going to continue my reflections that are guided by Mike Aquilina and James Papandrea's book: ***How Christianity Saved Civilization... and Must Do So Again***. Please join me on reflecting on the idea of how Christ's message spread through His Church has ganged the world. Quotes from their book will be in bold and my commentary will be in normal font.

Revolution #3 The Work Place

In the realm of what we might call the workplace, Christianity emphasized the dignity of human labor. Based on the assumed value of the individual person, the church affirmed the honor and manual labor and eventually rid the world of the belief that one person could own another.

Two of the men that I admired the most were Red and Norm. They were friends of my grandmother and active members of my parish growing up. What I admired most about them was their willingness to pitch in and do whatever needed to get done. Norm and Red were comfortable and happy being chairmen of events and they were comfortable and happy being dishwashers. Work (manual labor) for Red and Norm was simply an opportunity to show others that they cared.

In the ancient world the taking of slaves was normally the result of conquest. When Rome conquered the Mediterranean world, the losing sides became slaves. The children of slaves were also slaves, so, in time the slave population grew to be enormous. In some rural districts, almost everyone who worked on the giant factory farms was a slave. No one knows how many people in their empire were slaves, but in Italy, where many of the slaves were sent after Rome's numerous victories, slaves probably composed at least a third of the population.

In Paul's letter to Philemon St. Paul writes to Philemon and asks him to release Onesimus (a slave that Philemon has lent to Paul during his house arrest. Paul proclaims that he could demand Philemon to do so but he would rather Philemon do so out of the goodness of his heart and for the love of God and Paul. St. Luke willing became a slave to Paul during Paul's imprisonment in order to learn the Gospel for St. Paul.

That is much as can be said in favor of the lot of the slave. For the most part, the life of a slave was miserable. Legally a slave was property---a thing, not a person. A slave owner could beat or torture his slave for any reason or for no reason at all. If he decided the slave deserved to die, no one would stop him from destroying valuable property, but they would not think he had committed a crime. He could rape any of his slaves without consequence, and the slave had no right to complain; a well-to-do gentleman might buy a certain number of attractive slaves for that purpose. Under a particular bizarre twist of the law, the testimony of a slave was not valid in court of law unless the slave had been tortured first. The slaves who worked on the giant factory farms often died from ill treatment; it was cheaper for owners to buy new slaves than to provide decent living conditions for their slaves.

Slavery or treating people as objects is what will inevitably happen when human life is not respected at all its stages. If a person value comes from what he or she produces and not because he or she is a child of God our society is doomed.

The pagans thought work was for the servile class and leisure was for the upper crust. The Christian though that both work and leisure were necessary for everyone.

One of the ways that the Church promoted human dignity by promoting the value of work was by emphasizing the Sabbath Day. This is one of the reasons why I feel Sunday Mass is so important. The Mass helps us realize that our value does not come from what we are doing because from the world's point of view we are doing nothing. The Mass teaches us that our value comes from who God created us to be – His sons and daughters. Our God loves us even when we are sitting around doing nothing.

But there was one enormous difference. Monks were not men of leisure. True, they made time to pray throughout the day, but even the best-educated among them also had to dig ditches, plant crops, grind flour, or copy manuscripts. There were no class distinctions among the monks, no men who were set apart for a life of leisure on the grounds that they were presumed to be superior to the laboring herd. The proof that monk was striving after

holiness, that he was developing as far as it was possible for a human being to develop, was that he was working hard.

The faithful medieval monk is a prime example of faith in practice and how valuing work reshaped culture. Compare St. Benedict's ideas of work to the ideas of Augustus Caesar.

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January 12, 2020

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Revolution #4 Religion

In the realm of religion, the church to find herself, and, by extension, religion in general. Christianity redefined what it meant for humanity to connect with the divine, and in the process, it taught that God is love, and union with God is open to all persons. Thus, the church recognized, in the course of her struggle to find herself, the importance of inclusiveness and the value of unity.

I believe that I am like most modern day Catholics and so I assume all of us run into the problem of some days forgetting to be Catholic and instead practicing my faith in a pagan way. The pagan theology of the time presupposed that there were certain deities (super human beings) that controlled the weather, animals, etc. If you made these deities mad then they would punish you with a plague and if you made them happy then they would shower blessings upon you. Personally, I know that God does not punish me (my punishment is the evil I cause by turning away from God who is Love. I do find myself time and time again asking myself "what did I do to upset God?" when bad things happen to me despite knowing that this is not what my faith professes. I have to stop myself and redirect my thoughts to "what is God trying to teach me by allowing this situation to take place?" We sometime do this with others. When someone gets hurt we may think to ourselves, "Wow, what did she do to deserve that?" despite knowing that God does not work that way.

This Church that Jesus founded with his apostles was a revolution of religion in three important ways. First, Christianity redefined the way humans related to the Divine. The relationship between Greeks and Romans and their gods was a relationship of patronage, in which the people hoped to please their gods enough to receive protection and blessings. The Hebrew people, the nation of Israel, were in a covenant relationship with their God, and they were expected to remain faithful to God to avoid the consequence of infidelity and to live a life of blessing. But Christians entered into a relationship with their God as individuals responding to an offer of forgiveness, which is, at its heart, God taking the initiative to reach out to people in mercy and compassion. Those individuals who respond to God's invitation are then gathered into a community of mutual care and support, and they reflect the grace they received from God to one another. In the Christian faith, God is not only the transcendent Creator and Judge; He is also relational---up close and personal, and intimately involved in the lives of people and their relationships. God cares about people. God is love (1 John 4:7-21).

Our faith is a faith that is both individualistic and communitarian at the same time. We are meant to be saved as a community and so the Church emphasizes community throughout its liturgies especially in the Sacraments.

I am also extremely glad that I do not live under a patronage program with God. I am glad instead that our God is a merciful God who really cares for us as individuals.

What a revolution of thought it was when Christians started thinking of "being like God is being all lovable instead of being like God as being all powerful.

Second Christianity redefined the way humans understand God. For the Greeks and Romans, there were many gods, and demigods or other being who were quasi divine. For the Hebrews, there was one God, but direct contact with Him was rare and reserved for a select few. For Christians, the one God can be known in Jesus Christ and is present in

the Holy Spirit... Because God is love, God had reached out to humanity by extending Himself into the created world and the human realm.

Sometimes, I think we, human beings, take it too lightly that God became one of us. This would be like the President of the United States become a private in the Army.

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January 19, 2020

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Revolution #4 Religion Continued

Third, the understanding of God as a Trinity of three diving persons, but also God's is in relationship with humanity but also that God is internally relational, that divine love is constantly being shared among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that this loving relationship has existed since long before humans entered the picture.

Thinking of God as a loving Father like Jesus reveals him to be is much more amazing than thinking of God as a supreme military general.

Before Christianity, religion was a service contract. For the most part, ancient religion entailed people serving various gods (usually by ritual sacrifice) so that the gods would protect people or grant them blessings—in effect, religion meant doing whatever it was believed would coax or motivate the gods to do the people's will.

When I sit down and pray at night, I try to focus on praying (enter into a relationship with God) and not witchcraft (trying to manipulate God.) I want God to help me because we are friends and not because He owes me. (God has done so much for me that I will be able to place God in my debt).

To make things more difficult, the multiple gods could be at odds, and sometimes a person had guess which side they should be on. Trying to outcome the influence the outcome of a war became more a matter of praying to the more powerful god than putting together the more powerful army.

"Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right." - Abraham Lincoln

What made Christianity revolutionary was that it was more than a service contract; it was a relationship with the Divine.

"Mic drop!" God wants to be in a relationship with you and me.

Revolution # 5 – Community

In our world, the word religion implies standards for behavior in everyday life. In the Greco-Roman world, it did not have.

The authors of our book spend a lot of time talking about how religion focused more on duty to the state then it did to everyday life behind closed door. A person practiced his or her faith in public in order to appease the god who was patronizing the city. As long as one's sins were not to public no one cared. A person could be considered a religious person if he or she fulfilled their religious obligations of offering sacrifices despite being a rapist and murderer behind closed doors.

In the Roma community, Christians looked outward from the church and care for the poor and the sick, regardless of their religion. The concept of Christian charity was something alien to the self-centered perspective of Roman culture, yet by the end of the fourth century Christian charity had replaced Greco – Roman virtue as the goal of human progress.

In the Roman religion there was no concern for the poor and there was no altruistic demands. A person could remain as selfish as he or she wanted to. People gave to the poor only to keep them at a distance or keep them from rioting.

Following Jesus's lead, the Church has always insisted that we respond to the love of God by loving our neighbor.

How weird the early Christians must have been to others?

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January 26 2020

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Revolution #6: Death

We believe in the resurrection—not just the immortality of the soul but also the resurrection of the body. That idea marked the difference between the Christians and their pagan neighbors.

I think we all saw this one coming because after all the Resurrection is one of the major points of Christianity. I did not know how much it separated us until I read further.

In the realm of ultimate concerns, Christianity influenced attitudes towards life and death, not to mention belief in the afterlife. And by doing so, Christians further promoted a culture of life. The culture of life (and eternal life) gave people the hope they desperately needed, which led to the freedom to rise above the daily grind it even to express their God – given creativity through art.

Hope, that this world is not all there is, continues to inspire us rise above the daily grind

A dead body was something a pagan didn't want to think about. The mere sight of a corpse made a pagan ritually unclean, not to mention giving him the willies. Yet Christians treated dead bodies as though they were worth something—as though they were still somehow connected to the honored dead, not just a cast-off container for souls.

Catholicism has never devalued the human body and has always done its best to show this physical container respect because it alone could make our spiritual soul visible.

Revolution #7 State/Government

Finally, in the realm of the state, the church revolutionized government. Beginning with Constantine, Ambrose admitted not only that they were not gods but also, they were not above the law and were morally accountable to God. Although some, like Constantine, consider the postponement of baptism a loophole in the system, the fact they thought they had the postponement baptisms to avoid accountability proves the point. There was a higher power, and authority over the Emperor, one who had behavioral expectations for the Emperor, and one who could remove the Emperor from the throne to be did not measure up. With all of the seven revolutions in mind, it is indeed remarkable that the church, born of oppression in the Roman Empire, would be the entity that brought hope to the world.

The focus in the Pre-Christian world was maintaining the state (government) at all cost. This was what made Christianity so dangerous. People were putting their faith in front of their duty to the state. The fact that so many Christians chose to give up their lives and be tortured and killed than to submit to the state religion was both amazing and evangelizing.

Before the time of Constantine, no society in the world had ever had anything like religious freedom.

When Constantine converted to Catholicism he first legalized Christianity. He did not make it the state religion. Another Emperor would come and do that. Most Church Fathers felt "forced" conversions were of no use and should be avoided.

By the time the Church was in a position to influence government in the fourth century, a Christian idea of government had emerged – that those who governed should be the protectors of those whom they govern. Leadership was not a right; it was a responsibility-one that included serving the “least” of society. To govern was to be entrusted with something very valuable –human beings created in the image of God and the resources that sustain them. In other words Christian leadership is a form of stewardship.

Whenever the Church (or world) forgets this bad things happen. Leadership should never be seen as a way of earning God’s love or prestige. It should always be about serving others.