

EXPECTATIONS — REALISTIC — CATHOLIC

This Sunday marks the end of the Christmas season with the celebration of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the river Jordan. It was some years earlier that John first appeared on the scene, coming off the desert, looking quite disheveled and speaking eloquently about the need to convert, to turn back to the God of Israel. He was a voice in the desert preparing the way for the Lord, as foretold by Isaiah the prophet. Israelites and others flocked to hear him and many heeded his call to repent, sealing their sincerity by letting John pour water over them as a sign of washing away their sins. All began to feel that the promised Messiah was coming and this alone fueled their hopes that now they might return as a nation to their former glory, repelling the hated Romans who were now ruling over them. Their expectations about the “one to come” were based on a long held belief that whoever it might be, he would be a great leader and lead them all to the new Promised Land.

However, many thought it might very well be John himself who would lead them, but he insisted that the one coming after him was far greater than himself, and he was unworthy to even touch the straps of his sandals. When seemingly out of nowhere, an unknown man appeared on the scene, John pointed out to the people surrounding him that there was the Lamb of God, the promised messiah. John records how he along with his friend Andrew took the words of the Baptist seriously and they went across the Jordan to talk with this man, Jesus by name. They followed him to where he was staying and spent the rest of the afternoon talking with him. When they left, they were simply overwhelmed with Jesus and they had to tell Andrew’s brother, Simon, that they had found the Messiah!

It was not too long after that Jesus suddenly was in the River Jordan facing John and asking him to baptize him. John recognized him as the true Messiah and simply refused to baptize him, claiming that he was simply not worthy. But Jesus told him to do it, that later he would understand. So there in the river, John poured water over the head of Jesus and suddenly John heard a voice from above, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased” and looking up he also saw a dove hovering over the head of Jesus. This was God the Father now blessing his son and now sending him forth to do the work of redemption. John then knew his mission was complete, and all he would say was that now He, Jesus, must increase while he, John, must decrease. From then on Jesus began his public life, talking with the people, preaching the Good news, a new meaning of genuine love in their faith and healing everyone who asked him for help. His name and his message spread rapidly and literally thousands of Israelites flocked to hear him.

But what were their expectations about Jesus? He was extraordinary beyond any doubt but was he truly the Messiah, the one who would free them from the Romans? Beyond that, just who was he really? They had no clue. The way he talked and the way he acted seemed to indicate the opposite, yet they were totally enthralled with his message, his healing powers, and above all his genuine love for them which came across so strongly through all his actions and words. For three years they followed him and listened, but then suddenly the true venom of the leaders took hold as they saw their power decreasing and they determined that he must die. With diabolical hatred they plotted and then on that fateful night before the great Sabbath they had their chance and before anyone realized he was hanging on a cross, the ultimate penalty of death.

The closest companions of the Lord, his Apostles, could not believe what was happening, it was all so swift. But then, three days later, they heard reports that he had arisen! It took some time for them to believe that this was true, and with that they began to believe that he was indeed not just the Messiah, but was truly the Son of God, God Himself. Their expectations of what and who the Messiah would be were suddenly fulfilled, but not in the way they had imagined. And after they watched Jesus ascend into heaven and nine days later experienced the Holy Spirit coming upon them, the Church Jesus founded was on its way to become not just a reality but a force that could and would change a world.

Now some two thousand years later, one can ask just what are our expectations of what the Church founded by Jesus should be like? There is a long history going back to Jesus, but it is often a tumultuous history filled with human foibles, human aspirations, human pride and prejudices, and very human sins. Yet despite all this, the Church still remains one, holy, Catholic and apostolic, the four marks that distinguish it from all other churches, faiths, and religions. So today, in the twenty-first century, just what are the expectations of the ordinary Catholic living in our country, the United States? Given the culture of the United States which at present is quite materialistic and hedonistic, how does our Church stand out? The answers will most likely be as diverse as people are diverse, each having some ideal in their minds, but through all this there will be something of a common thread.

The culture stresses that everyone has a right to be happy at all times. If this is not true in one's life, then something must be wrong and must be fixed. This leads to all sorts of moral problems as well as financial ones. Happiness is the common denominator as the guideline and this is most obvious in all the advertisements one is peppered with on a daily basis. Take this, take that, do this, do that and happiness is assured. It is all an illusion that is for sale with only broken promises as a result.

In the practice of the Catholic faith, Mass is and must be at the very core of one's faith. This is a given but all too many stress that when one attends Mass, one must leave with a happy experience, a happy feeling, a happy outcome. Music becomes all important, and other forms of ritual begin to emerge all of which involve the Mass serving the externals rather than the externals serving the Mass. There was a time in not the too distant past when one referred to the Sacrifice of the Mass, acknowledging its sacrificial character. Today the mass is referred to more and more as a reenactment of the Last Supper. No longer is there an altar; it is a table, and like sharing in any festive meal brings happiness, so should the Mass. Wrong! The Mass should result in a true joy coming from the fact that we share in Christ's sacrifice. Happiness can evaporate in an instant while joy can exist even amidst pain and suffering. It is joy which Christ came to give to his followers, a joy that will continue on into eternity.

The whole basis of our belief is in the fact that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to redeem it. Our religion, our faith is one based on love, divine love and human love. The idea that love might involve pain and even suffering is anathema to many, yet true love often involves this and when one freely accepts this, then Joy is the result. Thus, our expectations of what our faith should be must be carefully considered and perhaps courageously change. Jesus showed us the way. Follow him amidst joy.

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