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CONFESSION OF FAITH

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STEP 1 "It started when...."

Our esteemed editor (Fr. Greg Singleton) dropped me an email some time back and asked if I'd like to follow up on the article I wrote on Church Structure for the second edition of this Occasional Periodical. His invite went something along the lines: If "Article One" gives the structure, then "Article Two" should lay out the message as it needs to be proclaimed at the beginning of this 21st. Century.

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

I've started that Article #2 three other times, (this is attempt number four,) and I've abandoned each of the others because I had not found the answer to the inherent question of that first Article, which I now see as: If contemporary society needs to discover a new model of Church, then what is the unique message that needs to be proclaimed from that new model and why is that new world different?

Or, to put it another way, if we (and by that I mean all Christian churches,) are being invited (which I firmly believe we are) to create a new wine skin, it seems sensible to assume that the Spirit is brewing a new wine for it. What does that mean?

The journey into these questions has been real for me, and the answer, well, you'll see and judge for yourself.

All I can say is that in another age I'd be nailing a copy of this article to a Cathedral door, I feel that strongly about it.

STEP 2 "To be honest, it goes back to when....."

Fr. Greg's "Something to think about" the other month, discussing different strands in our wide Catholic understanding of the Paschal Mysteries, taught me a new word - *Theosis*.¹ My reaction was "oh good, at last, there's a valid alternative theology about salvation and there's a word for it!"

My excitement at learning this new word came out of my frustration at what I had been offered as an exclusive alternative for so long. Like many in and outside the Catholic and other Churches, the theology of Atonement had never worked for me. I have no problem recognizing human sinfulness, both individual and collective. I have no problem accepting and celebrating the Eucharist, and all it encompasses, as the fullest symbol and reality of our reconciliation with each other and God. But my faith did not need a "lamb" to be slain in order for "God" (or anyone else,) to be pacified, not even symbolically.

Atonement, in its usual manifestation of our needing a spotless sacrifice etc., was a theology that belonged to our Jewish past.

Paul gets it right, for me, when he says that our salvation was won because "Christ was obedient," only adding afterwards, "even unto death on a cross." As both the writer of that great hymn of praise recounted at the beginning of the letter to the Philippians, as well as whomever penned chapter 5 of the letter to the Hebrews, it is the obedience of Jesus which brings with it the biggest gift: Obedience and the learning of humility. After those two things, everything was possible. Salvation comes through obedience, or as Paul elsewhere calls it, love, (1. Corinthians 13,) and without that even death on a cross is worthless.

In the early Church, two dominant understandings of what others have called "The Jesus Event" lived in parallel. They do not negate each other, though they do not automatically enforce each other either. The Atonement model was dominant with the Church in Jerusalem, grounded as it was in a Jewish story centered around Temple sacrifice. The other model, *Theosis*, was more common among the desert communities, the mystics and in the Church as it grew in the East, finding echoes

¹ "NEWTON, BABIES AND BATHWATER: Removing Hellfire, Brimstone and Individual Redemption from our Understanding of the Gospel while Keeping Salvation, Healing and Wholeness"

<http://www.csfecc.org/html/082511.pdf>

even in older faith traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism.²

What became the Oriental (Orthodox) and Occidental (Roman) Churches grew side by side, not without conflict, through to the Great Schism in the 11th Century. Every prior split, usually termed a "heresy" by Rome so it was clear who was right and therefore won, had helped the Roman church build more and more sturdy walls from which to defend its theological stance. Since that Schism the dominant emphasis of the Roman church culture has been maintenance - of Tradition, of Power, and of Scriptural Interpretation. As each successive "protest" came along - vernacular bibles, vernacular liturgies, de-centralized Episcopal power - the Roman Church leaders dug themselves in, wanting a safer and stronger place from which to defend themselves.

However, before and since that time many great minds had continued to weave their meditations and instruction between the two poles of Atonement and *Theosis*, including, in the West, Meister Eckhart and Thomas Aquinas (both Dominicans of course,) as well as Francis and Bonaventure (quintessential Franciscans) with, more consistently, the great voices of the East, including Athanasius and John Chrysostom from almost the beginning, through to Alexander Schmemmann and John Zizioulas.

One might say that for too long, (since about 1250, when it was just beginning to have the option of real reform and growth fueled by the best of the nascent Franciscans and Dominicans who followed that sad and unnecessary Great Schism,) the Catholic Church has been digging itself further and further into a hole that the brave souls of Vatican II tried, but apparently largely failed it now seems, from which to extricate it.

Let me also admit here to another element of this personal search, this quest, based on a dis-ease that has been nagging at me for some time. For the past several years I have been questioning what it means to be an independent Catholic community member and priest beyond enjoying a faith that is most accurately, though not kindly described as "Catholic Lite."

We know what we are not, (homophobic, misogynistic, unnecessarily judgmental,) but theologically what are we uniquely and really? Where is our "Freedom," our "Independence?" I'm not proud of this quest in some ways, and I certainly do not mean it as judgment on anyone but myself. But it is my truth, and

² There are two versions on the creation story in Genesis, from the Yahweistic and Elioistic traditions. In the latter version, *Adam* is created, both male and female, but in the first listed, used more often, we get a man made, from whom a rib is taken to make woman. Maybe the conflict between the two traditions of our Catholic understanding of Salvation history can be partly said to stem from these two Jewish traditions. The history of how these two traditions have battled it out in Judaism is not dissimilar from the way the Roman and Orthodox churches have dealt with each other over the centuries.

my dis-ease with it has been growing this past year.

The surprising answer that has come is a commitment to a new evangelization for the 21st. century. Indeed, I have decided to take my stand on the following soap-box:

I believe if we are going to be truly Independent Catholics, then we need to find a way to reclaim what is best from our wider Catholic Heritage, and not be satisfied with decamping to a place which simply gives us a good view from the progressive edges just beyond the mainline Catholic Church's 800 year old bunker.

STEP 3 "I started noticing the change when"

The place where I mostly meet people today where anything to do with theological thought comes up is in the context of preparing couples for marriage. Ranging in age from early twenties, (sometimes much too early twenties,) to late forties, the vast majority describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." The vast majority, even if their families go to church (or synagogue, temple or mosque,) and they do occasionally, still feel that organized religion is not for them.

This is not a new twist - every generation has rebelled. The difference this time is that most of the families are not as committed as they were before. Even for families of believers, telling your parents you didn't go to church this weekend is more and more frequently met with "I don't blame you."

When I prepare couples (regardless of their theological background,) for marriage I use a very Catholic Vatican II theology of marriage. I don't tell them that of course, it would turn them straight off. But I do explore the ideas of the spousal priesthood of ministry to the "other," the sacramentality of daily life, the concept that we are rebirthing each other into being with every act of love; how we literally "make" love, which is our salvation, on a daily basis.

I've never had anyone object and I've literally worked with folks from across the board in terms of faith and belief and lack of it. I've had many tell me "that's giving words to what I knew inside, but couldn't express." And it's the guys saying this as much as the girls. Couples in love are hungry for a theological and then a ritual expression for what they know and feel inside and the Catholic tradition has a lot to offer.

Not just engaged couples are hungry today for Good News, everyone is, as they have ever been. The difference today is that it also needs to make sense. And I mean "make sense" not in a limited linguistic or logical sense; it needs to find an echo in their hearts for what they already intuitively know and feel. Faith is fine -

95% of Americans say they believe in God, they have faith. But religion has to make sense; faith is no longer "blind."

After a wedding at which I officiated a few years ago a couple, probably in their fifties, came up to me. "Nice job father," they said. "We haven't heard any of that theology since we were prepared for marriage in the late 1960's, by a Redemptorist priest."

That period, matching the first flush of energy after Vatican II, was the beginning of a global changing point I believe. The late 1960's, into the 1970's saw the beginning of a world revolution that continued to play out in the virtually bloodless fall of Communism through to the current Arab Spring that still needs to decide where it might bloom. It's not been perfect, but given the scope and magnitude of the change on the world stage, it's been amazing all the same.

The world has ridden the wave of change, the Roman Church has not, and it is from that post-1964 "not" that most of us currently ordained or otherwise involved Independent Catholics have come.

I wanted to know why, what is driving this global shift in which we find ourselves trying to minister. The answer - or at least one of them - was not where I expected to find it.

STEP 4 "Then it dawned on me...."

Some years ago an acquaintance of mine told me that the song "The Dawning of the Age of Aquarius" (from the 1970's musical HAIR,) was based on fact, not just Flower Power inspiration.

The acquaintance, Joseph Sheehan, an ex-Christian Brother with 22 years' service in India, had listened as much as he had taught while there. What he learned was that in the Hindu Vedic Tradition, the zodiac not only covers the years, but also the centuries and millennia. Each "House" influences life for two thousand years - or so - at a time and has since the beginning of time.

For the past 2,000 or so years, apparently, we have been in the Age of Pisces, whose "slogan" or tag-phrase might be best expressed as "the subjugation of the individual for the common good." It is a perfect age for a sacrificial Jesus and Atonement Theology. The qualities of self-sacrifice and self-effacement are indeed qualities that our grandparents, and maybe even we, appreciated as part of the spiritual code of Good Character that has been highly valued until recent times. However, few aged 40 and over would object if I said that things have changed in the past 30 years or so, and such "old fashioned" values are no longer current or attractive to the younger generations, at least not in the way we embodied them.

According to Mr. Sheehan, (though other astrologers differ with him) around

the time of HAIR, we entered the Age of Aquarius, the tag phrase for which is "the fulfillment of the individual for the common good." For Sheehan and others, the "Me" decade of the 1980's was a perfect manifestation of the shift that has continued and grown ever since. Yet if a search for the "fulfillment of the individual" was happening automatically and all around us, the last bit of the tag might prove less easy to promote.

So while the common element of both these "tags" is "...for the common good," it seemed to me that the challenge for the leaders (school teachers, church, society etc.) would be to "proclaim" and encourage that end. In a world where folks are "spiritual not religious" our work would be to persuade folks that they should still act "for the common good"—which sounds remarkably religious.

Then the first light bulb went on. While it seems Catholic Social Teaching, finding its strongest voice at this same time in the 1970's and 80's, was onto something here, Oprah was doing a better job getting people to move on it. Her "pay it forward" caught on quicker than anything from the Vatican. Indeed, if Jesus was the harbinger of the Age of Pisces, then maybe Oprah, (building on Joseph Campbell's work,) is the model for Aquarius - with a gospel of "follow your bliss, have plans for success, and always pay it forward."

I am neither an astrologer nor Hindu, (okay Oprah I'm still a fan!) but I do have a smattering of scientific method in my training. I would venture to comment that, regardless of the reality or provability of the above zodiacal assertions, the reality as I've experienced it through those many couples every year preparing for marriage would strongly suggest that people are changing in ways that correspond to these astrological parameters.

Maybe it's a big jump and a broad statement, but I'll make it anyway: People are no longer moved by a theology of Atonement. They are discovering their own power and ability to be creators of their own world. *Theosis*, or at least a humanistic version of it, is already happening.

STEP 5 "So what I want to do now is...."

Simple and succinct definitions of *Theosis* are invariably wrong. In lieu of falling into that trap, let me suggest that the concept involves 1) both a desire for and a path to great intimacy with God, 2) Christ as God enfleshed so that we who die and rise with him may be more perfectly enspirited (but without losing our incarnate nature), 3) a high sense of purpose assigned to that intimacy. While not a definition, we get closer to the essence of *Theosis* when we contemplate the words of Archimandrite Christoforos Stavropoulos: "In the Holy Scriptures, where God

himself speaks, we read of a unique call directed to us. God speaks to us human beings and he says: 'I said you are gods, sons of the Most High—all of you.' Do we hear that voice? Do we understand the meaning of this calling? Do we accept that we should in fact be on a journey, a road which leads to *Theosis*? As human beings we each have this one, unique calling, to achieve *Theosis*."³ Beyond that I refer the reader to Stavropoulos' book and a few others.⁴

I see *Theosis* as being a message that today's world is not only open to hearing, but eager to hear. Indeed, I think one can see the yearning for it and leaning towards it even in many of our popular TV programs. There is an apparent assumption that simply out of our human nature we can choose right, though the desert mothers and fathers would suggest something more divine was acting then too.

Even without Oprah, programs like **Glee** and **CNN Heroes** tell us that "ordinary people can do extraordinary things when they act from the place of their best selves." (I'm sure there are examples from the day-time programs, but I've never been into those.)

Evening soaps like **West Wing** and then lesser attempts like **Brothers and Sisters** frequently took very real contemporary issues and showed how the best of humanity might respond to them. Television, while also doing other less worthy things, has frequently been the best preachers of the adage "Do what's right and virtue will be its own reward."

Divine Grace builds on nature, or so our theology says. Yet our Western attitude seems to say that it has to be "churchified" first for it to be real grace. I believe the implication is that our "fallen nature" cannot reach beyond the pit of self-involvement and only God's grace can pull us out. I'm not sure the Spirit agrees. I believe that the equally valid theology of *Theosis* suggests that our very natural selves are capable of the perfect good on our best days, simply because that divinity lives within us at all times. "Christ is within you," making God incarnate every day.

I remember an occasion at university in the early 1970's. A leaving student had just arranged with the chaplain for the house of a sick local senior to get painted as a celebration of her graduation. Someone in the room at the time said: "That's a very Christian thing to do." Another student replied, "No, it's a very human thing to do." Maybe we should have said "It's a very divinely human thing

³ Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Partakers of the Divine Nature* (Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1976), p. 71.

⁴ See Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking On Theosis* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Press, 2009), Archimandrite George, *Theosis, The True Purpose of Life* (Mount Athos: Holy Monastery of St. Gregorios, 2009), and James R. Payton, Jr., *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), pp. 132-154.

to do."

What would it be like if we accepted and proclaimed that the Spirit did indeed inspire people to be their best selves, whether they went to church or not? What would it be like to accept that God's indwelling Spirit is freely given to every person, and they need nothing else for salvation? Unless, of course, they choose to reject it.

The incarnation is amazing in many ways, and one of the most amazing facts is its sheer abundant generosity. I truly believe we professional religious types are scared of folks knowing that, because it makes them less dependent on us. Yet the truth is when we trust people to be their best selves miracles can happen. As many of the historical "Protestors" found out, and we in our turn have too; when we stop trying to copy Rome's need to "channel" Spirit, stop limiting it in any way, stop metering it out through rarified access to sacraments and prayer, then the demand increases and the flow becomes fuller and life giving to all.

When I work with people to explore their understanding of what I would genuinely call a priestly ministry within relationships, encouraging them to be open to becoming the fullest person they can be, I see their faces light up. *Theosis* is truly already living within us.

STEP 6 "A New Confession of Faith."

And so I propose a new confession of faith, not to replace the others, (as in the Creeds or at the Easter Vigil,) but a guide for us Independent Catholic followers of a generous and abundant God to proclaim to an eager, though maybe unaware world.

I believe that it is time to accept that God knew what God was doing when Jesus came to earth and brought the gift of *Theosis*, our invitation to be assumed into the Divinity.

I believe that life is not about "getting it right," but "risking obedience to what is right," that we might imitate Jesus' salvific acts. This is the way of the gospel stories.

I believe that God our Creator, like the Parent in the story of the Prodigal Son, waits to welcome us home as God's own flesh and blood.

And therefore:

I believe that the theology of *Theosis*, which Atonement supplanted in the West 800 years ago, is now needed more than ever, and that we Independent Catholics are in a unique place from which to proclaim it.

I believe that because Jesus came to proclaim above all else that we are already adopted daughters and sons of God, and what we are to become is even more, (1 Jn 3:2) then our job as Christians is to proclaim this truth, assuming God will be able to deal with the consequences.

I believe that we as Church need to start doing what God has done since the beginning, and that is trusting people to respond to God's grace. Our job is simply to be guides, cheer leaders and occasionally ministers of spiritual first aid for those who are busy walking the journey of life. And we need to celebrate that we have a life to walk too.

As I write this I become more and more aware of how much I don't know. I am also very sure that none of this is new, though it feels as if I'm hearing it for the first time.

Most of all, I feel excited. I feel that I am no longer choosing a ministry as a priest of "Catholic Lite."

Anyone interested in joining me with my new soapbox and wineskin?