

Changing the World

May 23, 2013

I once asked a very good friend of mine who is a diocesan priest why he had chosen that path in life. His answer was both quick and simple: “To save my soul.” If we were to look at various parts of the Rule of St. Benedict, we might well conclude that that is the sort of answer Benedict himself would have expected of a candidate. For example, he writes in his Prologue that we are to obey God at all times so that “he may never become the angry father who disinherits his sons” (Prol. 6), and a bit later he urges each monk to “run and do now what will profit us forever” (Prol. 44). There is also good Gospel warrant for such motivation, as when Jesus asks: “What will it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?” (Mk. 8:36).

That being said, I’m not at all sure that this has been or should have been the primary motivation of most people who enter a monastery or other form of consecrated life. It certainly wasn’t mine. Having had good, devout parents, I never doubted that I could just as well have attained salvation if I had followed their path in life. I expect that many of you, too, joined the community mainly because you saw it as an especially good way to serve God and the Church, and even to do something positive beyond the somewhat narrow bounds of the Church—that is, to be of service to the larger society in which we live. The question is, how might this best be done in our time and place, an era that many call “late modernity”? One of the more thoughtful reflections on this issue is from a professor of religion at the University of Virginia, James Davison Hunter. Even though a book he wrote is titled *To Change the World*, he actually argues very strenuously that that kind of language is harmful. In his opinion, talk of “reforming the culture,” “building the kingdom,” or “transforming the world” implies conquest, take-over, and domination and assumes that the world and history can be controlled and managed, leading one to treat God mainly as a tool for achieving one’s objectives. Professor Hunter writes,

“Christianity is not, first and foremost, about establishing righteousness or creating good values or securing justice or making peace.” We may indeed pursue such values passionately, but they “are all secondary to the primary good of God himself and the primary task of worshipping him and honoring him in all [we] do.”¹ If you agree with that, then it is encouraging to reflect that this is precisely where the Benedictine Rule places the emphasis. As you well know, Benedict writes that nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God, so when the signal is given for that, whatever else the monk is doing should be set aside (RB 43.1-3).

As regards those secondary but still laudable aims—ones like promoting good values and securing justice—one helpful way to understand our Christian role in a society that is as pluralistic today as in the days of the early Church is to look at a short work from the second century, written by an anonymous Christian to a certain Diognetus, who was probably the tutor of Marcus Aurelius. This so-called “Letter to Diognetus” makes the following points:

Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe.... But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities ... and following the customs of the natives with respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life.... They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.

There is much in that letter that is not directly applicable to the Church today, but a crucial point is that we don't live entirely apart from the rest of society. Rather, we live in the midst of many other people of quite different persuasions than our own, and we are called to be genuinely

concerned for their welfare and not just for those of our fellow Christians, and so “to provide for the physical, aesthetic, intellectual, and social health of the [entire] community” in which we find ourselves.

There are all sorts of ways in which this can be done. If we take seriously what the New Testament says about Christ’s having “despoiled the principalities and powers” (Col. 2:15), those forces that are elsewhere called “the world rulers of the present darkness” (Eph. 6:12), then we should feel empowered to act in creative ways, above all in our community’s particular works of education and hospitality. As regards education, a recent article in *America* magazine titled “Preambles for Faith” made some thought-provoking suggestions. The author, who teaches at a Jesuit preparatory school in southern California, pointed out that since many young people do not think much about religion because they consider it so unverifiable, it is therefore “an indispensable duty of a Catholic school . . . to animate a spirit of inquiry, a spirit that extends beyond what they see through a microscope or plug into a calculator.”² He goes on to insist that this spirit can be inculcated not just in religion or theology courses but in all others, whether English or Algebra I or environmental science, leading the students to ask, “How can this be? What else am I missing? What else have I not known?” for “it is only when students relinquish their certainty about inherited beliefs that they rethink their resistance to God.”³ Courses in the visual arts and music may be especially beneficial in this regard, for it is the gift of great artists “to demonstrate in ways that are imaginative and compelling that materiality is not enough for a proper understanding of human experience; that there is a durability and permanence as well as eternal qualities that exist beyond what we see on the surface of life.”⁴

As regards our other main work, hospitality, while the role of the guestmaster is obviously crucial, we ought never overlook the fact that it is the community as a whole that may

well make the most profound and positive impression on a guest. I've quoted before the anonymous email we received a few years ago from a former guest who underwent a remarkably transforming experience after a few days here and who attributed it largely to the example of the community as such. That guest wrote: "To see men live happily and so simply and to have all of their needs met showed me how little one really needs to be happy. Whereas the focus I had prior to arrival was on external things that could make me happy, I realized that weekend that all material things will eventually decay and bring sorrow—and that true joy can only be found inside, in the love of Christ himself."

The words of that guest are simple, but they do capture a lot of what people are up against in today's world, where, as Professor Hunter writes, many people are socially predisposed "to measure human worth and to find personal significance in material possessions, in appearance, in minor celebrity, or career success."⁵ Even if we ought to agree with him that it would not be helpful to think of our life and work in pompous terms like "changing the world," there is no doubt but that we can make a difference in the lives of the various kinds of people we serve: students, Oblates, short- and long-term guests, fellow worshipers, readers of our publications, and so on. The imminent summer break from school could be a good time for all of us to think creatively and even boldly about ways to do this still better than at present.

1ⁿ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 285-86.

2 Matt Emerson, "Preambles for Faith," *America*, May 13, 2013, p. 15.

3ⁿ *Ibid.*, 16.

4ⁿ Hunter, 265.

5ⁿ *Ibid.*, 282.