

Camouflage?

Acts 1:15-17, 20a, 20c-26; I John 4:11-16; John 17: 11b-19
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Contrary to the way mystics lived in the past, by “fleeing the world,” this impulse of flight does not lead today’s believers to true sanctification. Nowadays it’s our insertion into all the world’s dimensions that permits us to live our Christian faith most authentically.

Yet we see a motive of insertion even within the early church itself. In its confrontation with the most systematic expressions of Greek culture, the early church discovered that the best way to develop and live its faith was to welcome critically the thought structures and social organization which the pagan world offered it. The early Greek apologists for the Christian religion— or “the Fathers,” as they are called— were, in their own manner of thinking, creating a faith vision using the philosophical materials of a culture in whose eyes their new faith was practically irrelevant.

Believers today live even more deeply within the “world” and from that greater depth of immersion must also develop their faith. The Second Vatican Council was aware that this trend was happening, but was neither able nor willing to draw the necessary conclusions. And so it is that not all church structures help or form the faithful for this labor.

Our history as a people of faith has followed a path of syncretization— not a path of ghetto-dwelling, of living in isolated bubbles of ideological purity. Today’s human cultures have been generated by surprising syncretizations. Unique, self-contained paradigms cannot be sustained in the search for truth and human fulfillment.

Perhaps my last statement sounds contradictory. Isn’t “truth” by its very nature a reality utterly separate from the corruption of ordinary reality? After all, Jesus asks the Father that his disciples be “consecrated in the truth,” not in falsehood or compromise. Yet the word “truth,” highly valued by the community of John, seeks to connect the evangelical mission of Jesus with the practice of discipleship. That is why the word refers, not to a theoretical effort to reach the truth, but to a way of living. The best, most vital synthesis of this approach to the truth arose from syncretic experiences. The New Testament scriptures are the clearest expression of this synthesis.

The French rationalist philosopher Gaston Bachelard thought that the quickest way for people to open themselves to the truth was to subject themselves to the evidence of their own erroneous ideas. Not in order to cling to those false ideas, but to enable the truth to emerge in the only way it can, through dialogue and synthesis. For since the effort to construct reality epistemologically inevitably brings along with it the history of one’s own prejudices, then the truth about reality can be built up only through engaging with those prejudices and working both with and beyond them. Similarly, the believers’ approach to the truth passes through their insertion in all dimensions of the “world,” even though believers might not be in agreement with its structures. Believers have to accept those structures, while taking into account the prejudices against the world inherited from their experience of the Church.

This is why the real is called the “path to humanization”...in order to consecrate the disciple in the truth. This is not a strategy for camouflaging believers in the world’s costume. It is an unavoidable choice for opening oneself *to* the world with all its contradictions without becoming *of* the world.

In this sense those of us formed for evangelical service need to relearn the Gospel's message by observing its practice in the lives of many simple believers. They are the ones who are living in their own flesh the mission cast only in theoretical form at Vatican II— the mission of uniting faith and life, of overcoming the divorce of a faith which distances itself from everyday reality. Believers do this in order to embrace the “world” as the terrain where the Kingdom is being prepared. This mission is being carried out right now by men and women of faith who are making mature ethical decisions in disagreement with the Church's moral teaching (we are thinking of the vitality of their matrimonial sexuality)... by men and women of faith who have aligned themselves, in their political commitments and ideological struggles, in solidarity with communities that have been impoverished and excluded.

The “world”— that anti-Kingdom force that hates the disciple— is also where Christ's fidelity to the Father is to be proclaimed.