

Discipleship

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Adapted from a retreat talk given 25 years ago



I'd say our religion can first of all be seen as an IT. It provides us with an institution we serve, a house we live in. We belong to the Church - to the Church in general, but also to our own bit of the church. We develop a loyalty to the institutional side of things. - indeed for some it can become almost the whole of religion. The loyalty shines out not just in those who support the institution but even in those members of the Church who are strongly critical of it - for the institutional aspect of the Church really matters to them. During the early years after Vatican 2 most of the renewal seems to have been about the IT - getting structures right, developing collegiality, parish councils, restructuring our religion. I am not saying it isn't part of renewal, but it is the most superficial aspect of renewal.

Secondly our religion is about a set of values, a collection of precepts and principles. It is an - ISM : a philosophy, a way of life, an ideology, a system of belief, and of moral values. This presents problems in a world today which is changing so rapidly and raising questions we have never had to face before - in medical and sexual ethics, in the role of women in society, in education, the family so on. Youngsters coming to University from a background where the Church was mainly an IT, have to listen and struggle with new challenges. For all of us our religion may not always have the answers but it offers us values which help us in a search to make sense of our lives.

But so fascinated can we be with our religion as an institution or as a custodian of values, that we can often forget that the reason for it all is the HIM. Though not always seen at first, this third element is the deepest aspect of our religion. Christ is not just the lord of history, he is the lord of my life. He is a real person, alive, with a will for me for every moment, who tells me he loves me. He has chosen me to be his disciple. The most exciting part of my religion is not that I have found an institution to which I belong, or a set of values to sort out my life, but I have come to realise that there is a HIM, a person who has taken the initiative and called me to serve him as a person. He has called me, not just to be a witness of structures, or to have answers about faith and morals, but above all to grow in a personal relationship

We need to preserve all these three approaches and keep them in balance and perspective, for they all go together and are clearly part of one service, one loyalty. But the IT and the ISM are incomplete without the emphasis on the HIM. It is possible to be a loyal member of the community, a great churchman - to devote one's life to the IT, and yet be achieving little more than someone who gives his life to Barclay's bank or being secretary of the local golf club. Similarly we may argue with great complexity and conviction about the ISM of our religion - about its values and principles - and underplay that personal relationship which is the heart of our calling. We may be fully devoted, but not to what God has called us to - a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and through him to the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our religion is really a call to conversion, to a breakthrough from the IT and the ISM to the HIM. He has chosen me, but I have got to choose him. And it is not a once and for all event - it ebbs and flows. It is true, he never ebbs in choosing me, but I ebb in choosing him. I am constantly being called to a total and radical giving back to him, to a lifetime pursuit of letting my life centre more and more on him. Kirkegaard had a telling way of expressing it - "No one can ever say he is a Christian, only that he is becoming a Christian". And the further we go, the more we realise how much further there is ahead of us. "Eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

In a word, our religion is leading us, not to know about God, but to know God. And the way to knowing him more fully is most of all through our prayer