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Rugged individualism vs. Easter faith

By Bishop John T. Folda

“The Lord is Risen, he is risen indeed! Alleluia!” Dear readers, I hope each one of you had a most blessed celebration of Holy Week and Easter. These blessed days are a powerful experience of grace for those who experience them, and they remind us that the salvation accomplished by Jesus is not just a mere abstraction. He truly underwent a brutal crucifixion and died for our sins. He just as truly rose from the dead, opening for us the way to eternal life in heaven. Jesus alone was able to accomplish this; he is our one and only Savior.

But faith in the saving act of Christ is undermined by a kind of radical individualism that has taken hold of our culture. It’s true that we admire personal accomplishment and the rugged individuals who can stand on their own two feet. For good reason we value independence and individual initiative, but in many ways a radical kind of individualism has crept into our faith lives as well, and doesn’t adequately reflect the unique salvation won for us by Christ.

One example is the subtle but widespread belief that the human person is completely autonomous, and whose sole fulfillment depends entirely on his or her own strength. We achieve salvation not by God’s grace but by our own efforts. Most people wouldn’t say so explicitly, but that is often the way faith is lived out. According to this mindset, there’s really no such thing as original sin, and other sins don’t matter much either. Thus, our need for a savior is certainly less than urgent, and Jesus becomes an admirable teacher - sent by God, yes - but really just a great man who taught us some good lessons about life that can help us get to heaven. Of course this sets aside any notion that we are saved by the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus, or that we have any need of divine grace to attain salvation. This concept of faith is especially appealing to the radical individualist, who does things “my way” and doesn’t see the need for interference from anyone else.

But there’s an old saying that “what goes around comes around.” And how true that is in the life of the Church. This new form of radical individualism is just a warmed up version of an old heresy that has been around for centuries. Back in the fifth century, a priest named Pelagius denied original sin and basically said we are saved simply by following the example that Jesus set for us. Of course, he was mistaken, but in many ways, our culture has embraced this distorted version of Christianity, and has lost the realization that we are sinners in need of a savior. This rugged individualism also excludes the role of the Church, or recasts it merely as an association of like-minded people who share a common view of life. The idea that the Church is an essential part of the divine plan and that we are all members in the Body of Christ is diminished or even lost altogether.

Another version of this radical individualism has the person finding fulfillment in an interior experience of God with no reference to or need of anyone else. Needless to say, this understanding of faith is completely subjective. One has no need for any other reference point, and the individual’s interior experience is the only standard for truth or morality. The logical consequence is that we decide what is true and what is good, regardless of any norms outside ourselves. We attain a sort of personal illumination that is not subject to anyone else. Far from being an exercise of Christian conscience, this is the individual inventing his own truth and salvation.

And yet again, we find here a modern version of an old heresy called Gnosticism. In the early Church, some teachers taught that one could attain salvation by discovering a secret knowledge that would give one a spark of the divine life. In its extreme form, it denigrated the body and held that the mind alone is where we arrive at salvation. Gone is the belief that the human person is a unity of body and soul, and that both are redeemed by the saving grace of Christ. One finds this same belief in many aspects of New Age thought and practice, and it plays right into the radical individualist idea that I am my own savior.

Both of these modes of thought reject the understanding that the person is a unity of body and soul, and that life is not one's own, but a gift. Not surprisingly, we find a growing acceptance of physician assisted suicide, transgenderism, same-sex unions, and other aspects of the radical autonomous individual. There is also widespread rejection of the Church's teaching on morality and on the need for the sacraments.

Authentic Christian faith reveals that we find our fulfillment not in radical individualism, but in our relationships with God and with one another. This fulfillment and hope of salvation is ultimately found through the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose from the dead. By our union with him and through his grace, we live out the virtues of faith, hope, and charity in a community of persons. We are part of a family of faith and charity that Jesus himself established, his Catholic Church.

The rugged individual may be an admirable character, but he is still a child of God. Jesus never told us to "go it alone," but he called us to loving communion with God and with others. The events of Holy Week and Easter show that every one of us needs a savior, and that Savior is Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.