

Saved by hope

By Bill Lewellis

[579 words]

The protagonist of a posthumously published book of Italian author Ignazio Silone lay dying. A friend comes to her deathbed, takes her hand and says, “Severina, tell me you believe.” “No,” Severina says, *but I hope.*”

I will soon have completed my 70th year of life. I, too, hope. I wonder. I trust.

For 18 years, I was a Roman Catholic priest of the Diocese of Allentown. For another 18 years, I worshipped as a lay person at Grace Episcopal Church in Allentown. In 1999, Bishop Paul Marshall of the Diocese of Bethlehem formally recognized my Roman Catholic ordination and received me as a priest of the Episcopal Church.

Wonder has long been central in my prayer, in my thinking, in my life. Long ago, I discovered a few guides – and their questions – for my journey of hope and wonder and trust.

Be attentive, one guide tells me. Be attentive to your experience, i.e., to your senses, feelings, intuition and imagination, to all the evidence that precedes a hunch.

Be intelligent, says another. Have you interpreted the data correctly? Might there be crucial information you haven’t considered? Are there other ways the data might be understood?

Be reasonable, says a third. Evaluate. Choose your best interpretation of the data. Judge wisely.

Be responsible, says the fourth. Decide what you will do about what you have judged to be accurate about how you have interpreted the data of your experience. What commitments will you make, what risks will you take, to act responsibly?

Bernard Lonergan, a Jesuit theologian, called these four guides transcendental imperatives. By asking interrelated questions over and over again, the guides suggest that the way to integrity transcends self, that integrity is attained, beyond reactivity and narrow horizons of self, through multiple experiences of intellectual and moral conversion.

I don’t have to be religious to achieve authenticity. I don’t have to be liberal or conservative. I can take the Bible literally or I can take it as metaphor, rich holy writ given for my attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible conversion. I don’t have to profess adherence to the teachings of any man or woman or institution. I don’t have to be a Democrat or a Republican. I don’t have to be Roman Catholic or Episcopalian. Along the way, however, because I’ll never have it all together, I do need to be open to conversion.

Because he was a theologian as well as philosopher, Lonergan added a fifth guide.

Be in Love, where wonder and trust and hope truly begin for a religious person. Be in relationship. Be in God.

Being in Love adds the gift of religious conversion to intellectual and moral conversion. There, life begins anew, where a new self is to be understood, only to be transcended. There, a rumor of angels promises deeper intellectual and moral and religious conversion.

With that journey in mind, I am distressed when “persons of faith” reduce religion to one’s adherence to intellectual propositions, when faithful suggests intransigent, when openness to wonder and trust and hope is thought to be naive, when questions that might lead to multiple conversions are looked upon with suspicion, when people estrange themselves, one from another, by their so-called truths.

Where once I thought “faith,” I now think hope, trust, wonder and relationship. It was encouraging to see recently that Pope Benedict called his new encyclical “Saved by Hope.”

Be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible, be in Love, and, if necessary, change.

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