

TRUE AND FALSE RELIGION: REFLECTIONS ON SOME THOUGHTS

I title this piece the way I do because these will be my reflections on another's thoughts: specifically, those of Fr. Richard Rohr in a series of talks he has given (on CD), "New Great Themes in Scripture." Now, with all the proper disclaimers and apologies...

Fr. Rohr defines "false religion" as "the futile attempt to prove you are worthy." If I may vulgarize the theological issues of the 16th century, this is precisely how the Reformers saw what they regarded as a "theology of works"—as a way to prove (or earn) their worthiness (that is, their salvation). It is why they wanted to insist on salvation by grace through faith. Of course, the Catholic Church saw this as tantamount to laissez-faire religion, tending toward the kind of "cheap grace" so strongly opposed by the 20th century German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (especially in his *The Cost of Discipleship*).

Yet many prayers during the celebration of Eucharist certainly speak of our worthiness, or "meriting." How should they be understood?

The key, it seems to me, is to understand that "worthiness" is crucial to a person's faith life, but only in the right order. We easily come to think we must prove our worthiness in order for God to love us. We might word this as trying to merit our salvation. But it is to put the cart before the horse, as Fr. John Powell, S.J. also says in slightly different words: "We don't have to change in order for God to love us; God loves us, and therefore we can change."

People get terribly confused about grace, works, merit and faith. It's really pretty simple, first granting that these concepts are all inter-related. God's love, God's in-dwelling presence, is what is meant by salvation (tasted even here, even now; to be fulfilled in the Kingdom). It is a totally gracious gift (just as the love of parents for a new-born child is completely gratuitous). But it enables a response, a response desired by God: for us to live authentically as members of the Family—in prayerful love of God, and in active love of others. Even the famous passage of Ephesians 2, if we read beyond verse 8 and all the way to verse 10. So in this sense we can read further in Ephesians (4:1) "I plead with you, then, as a prisoner for the Lord, to live a life worthy of the calling you have received..." Yes, we are called to be "worthy" (or "faithful," or "meritorious," or whatever buzz-word you choose). But the call is able to be answered because of the gracious gift of love given to us first by God in Jesus Christ.

This also means that I cannot use my claim of "unworthiness" to fail to face up to the reality of God—one who declares me to be, and who makes me, worthy, and who therefore expects a certain kind of life-style so the world can be what God desired in the beginning. It takes me to the song from *Godspell*, "Turn Back, O Man," where Jesus sings: *Earth shall be fair, and all her people one/Nor 'til that hour shall God's whole will be done.* As the saying puts it: "God does not call those who are equipped; God equips those who are called." We have a call, and we are being enabled by God's love. Are we ready to respond?