

July 1, 2020

Another month begins, one can only wonder how it will end.

The City of God is the title of a book by Saint Augustine written in the fourth century that became what you might call “boiler plate” thinking about our lives together as human beings. Apparently, the book was a response to contemporary thinking that the decline and fall of the Roman empire and all that went with that was the result of massive conversions to new Christian religion.

The thinking was among the old guard was that the abandoned gods of the Roman pantheon were not happy with being ignored and so they wrought havoc on people primarily through what was called the “barbarian invasions” which were actually the explorations of the indigenous people from the north of what we today call Europe and Asia.

Augustine offered not so much as a theological explanation of the massive and painful changes that people were experiencing as he offered an earth based, a human initiative, an anthropological explanation of what happens when humans try to live together with freedom.

He offered, perhaps, what might be the first framework or systematic thinking about our lives together that did not rely on gods as the forces and agents at play in human history but on human beings alone as being masters and shapers of their own destiny to an extent.

Anyway, in his book, Augustine discussed the reality of evil, the suffering of the innocent, the tension in reconciling a belief in an all good God and the fact of human cruelty and violence.

It was in this context that Augustine formulated his understanding of original sin and his faith in a God with a plan for human beings in their life together and the consequences of that for human history.

This book was the foundation for many of the moral and civic values that have informed human societies and cultures primarily those of European origin and by extension our own United States of America where we find these Augustinian ideas, I don't like to use the word enshrined, in our foundational

documents, the Declaration of Independence, The Constitution, and The Bill of Rights among other places.

Now as we celebrate Independence Day 2020, we find ourselves in the midst of massive and painful change and a kind of cultural and moral havoc.

For years, I think, if you look to the more artistic dimensions of our lives together as human beings you could have seen this coming.

Certainly there were scientists and public health scholars that were sounding the alarm of the potential of a pandemic, but if you look to music and dance and the nature of what was being added to museums of art around the world, you could have noticed that something was up, something very different was fermenting and simmering that was going to arrive and now has arrived.

Perhaps, the most significant development this Independence Day is the rising awareness of the fact that words “God bless America” meant different things to different people and that what some saw and experienced as a blessing, others saw and experienced as a curse, that the suffering of the innocent is not limited to the unborn, that evil has many faces sometimes our own, and that an all good God doesn’t abandon the plans for human flourishing in the face of human cruelty and violence.

How this will unfold remains to be seen, we are in a fallow time and fallowness requires patience, it cannot be rushed

I am not an expert on any of this, just an observer and a reader but if you want to try and see what I see, listen to the music of Eighth Blackbird or see the painting of Cy Twombly or the dance of Merce Cunningham or read the poetry of John Ashberry or Natalie Diaz or Sharon Olds.

You will probably not like what you hear and see because “their work makes no sense, it seems just pure havoc, noise and movement and scribbles without rhyme or reason,” but for others beauty truth and goodness unfolding in due time based on human initiative and the Divine Spirit.

There will be those who come after us that will look to Independence Day 2020 and they will know how we did and what we did with the great gift of freedom.