

Shall we dance?

Back in the 1940's (and before and even for a while after) it was quite common for boys to enter a minor seminary and begin training for the priesthood at age fifteen. I did so – right after my sophomore year at my hometown's LaSalle High School. What motivated me at that age? Well, I had already had eight years of parochial school and much awareness of that vocation – and the Christian Brothers who taught us – while not ordained priests – were nevertheless dedicated to a religious profession. So the momentum was there.

But I think the immediate reason I went off to that minor seminary is – I was afraid to dance. I was shy. When I entered high school I was introduced to monitored evening dances held maybe twice a year – bringing Catholic boys and girls together (perhaps as a way of “keeping them in tow”). I attended one and as my peers swung or jitterbugged to the swing and sway of Sammy Kaye or Benny Goodman – I sat stiff – a veritable wallflower! I couldn't move; I didn't know how to master that movement. To step out there into that crowd of energetically at ease dancers would have meant drawing the ridicule of observers; revealing my own paralysis! So – even that soon, at the end of my sophomore year, I went to the seminary where dancing would be excluded from a future clerical lifestyle.

Oh, I had other motives, for example the community life and dedication of the Brothers, films like *Going My Way*, the characters played by Tracy and O'Brien and Bickford (in *The Song of Bernadette*), the cult of St. Francis and other saints . . . the environment of Catholicism, which by way of liturgy and architecture offered us a construction of the world as “sacred”. But still, a fundamentally compelling motive was: I wouldn't have to make a fool of myself on a dance floor! Well, let's face it: after all I was only fifteen, not old enough for more profound reasons to orient my life.

But as I view those moments so many years ago I realize now that my distancing myself from the dance floor back then concealed a deeper anxiety. It was life itself as I had already experienced it at home, in the neighborhood, in the films, in the daily news, that had made me shrink from the threats of existence rather than trust the positives of life. Indeed, as I looked around, a lot of people older than I looked scared, worried, *en garde* – indeed nations were bombing each other to pieces! The dance of life seemed more like a *danse macabre*. And so I contracted that human illness called “survival” as an alternative to *living*, to stepping onto the dance floor of existence to release my mobility, catch the beat of my heart as pulsating in a-chord with the Gospel and great literature and yes – great music – including the Gregorian Chant I was fortunate to experience as soon as I entered that seminary.

In fact, I have no regrets for having entered a seminary that young – because ever since then, as the music of life became more audible to me from one phase to another, it's been a dance in which all the moves have become spontaneous, not forced, not choreographed by me but by the One Who Is. Shall we dance?

Geoff Wood