***I did it MY way***

Simply saying that phrase probably causes a number of people to say “Frank Sinatra!” It’s true — he is undoubtedly the one best remembered for singing the song. Few remember that Canadian Teeny Bopper, Paul Anka, wrote the words and even fewer remember that two Frenchmen had written the tune years before. We are a “sound byte” generation and over the years, Clergy have taken illustrations from the culture and its songs and used them in sermons. In 1969, I remember several sermons on Peggy Lee’s plaintive cry in her song, “Is that all there is?” Of course, you could write your own meditation on that song, and the question still haunts you even if the tune doesn’t. For those who are a little bit OCD — sorry for sticking these tunes into your brain as you read this!

Some have said that when Frank Sinatra sang “I did it my way” that it was a bit like a commentary on his life. I leave that to others to evaluate, but I was confronted with a type of dilemma several years ago when a man told me he wanted me to sing at his funeral. Guess what he wanted me to sing? For those who know me, you know that I have a musical background and that I enjoy singing, but I had a problem. Being a Traditional Anglican means that we don’t do eulogies and we don’t do secular music at Requiem Masses. I am aware of the fact that in the current secular culture we are seeing less of what the Church has taught for two millennia. That is, a Requiem Mass is not a “Celebration of Life” unless we mean, “A Celebration of Jesus’ Life in the life of the departed person.” The Requiem Mass, Burial Office, Funeral Liturgy are all about Jesus, and it is about the inclusion of the departed in the Kingdom, where Jesus has triumphed over death. Along the way, we mere mortals have fallen down because “I did it my way.”

The good news is that when the man died his family relieved me of the burden of having to sing the song. Traditionally we have “Wakes” or “Vigils” the night before a Funeral where people gather, tell stories, and reminisce. This is very good. We also have funeral receptions after the Requiem or the Cemetery Interment, and once again this is a great time for slide shows, pictures, eulogies, and stories. After all, the funeral is not meant to exclude the departed, nor is it meant to exclude the mourners: it’s meant to focus on the Words of Jesus and what He has done for us so that death is not the final reality. St. Paul has a great deal to say about these, and as we look carefully at the Readings at the Burial Office or Requiem — we see what the traditional emphasis is: “DO IT HIS WAY.”

It has been postulated that at times of stress and crisis, even the well-educated and well-trained return to earlier forms of behavior. I suppose I occasionally see this in dogs, for instance, who instinctually growl, snap, and bite when confronted with a crisis — “Let sleeping dogs lie.” We human beings can be like that. In moments of crisis, frustration, and stress we can return to earlier patterns of behavior where we begin to yell, scream, swear, call people names, etc. I once asked a congregation at a parish how they might feel if I could have a public showing in video form of each one of them at a point in their life when they were at their worst: words, actions, behavior, and so on. Obviously, this could be devastating, but it was when we have been at our absolute worst that Jesus was willing to die for our sins. He did not die for us because we sang well, or because we wrote a song, or because we donated a great deal of money. It is easier to die for someone who is a friend and is loving than it is to die for an enemy who is hateful.

Forgiveness and repentance are counter-cultural because we are so busy living the cultural theme of “I did it my way” that we forget that we are supposed to “do it His way.” His way does not include speaking ill of others, or of holding grudges, or of lashing out. All of that behavior can be forgiven, but we must ask. “IF we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” — IF. — We need to take the first step — that’s “His way.”

I must confess, that as a teenager, I had prayed that all Christian Churches could once again be Eucharistically centered, and I have lived to see that. BUT now I have been praying that all Churches would offer the Sacrament of Penance and reemphasize the necessity of being penitent before receiving the Blessed Sacrament. “His way” is that we MUST be reconciled and we must be forgiven. St. Paul warns us against receiving the Blessed Sacrament unworthily lest we bring condemnation unto ourselves. Maybe that’s why a “Celebration of Life” is so popular today. People can come and go, live and die without ever having been reconciled with God and with their neighbors. In fact, they can even justify themselves for not forgiving God or someone who has been in their life. Why — because they are so busy doing whatever they do “MY WAY” and not “HIS WAY.”

As the old saying goes: “There are two ways of doing things — My way or the wrong way.” Well, how about HIS WAY? Do we ever plot our course and make our plans without including God’s Word and God’s Revelation? Do we even claim a religious cover: “after all I’m doing it for the church!”

I have been blessed for six decades by what I call “Jo’isms.” These are amazing and direct points made by my wife over our 57+ years together. An example: she had never seen what might be called “Low Church” until she was much older, and said to me. “Now I know what Low Church is. It’s where they elevate the offering plates higher than the Host and Chalice.” But on one occasion she said to me as I was rushing out the door many years ago to do something “for the church,” “Are you doing this because it’s what you want to do, or are you doing this because it’s what God wants you to do?” Amazingly direct and an important lesson.

As we look at our lives, let’s see what we do because it’s “MY WAY” and let’s look and see what we are doing “HIS WAY.” Imagine what Heaven would be like if we entered singing the Frank Sinatra song, or the Peggy Lee song, and how it would be if in Heaven, we really did it “MY WAY.” I think, perhaps we would need to look carefully to see if we were someplace other than Heaven!