

SPIRITUALITY

The word “spirituality” has been used to cover a wide range of religious experiences that have been evident throughout human history and found in all cultures inside and outside of formal religions. Thus, perhaps we should speak of “spiritualities” rather than a single common spirituality. In fact, when we attempt to define “spirituality” the case could be made that, within certain limits, each person necessarily has his or her own unique spirituality. However, while there may be many forms of spirituality, the majority have two common elements: 1) to put oneself in the presence of God and 2) to be transformed by that personal encounter.

Of course some major questions remain: 1) Who is this God whom I seek? 2) How do I go about the process of putting myself in God’s presence?, 3) How will this encounter affect the way I lead my daily life?

For our purposes, we will limit our historical considerations to three types of spirituality that we find in Catholic Christianity – Pauline, monastic and lay spirituality – and then a brief comment about an emerging form of personalistic spirituality that is taking place currently in the United States.

We will also attempt to evaluate these forms of spirituality and outline an approach to lay spirituality that most of us probably use in our everyday life without thinking of it as a type of spirituality. As we shall see, this approach has a different orientation than Pauline, monastic and the new personalistic personality and arguably more in line with the approach we see in the life of Jesus.

Definition of Christian Spirituality

Our first step will be to come up with a concise definition of “Christian spirituality”. Simply put we could say that Christian spirituality is: Our life in the Spirit -- that is, the way we understand ourselves and live out our lives as the result of our experience of the presence of the Spirit of God encountered by us, especially in Jesus.

To speak of God as Spirit is an ancient way of speaking about the presence of God in human life. In this metaphor, God as Spirit is likened to the “breath of the wind”. Although invisible, God’s presence can be felt as a kind of energy field, a principle of life, a creative force that influences our daily lives.

We can speak in these terms, rather than the familiar term “Holy Spirit”, because scripture scholars are careful to make us aware that when Jesus is quoted in the New Testament speaking about the Holy Spirit, he is quoted in the Greek language in which the New Testament is written. However, Jesus spoke in Aramaic and in Aramaic there are no adjectives. Thus Jesus would not have said “the Holy Spirit”, but rather “the Spirit of Holiness”, which give us more of a sense of an energy field or breath of wind, than the designation Holy Spirit.

Of course, God as Spirit is not other than God's self. There is only one God – Father, Son and Spirit. God as Spirit is simply God, but God experienced as present to and personally making a difference in our lives and through us a difference in our world.

There certainly are other definitions of Christian spirituality, but, as mentioned above, it seems clear that there are two fundamental elements in any definition of Christian spirituality: First, our experience of God -- for Christians this is the God mediated through Jesus, either individually or as a group. Second, the transformation of our consciousness of self, others, all creation and God as a result of this experience and how this transformation expresses itself in the way we live out our daily lives.

For example, if, through the words of Jesus, we have a religious experience of God as Father, we become conscious that if God is indeed Father then we are each sons and daughters. And if we are all sons and daughters, then we and all other humans are indeed one family and created to live as one family. This is God's creative purpose for us. Therefore, it is in truly living as one human family that we find our human fulfillment. Responding to God's creative purpose for us transforms our lives in that we are committed to love all fellow humans as members of our family. This plays out in a life committed to justice, care, compassion, service, forgiveness, etc. within the context of our individual life situations.

This definition can help Christians answer the three major questions which we noted earlier: 1) Who is this God whom I seek? Answer: The God revealed in Jesus, 2) How do I go about the process of putting myself in God's presence? Answer: Looking at our everyday life experiences "in depth" to discern the presence of God, coming to understand and participate in the sacraments, reading and meditating on the New Testament, personal meditation, listening to good sermons, reading books on spirituality and theology to name a few. 3) How will this encounter affect the way I lead my daily life? Answer: Follow the example of Jesus by finding ways in daily living to love yourself, love others and love the world which God created and entrusted to our stewardship.

In what follows, we will attempt two things: 1) to outline a brief history of Pauline, monastic and lay approaches to spirituality in Christian history and 2) to evaluate these various approaches, both in the past and in the present.

History

Pauline Spirituality

According to St. Paul, based on his personal belief in Jesus whom he had encountered and then preached to them, through their faith and in their baptism, Christians became a new creation and entered into a "life in the Spirit". This "life in the Spirit" was characterized by certain gifts or *charisms*, which they usually received after baptism.

In First Corinthians Chapter 12, Paul talks about “spiritual gifts” (*charisms*) coming from the Spirit of God. He says: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit...to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (vs.4-7). He later seems to rank them in the order of importance: “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues.” (vs. 27-28).

This is a church-centered spirituality. Paul sees his mission as establishing churches wherever he can find converts. Paul indicates that “life in the one Spirit” takes many forms, but all are to be in service to the common good of the church. The Spirit of God was made present to them through their faith in Jesus. Paul could now speak of them as being “a new creation” having accepted and been transformed by the grace (gift) of a “life in the Spirit”. Notice that the “gifts” were not simply given to them for their individual benefit, but for the good of the community. Their personal encounter with God through Jesus involved a personal transformation, but this was to evidence itself in service to the local Church community.

It seems that Paul might answer the initial three questions in this way: 1) Who is this God whom I seek? Answer: The God revealed by Jesus; 2) How do I go about the process of putting myself in His presence? Answer: By listening to Paul’s preaching; 3) How will this encounter affect the way I lead my daily life? Answer: Using the gifts of the Spirit in the service of the church community.

Only later when the Church was a major player in society, would the gifts of the Spirit be seen as also directed to the world outside the Church.

Monastic Spirituality

The origins of monastic spirituality are often traced to developments in the Church during the second, third and fourth centuries. During this time Christianity was transformed from a Jewish sect into a separate religion - Christianity. After the death of the apostles, the spirit-led Christian communities of Paul and the Johannine communities (those Christian communities from which sprung the Gospel and Epistles attributed to “John”) felt the need to place some organizational order and control over the “life in the Spirit” experienced in their communities.

Thus they developed a structure of bishops, priests and deacons. This was necessary from a purely sociological point of view and the need to evaluate which were true gifts of the Spirit and which were not. For example, they needed to identify a true gift of prophesy from a false one, to control and evaluate the meaning of the gift of tongues and to identify which teachers were teaching orthodoxy and which were teaching heresy. Thus, the Church became more organized and in the view of some it was now led more by the clergy, than by the Spirit.

A more fundamental change came in the fourth century. When the persecutions ended with the Edict of Milan, issued by the emperor Constantine in 312, probably less than

five percent of the Roman Empire was Christian. By the end of the century, when the Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the empire, some fifty percent of the empire was Christian.

Gone were the small, dedicated, sometimes persecuted, Spirit-filled communities of the first century. In the estimation of some Christians, many of the new converts were judged to have converted simply because of social and/or political convention. They seemed to accept Christianity often based on the judgment of the Emperor and society, rather than on a personal encounter of God in Jesus. Given these developments, one of the outcomes of this situation was the birth of a very influential type of spirituality known as monasticism.

Monasticism arose in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire and was a reaction to and a warning about this new situation of Christianity created by Constantine and Theodosius. Some thought that Christianity had become too cultural or secular and had lost its original Spirit-driven fervor and dedication. In order to regain their Christian spirituality, many felt they had to withdraw from society. This movement began in the middle of the 4th century and became known as monasticism.

The founders of monasticism (e.g. Anthony of Egypt d. 356) were called monks, a word that comes from the Latin *monachus*, which is a transliteration of the Greek for “one who lives alone”. The first type of monasticism was called anchoritic, from the Greek work *anachoresis* which means “withdrawal”. The anchorite monks were basically hermits who withdrew from society and usually lived solitary, celibate lives in the desert. They devoted themselves to prayer and meditation in order to experience union with God.

These early monks were often criticized for withdrawing from society and not serving others as Jesus had done. Thus, another, more balanced, type of monastic movement evolved that was predominately communal and concerned with the needs of the poor. This model was introduced by Basil the Great (d. 379), who later became a bishop and was famous for his relief efforts in time of famine and his building project to aid the poor.

As time went on the monastic life spread to the West and continued to develop communal forms of monastic life. Monks took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and lived and prayed in a community. St. Benedict (480-547) is known as the founder of Western monasticism. Benedict introduced a more balanced spirituality, which was expressed in the phrase – *ora et labora* - pray and work. Monks would continue to pray, but would work on their lands to support themselves. However, just as St. Paul’s communities saw the works of the Spirit focused on the Church community, so too these monks tended to focus primarily on their own monastic community.

The spiritual life of many of the early monastic communities remained basically individualistic and focused primarily on “putting oneself in the presence of God”. It was seen as the “higher way” and provided an option for those Christians who chose to follow Jesus’ recommendation to the rich young man - “sell all you have and follow me.”

While these various types of religious orders made it possible for their members to focus on putting themselves in the presence of God, they were often criticized for being too individualistic and for ignoring the realities of the world and the needs of their fellow Christians. This criticism arose because some of these monastic spiritualities often stressed only the sinful side of humanity and saw the goal of the Christian life as a rejection of worldly things and pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, and a concentration on “saving one’s soul”. There was a certain dualism in which the soul was pitted against the body as if these were two separate components of human existence, one higher (the soul) and one lower or base (the body).

The monastic life was seen as a higher Christian calling or vocation. The spirituality of the lay person was seen as hopelessly third class – clergy, religious, laity - because, by definition, it was not celibate and was concerned with “things of the world”.

However, over time, new monastic orders and religious congregations (male and female) that followed after the time of St. Benedict, began to develop a spirituality that found expression in service to the world, especially the poor, the sick and orphans. They also were devoted to missionary work and established seminaries and schools for the laity. Many of these religious orders were known as congregations, such as the Jesuits and the Holy Cross fathers. These congregation did not usually have structured communal prayer and were active outside of their living quarters.

Therefore, we have seen a development in the concept of spirituality from an emphasis largely restricted to “putting oneself in the presence of God” and avoiding the secular world, to an emphasis of putting oneself in the presence of God to be transformed into a servant of the world.

However, we should note that this entire development of spirituality took place only within the ranks of the clergy and the religious. The spirituality of the laity was largely ignored by Church leaders and theologians. But of course, the laity did indeed have a spiritual life. They too had come in contact with God within the life and liturgy of the Church and their personal prayer life. They too had been transformed by this encounter with their God to serve better their families and their communities, but their spiritualities were not recognized or encouraged by the official Church.

Lay Spirituality

As the monastic orders declined in the 20th century, many theologians and began to stress that a deep and full spirituality was available to all Christians, whether lay or clerical. God could be encountered not only in monastic and of types of religious life, but also in the lives of ordinary people. Furthermore, the “world” was not to be escaped, but to be served. Vows of chastity, poverty and obedience were not prerequisites for a deep spiritual life. Marriage and family life were understood to be as fruitful a seedbed for spirituality as any form of monastic life.

Christians were reminded that the Kingdom of God of which Jesus spoke was only open to those who gave drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, food to the hungry, etc.. Rather than simply spend one's life in contemplative prayer many lay people saw their activism in society - addressing the needs of the poor, promoting justice, protecting the environment, participating in political life - as a concrete form of prayer more in step with the teachings of Jesus. This was exemplified in recent times by the Catholic Worker Movement led by Dorothy Day and service to the dying led by Mother Theresa.

The imitation of Jesus in a life of practical love of self and others was now seen as an indispensable element of a deep spiritual life. If religious experiences did not make a difference in the ordinary experiences of daily life, they were not truly Christian religious experiences. The test of any true religious experience was the transformation of one's life in service to the world. Moreover, the "life of the Spirit" - true spirituality - could be lived in any human circumstance.

Finally, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) made it clear that all the baptized lived in the Spirit of God. The Council also made it clear that Christians were not to escape from the world but serve those in need and transform the social and political structures of the world. This could be accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the daily life of the Christian.

Therefore every member of the laity could put themselves in the presence of God by participation in the liturgy, meditating on the Scriptures and engaging in personal prayer. And by doing so they could be transformed to be servants to the world in a wide variety of ways.

A Developing Spirituality of the 21st Century

The cover the September 5, 2005 NEWSWEEK magazine read: "Spirituality in America". It reported the findings of a poll of some 1,000 individuals that indicated the beginnings of a swing back to a more individualistic spirituality with an emphasis on seeking a personal, ecstatic experience of God. This spirituality is not necessarily related to affiliation with any particular Church or any activity in the world. Many describe their spirituality as a personal search for an experience of God. This was evidenced in the responses of many individuals who said that they were "spiritual", but not necessarily "religious".

This new movement seems to be a search for a personal relationship with God or Jesus sometimes within a church community or, perhaps more often, on a strictly personal level. When these experiences are communal they seem to resemble the churches of St. Paul with joyful, ecstatic, emotional experiences expressed in clapping, singing, shouting "Hallelujah" and speaking in tongues. Others are very personal like the early monks or mystics. The poll found that this trend is not restricted to Christians, but found in Jews, Muslims and Buddhists among others.

Evaluating Approaches to Spirituality

Given the wide and changing variety of approaches to spirituality found in Christian history we may well ask: Are all approaches of equal value? Are some to be avoided and others to be embraced? And what criteria should we use to evaluate them?

In evaluating various approaches to spirituality from a Catholic Christian point of view, the first point to mention is that when we “put ourselves in the presence of God”, this is the God revealed to us in Jesus and as understood within scriptures and traditions of the Catholic Church. We cannot live in the Spirit in isolation. There is no direct contact with God. All of our experiences are “mediated” and most profoundly mediated through Jesus as remembered in the writings of the New Testament and as understood by the tradition of the Church.

We mentioned earlier that in the earliest Christians sources, the letters of Paul, we find Paul speaking of Christians as “living in the Spirit” and receiving the “gifts of the Spirit” intended to be expressed in service to the community. However, in reading First and Second Corinthians we also see that Paul warned that an uncontrolled life in the Spirit could bring disruption to a community.

For example, Paul taught that the gift of prophecy came from the Spirit, but it happened that not all who prophesied agreed with each other. How could the gift of prophecy be judged? Who had the true spiritual gift of prophecy and who did not? Paul also acknowledged that the gift of tongues was from the Spirit. But what about those speaking in tongues who could not be understood and actually disrupted the community services?

Therefore, from the earliest days of Christianity, it became clear that without leadership and a common ground for spirituality, things could get out of hand. For Paul the answer was that the Christian communities he founded should listen to him and to those commissioned by him. In Galatians 1:2 he states that even if “an angel from heaven” should preach a gospel message contrary to his own, “let him be accursed”. As we noted earlier, after the death of Paul the early Churches developed a structure of bishops, presbyters, deacons who were charged with the task of determining which were true products of the Spirit and which were not.

Later, Christian leaders began to evaluate the growing body of Christian literature to determine which texts were to be normative or canonical, that is, which represented an orthodox rendering of the person and teachings of Jesus. Therefore, the canonical Scriptures and the writings of those Christian theologians who were judged to have an orthodox interpretation of Scripture came to provide a basis for evaluating the various forms of Christian spirituality.

Beginning with the 4th century, Christianity also began to develop creeds. While, by definition, they could not fully explain the mysteries of Jesus and the Trinity,

nevertheless they set limits to what could be believed. Therefore, any spirituality that claimed a knowledge of God contrary to the teachings found in the creeds and in the scriptures was a false spirituality. Thus, any individual Christian spirituality must have a solid connection to the teachings and traditions of the Christian community.

A second point to mention is that the transformation that takes place through placing ourselves in the presence of God is meant to be expressed in the moments of our daily lives. There is evil in the world, but the world itself is not evil. We are not called to escape from the world, but to serve it. Like ourselves, the world needs constant transformation so that it can better reflect the creative will of its Creator. We need to take the love of God to the world of our daily experience – our families, our work, our schools, our play, etc. We are to react to our world in the way that Jesus showed us. Jesus was God present among us reacting to His world. Our goal is to imitate Jesus.

Our ability to serve the world as Jesus did does not require that we be clergy or members of a religious order. Life as a lay person – single or married – is equally open to the presence of God and the ability of God to transform us

Where does all this leave us? How are we today to evaluate our own spirituality and the spirituality of others? St. Thomas in the 13th century made an observation that, perhaps, most of us could agree with - “in the middle stands virtue”. If we take a course between the extremes of pure activism and isolated individualism in approaching our life in the Spirit, we end up with our original definition of spirituality, which contained these two necessary elements: 1) to put oneself in the presence of God and 2) to be transformed by that personal encounter. If our spirituality is to be a Christian spirituality, then these two elements must be placed within the context of our Christian tradition.

We recommend this “middle way”, because if we do not put ourselves in the presence of God, our lives in this world are not properly guided and if we do not live a life dedicated to the love of self, others, and our world we have not truly experienced the call of God to love ourselves and our neighbors. A true Christian’s spirituality must contain both elements. Therefore, a true spirituality is not a permanent retreat into a private, inner world. It is not centered only on oneself, but by definition it is a personal experience that directs one toward others whom we encounter in daily life. Love of God and love of neighbor cannot be separated.

Given this broad context it is also necessary to state that each of us is a unique creation and so there must be patterns within Christian spirituality (as we have defined it) to meet our individual needs and temperaments. Therefore, a few in the Christian community (monks for example and mystics) will devote themselves to a life of contemplation and prayer. However, at a minimum the prayers of these contemplatives must be directed toward the welfare of others and their experiences are to be shared in order to help others in their quest for an experience of God. Others (the activists) will claim that their work in the world for peace, justice, etc. is their prayer. However, at a minimum they must spend some time encountering God in prayer and in the liturgical celebrations of the Christian community lest they lose the true focus and direction for the labors.

All of us have our own spirituality and most of us are already in the middle. As Christians our contact with our God has come through Jesus as transmitted by the Church. Our lives are a combination of prayer and action as the two necessary elements of our spirituality. It is well to remember that our spiritual life is always a quest, for the mystery of God and our communion with Him knows no limits. We must find new and better ways to put ourselves into the presence of God and find new ways to let this experience transform our lives in service to the world of our daily experience. True, our actions on earth will always leave something to be done, for the fullness of the Kingdom escapes us in this world. Nevertheless, whoever we are and whatever our circumstances, each of us can be truly spiritual.

Summary

In summary, perhaps it is best to review the answers to the questions that our definition of spirituality engendered. We defined Christian spirituality as putting ourselves in the presence of God so that our lives might be transformed.

That definition generated these questions and their answers: 1) Who is this God who I seek? Answer: The God revealed in Jesus, 2) How do I go about the process of putting myself in God's presence? Answer: Looking at our everyday life experiences "in depth" to discern the presence of God, reading and meditating on the New Testament, personal meditation, listening to good sermons, reading books on spirituality and theology to name a few. 3) How will this encounter affect the way I lead my daily life? Answer: Follow the example of Jesus by finding ways to love yourself, love others and love the world which God created and left in our stewardship.