

SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION: HOW THE TWO MEET IN PARISH LIFE

A gift and a challenge: making the quest for the Holy and personal spiritual process and growth not only fit in but be helped and supported by religion (word, code, ritual and prayer in worship). This is where the parish structure comes in, many times experienced as an obstacle rather than a help to involvement and identification with the church. Notwithstanding, the parish has great potential of transforming itself into a space of life in the Spirit. Meaningful liturgy, welcoming community, faith enrichment, option for the poor and needy, the use of resources responsibly, are the means of growth and joy in the Paschal Mystery.

Defining Terms

When told I was asked to write an article on Religion and Spirituality in Parish Life, our office manager, Debbie Ebratt, responded, "That's easy. Spirituality is about freedom and religion is about control." I laughed at her response, claiming it wasn't quite that simple. But to many, especially young adults, it is. Religion is confining and narrow, while spirituality is expansive and enriching.

According to Richard McBrien in *Catholicism*, (Winston Press, 1980), being spiritual means knowing and living "according to the knowledge that God is present to us in grace as the principle of personal, interpersonal, social and even cosmic transformation." (p. 1057) Religion, on the other hand, includes a set of beliefs, moral behaviors, rituals and a community of persons that "has at least some rudimentary structure." (p. 252)

Sr. Barbara Fiand, SNDdeN gave a presentation at the 2004 Religious

Education Congress in Anaheim, California entitled “*A Quest For the Holy.*” In it she describes spirituality as the acceptance of a greater power in our lives, a response in wonder and awe to those deep experiences that may not even be conscious. Spirituality is the quest each human being has for the mystery of who we are, the discovery of that greater reality that lies beyond us. This is a difficult and daunting task. We need help. Thus the emergence of organized religion as a way to capture and explain and support the mystery of spirituality within each one of us.

Religion is especially helpful during times of confusion, turmoil and transition. It provides an anchor to our spiritual longing, giving it direction and assurance that we will survive the chaos and period of uncertainty. According to Barbara Fiand, religion is “the articulated response of the community – the

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gathered people – to the depth quest experienced and intuited in primordial faith.” She goes on to explain that the articulated response is “formulated in word (scripture), in code (moral norms), in cult (ritual) and in the worship of the community gathered in prayer. That is the task of religion. Wherever people come together and are looking for inspiration and guidance in their common quest for God, that is where religion is found. But the freedom and fire and light found in religion comes from spirituality. Without that inspiration, religion becomes stale,

rule-bound and fixated. It loses its spirit and energy and courage to change and adapt. Spirituality, in other words, helps religion stay alive and relevant to people’s lives. At the same time, religion gives spirituality a framework and a direction so that the deep longings of our hearts find meaning and articulation.

The Parish As Obstacle

Enter the parish. A common bromide going around is, “I don’t go to church

but I consider myself a spiritual person.” From my experience with parishes across the United States, I can understand this response. There is much in the Catholic Church and in local parishes that discourages involvement in and identification with the Church. Besides the larger issues of sexual abuse, misuse of authority, the shortage of priests, restrictive regulations and exclusive attitudes towards women, gays and minorities, there are also discouraging experiences on the parish level. Uninspiring liturgies, boring homilies, poor catechesis, controlling leadership are all too common. As one person wrote in response to our monthly newsletter, “Rote Mass dulls awareness of spirituality. Sexist language angers me and impedes my ability to hear the message. I do not believe that the hierarchy of the Roman Church has adequately bought into the idea of lay participation to offer both leadership training and a real voice to the laity.” Despite these many drawbacks, people continue to attend church, longing to find expression for that deep mystery of spirituality that lies within. How can a parish speak to that longing?

The Positive Side of Parish Life – Unleashing The Spirit

Catholic parish, if it wants to be an authentic expression of Christ's Church, must have five essential elements; vibrant and participative worship, welcoming and inclusive community, on-going faith enrichment and development, outreach to the poor and needy, responsible use of financial and physical resources, all five of which are guided and given direction by a servant leadership. Using these five aspects of parish life as a framework, what follows are ways in which a parish at its best can manifest the interplay between religion and spirituality. Remember that spirituality is the mystery that lies within, the freeing, creative, dynamic force that is personal and unique to each individual. Religion is the expression of our deep longings in word, code and ritual which we do with others in a structured community setting. Archbishop Rembert Weakland mentioned in a homily that we need a help to discover God in our lives and to develop our interior spiritual life. Coping with our messy lives and trying to overcome our self-seeking tendencies requires great conviction, determination and discipline, something most of us don't have, at least not for very long. We need help. Here are some helps that a parish could provide.

Vibrant and Participative Liturgy

Consider the woman who wakes up on Sunday morning and says to herself, “I don’t want to go to church. The music is a performance, the priest is predictable, the community is cold and the environment is sterile. I’ll just spend time in personal prayer instead.” For some unknown reason – call it the urging of her spirituality – by the end of the day she decides to go anyway. She strikes out for the Sunday evening Mass, one she had not attended before. To her amazement, her predictions did not come true. As she approached the church building, greeters – mostly young people – were at the doors welcoming people into the assembly, smiling, shaking hands, offering song books to each person who entered. “I’ve never had this happen to me before,” she reflects. “Where did all this come from?” Music was playing as she entered, soothing, meditative music that gave her a sense of awe and reverence. That, too, was new to her. As the congregation stood to welcome the celebrant, a song leader encouraged all to sing, supported by members of the choir who stood along the aisles so that the voice of the people was much fuller and more alive than she had experienced in the past. She knew the song – *On Eagles’ Wings* – and broke into song with enthusiasm, catching the spirit of the choir members standing close by.

The celebrant had a friendly manner that seemed inviting and inclusive. His simple greeting and smile spoke volumes to her. “He’s much better than I remember him being at the Mass I usually attend,” she mused. The rest of the service was pure gift to her, from the way the readings were proclaimed to the engaging homily, from the shared petitions where she could speak her need for prayers with the person next to her, to the greeting of peace that was more than just a perfunctory hand shake or nod.

On returning home, she felt she had experienced God in a new way. The liturgy had given her strength to face the coming week with renewed determination and commitment. She found herself saying, “Why have I not gone to this Mass before? What led me there today? This was just what I needed. I certainly want to try that out again.”

Is this a fantasy, something that could not happen in a real parish? Certainly not. This is where religion and spirituality meet, in the Eucharist. Spirituality

comes first, in the creativity and risk-taking of those planning the liturgy. "What more could we do to give this Mass a lift and new vitality?" the liturgy committee might ask. "Let's get the greeters out on the street and in the parking lot to invite people in. Let's have the choir act more as a model and support for the congregation rather than doing all the singing itself. Let's talk to the celebrant to see if he could connect with the congregation better. Let's consider other ways people could be included, such as sharing prayers with one another during the petitions."

Spirituality also comes first in the prayer lives of those attending. The more people get in touch with the God-mystery within, the more able they are to share prayer and worship in the assembly. One example of where this is happening is in the Saginaw, Michigan Diocese. For the last four years, the recently deceased Bishop Kenneth Untener published his "Little Books," a black one for Lent, a white one for Easter to Pentecost, a blue one for Advent and Christmas, and a special one on Stewardship during October-November. Every parishioner in the diocese received – free of charge – a "Little Book" each season to be used as a guide and help in one's personal prayer life. He asked everyone to pray at least six minutes a day on the Gospel passage, using the reflection he wrote on the reading. As a result, people came to liturgy with this habit of daily prayer. This is where religion plays a part in personal spirituality. It is the organization and structure of religion that gives focus and direction to people's prayer through reading scripture, reflecting on the passage and establishing a habit of daily prayer. These "Little Books" have made a difference in the Saginaw Diocese and in other places they are used around the world.

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Welcoming and Inclusive Community

A young priest was given a parish on the edge of downtown Chicago. It was in disrepair and had only a few older parishioners on its rolls. His job was to close it down, it had no future. Instead, he made the rounds of the new high rise condominiums that were being built in the area. He talked to the young adults who were moving in, offering Mass in the common rooms for those who wished. He listened to their stories of frustration and competition and loneliness. He invited them to the parish, not for liturgy but for a block party in front of the church. And they came — in droves. The parish is Old St. Patrick's, the pastor is Fr. Jack Wall. It now has the reputation as *the* place for young adults to attend, although people of all ages flock to the Masses every weekend. Fr. Jack is an unassuming, gentle man of prayer who speaks to people's hearts in his homilies. This has a great appeal among young people who are struggling with meaning in their lives and with the stirrings of spirituality deep within.

Can other parishes follow suit? Of course. What is needed is a genuine atmosphere that "there's room for everyone." Creating that environment takes creativity and careful planning. When a young adult walks by the parish, for instance, does the twenty or thirty year old see others the same age going into church? Once inside, does the music fit a younger mindset? Is the homily relevant to a younger life style? Are there opportunities for the person to meet others the same age and to enjoy conversations about meaningful topics? Another parish that works at including young adults is St. Monica's in Santa Monica, California. The Sunday evening Mass is so full that a large television screen has to be put outside in the courtyard to handle the overflow. This is an example of religion speaking to the hearts of people, speaking to their spirituality.

On-going Faith Enrichment and Development

Consider the parish where the parents drop off their children on Sunday morning for religious education classes. But they don't go home. Instead, they sit in their cars reading the Sunday paper or doing other tasks. In one parish we visited we counted thirty such vehicles in the parking lot. There was a discussion session offered for adults at the same time but few attended because it was not well organized, adequately publicized nor in line with people's

interests. It did not, in other words, speak to the spirituality of the parents waiting in their cars for their children. Reading the paper was easier than grappling with central issues and deeper questions. Nor did anyone go out to invite them in, perhaps offering coffee and a donut that they could eat on the way in.

People's lives are so full and crowded that religion – read parish – has a difficult time capturing the imaginations of people and challenging them to “go deeper.” Challenge is the key word. Many parishes do not challenge their people. They expect little and get little in return. To turn the tide, look first at where most of the parishioners encounter the parish – at the weekend liturgies. How can this weekly ritual be formational and instructive without distracting from the worship? Start with the homily. One homilist we've encountered always left the people with three letters for the coming week, something they could easily remember and put into practice. For instance, in speaking about relationships, the letters were A-A-A. These stood for acept the shortcomings of the other, acknowledge one's own failings and attend to the relationship, work at making it better. Another priest had a two-minute “answering” session once a month at the end of Mass. People could submit a question on any topic during the month, whether by written note placed in the collection basket, by e-mail or phone. He would pick one and expound for no more than two minutes on the topic. No one left church early on the weekends he did this “answering.” This was yet another way that religion spoke to the spirituality of people's lived experience.

Other parishes have given people a single question based on the Gospel reading for the day that they could take home and discuss with their family. Still others have printed out the readings for the coming Sunday so that people could pray over them throughout the week. Challenge and depth are the common ingredients in these examples, finding something that will take people beyond the ordinary and routine of everyday life. It takes parishioners to a new depth and understanding. Offering these challenges and occasions for personal reflection can be done by others besides the priest, including staff members and lay leaders. Discover whatever it will take to stir hearts and touch people's imagination and interest.

Another vehicle for fostering spirituality as part of faith development is the use of art in all its many forms and expressions. Plays, movies, concerts,

paintings, poetry, craft fairs – all speak to a spirituality that can not be accessed through direct teaching, lectures or presentations. Those parishes that stress the lively arts as part of on-going formation have more parishioners who say their spirituality is increasing. This is the finding reported in Robert Wuthnow's book *All In Sync* (University of California Press, 2003). Wuthnow states that "a greater emphasis on the arts in congregational life may be conducive to members having uplifting (spiritual) experiences." (p. 146). His conclusion is: Expand parishioners' exposure to the arts in any form and their spiritual experience will expand as well. They go hand in hand.

Outreach to the Poor and Needy

The pastoral council decides to "twin" with a parish in Haiti. A delegation goes to Haiti to make personal contact. The group returns with stories of want and need unimagined by the parishioners back home. The delegation shows a video during Mass that reveals the deplorable conditions in which people of that country have to live. Donations from the parishioners come pouring in. Even children and teenagers offer their support and pledges. A young attorney who is struggling with overwork and balance in his life is touched by the presentation. To the great surprise of his wife and family, he volunteers to be part of the group taking donations to the sister parish. It even shocked himself that he volunteered to do this. Something deep inside told him that this would help keep his life on track. The one-week experience of Haiti, as his wife described it later, "Ruined him for life. He's a changed man, and this makes me very happy. He no longer is consumed by his work. He has time for us and for others as never before." Taking the risk to visit Haiti changed his outlook on life, work and family. The parish called forth his gifts and helped him realize his potential in service to the community. His religion awakened

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Fr Donal Neary, a Jesuit priest residing in Ireland wrote in response to our newsletter, "Religion is the challenge that takes us out of ourselves and moves us to share and help others." Just as spirituality is the fire and energy and creative force in each individual and in the parish as a whole, so religion is the structure and framework that gives spirituality an outlet beyond our personal experience. It links the individual to a group of people – a community – that is committed to serving others in need. A group of dedicated people can do immeasurably more than a single person in caring for those in need and challenging unjust structures.

Using Financial and Physical Resources Responsibly

As the new pastor joined the parish, he realized that the buildings were in danger of collapsing. A lack of upkeep for many years had to be confronted. Rather than dealing with the situation directly, he called a town hall meeting of the entire parish. A large crowd attended, drawn by the chance to meet the new pastor. He asked everyone present to choose a partner. He gave each pair a clipboard and pen. The sheet on the clipboard contained a map of all the parish property, both buildings and land. He asked each two-some to go around and inspect the property and then return with their findings. Staff members and school faculty were stationed at key locations to answer any questions people might have. After an hour the parishioners returned, full of new insight and discovery. "This place is a mess," one person exclaimed. "We had no idea what bad shape it is in." "Besides that," another chimed in, "the land that we could use for a new building is no good, it's on a flood plain." "We have to do something," a third person offered, "and do it soon." "Really," the pastor responded with amusement. "So you see it, too."

The result of that communal discernment was the creation of a plan for a whole new parish plant to be built on a parcel of land donated by the Knights of Columbus. What makes this a spiritual experience for the parishioners is that they agreed to finance this new adventure without a capital campaign. They made the commitment to pay for it all through personal stewardship. The people increased their regular contributions each year over the last four years so that they can break ground for their new church this coming summer.

The parishioners' spirituality will be embodied in the new structure. This is the true story of St. Mary's Parish in Derby, Kansas.

Conclusion

Ronald Rolheiser, OMI in *The Holy Longing, The Search For A Christian Spirituality* (Doubleday, 1999), mentions nine reasons why one should go to church. They are: because it is not good to be alone; to take my place within the family of humanity; because God calls me there; to dispel my fantasies about myself; because the saints have told me so; to help others with their pathologies and to let them help me with mine; to dream with others; to practice for heaven; and for the pure joy of it.

If parishes could get to that point where people attend for the pure joy of it then they would be speaking to the parishioners' deepest longings of spirituality. Despite all that drags the Church and parish down, there are moments where genuine spirituality shines and the people rejoice. This is the Easter experience we all crave, the mystery of new life and rebirth embodied in the Pascal Mystery. It is the same God who raised Jesus from the dead that keeps raising the parish and all within it to the possibility of Resurrection and fulfillment. We need to hang onto to that hope and belief. As it says in Hebrews 15, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the certainty of things not seen."