

Needed: A Revival of Spirituality

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“**I** am so worried about my children. I raised them in the faith, but now they are in their twenties and thirties and they never darken the door of the church. What can I do? I pray and pray, but the faith seems to them to be simply something they don't need.”

I have heard this lament so often and from so many people and my heart breaks for parents who are worried, worried sick at times, about their children and the religious convictions of their children. There is no denying the fact that many people, and especially younger people, have given up the practice of our Catholic faith. In Australia the level of church attendance has fallen as low as it is in the very secularized societies of France or Italy. In Britain, where only about five percent of the Anglican population attends church anymore, Catholics had long held a proud record of faithfulness to “the old religion,” but no more. In once-Catholic Ireland, the numbers at mass are quickly falling off—almost Sunday by Sunday. Even in North America where Church attendance among the wider American population is remarkably high, Catholic attendance levels are falling and falling fast. Many people are inclined to blame the decline of the role of religion in people's lives on “secularism” and indeed both Pope John Paul II and

Pope Benedict XVI have spoken out repeatedly against the collapse of Christian culture and its replacement by secularism in Europe and America. That attitude is reflected in the following comment by a blogger on a “Religion in Society” site:

Religion is not important. Good will, common sense, and logical thinking are all we need, not illogical cults like religion. Long live science.

Nevertheless, I think secularism a “straw man” in our Catholic conflict with current culture, too easy an answer to explain the real problem. There is no doubt that the modern generations—not only the young, but a significant portion of society that cuts across youth and middle age alike—simply have given up religious dogmas as they have rejected all intellectual systems that claim certainty. This does not pertain only to religious convictions, but to all claims on certainty. The blogger who writes “Long live science” does not know it but s/he is as culturally emarginated as is the religious fundamentalist. Science has lost its monopoly on the intellectual life of the new generation of modern men and women. This is the phenomenon called “post-modernism.” Today more and more people simply reject dogmas of any sort—political, scientific, and cultural, as well as religious. People look to non-conventional medical treatments—acupuncture, homeopathy, herbal medicines, or reiki—not in place of but in addition to scientific medical practices. Certainty and dogma have lost their hold of the minds and hearts of many people. While some may regret this collapse of certitude, we need to face the reality that the psychological toothpaste cannot be put back into the tube. Once people have moved away from a worldview built on certainty, they are not likely to go back to it.

This is probably not as unique to the modern generation as we might think. As we come to understand the varieties of ways in which the human brain is structured, we can see that a significant portion of the population in the developed world simply does not apprehend absolutes

and sees the world in greys more than in blacks and whites while others seem to be “wired” to see truth in more rigid categories. While this might be upsetting to some religious people, a careful reading of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux or Saint John of the Cross would indicate that, while they did not dissent from Church teaching, neither were they people of fixed and immutable ideas. Each of them said or wrote things that startled and even upset their contemporaries. Teresa of Avila and her companion Doctor of the Church, the Dominican Catherine of Siena, were even more shocking to their contemporaries in how they spoke and interpreted the faith. Indeed the mystical mind seems to be open to drawing their religious understanding from personal experience rather than interpreting experience in the stark light of defined theological categories. There are more ways to the Truth than through the Catechism. While we cannot reject the dogmas of the Church, neither is it necessary that we focus on them in our search for God. Faith is far more than assent to doctrine and being Catholic cannot be reduced to a set of beliefs and practices.

Before we can devise a strategy to bring so many who have fallen from the practice of the faith back to their Catholic roots, it is necessary for us to come to some appreciation of what being Catholic means to many of those who feel isolated or alienated from the Church. This can be difficult for those of us who are and have always been practicing Catholics. For us the external structures of the Church with its hierarchy and clergy, with its rituals and ceremonies, with its rich history of martyrs and artists, with mystics and humanitarians, even with its commandments and laws, is something we are very used to and not in the least disturbed by. There are, however, those who when we say “Church” think only of the institutional aspect of the Church—the hierarchy or the magisterium or the organizational aspects of our Catholic family. These institutional aspects cannot be ignored—every association must have its rules and

structures, and an organization as large as the Catholic Church will require a fairly complex structure. But the Church is no more limited to its hierarchical constitution than its faith is limited to its doctrines. There are those who find the Church exclusive, who find organized religion divisive, and who see Christianity as an instrument of patriarchy and authoritarianism. They can cite examples from the history, not only of the Catholic Church but of the various Christian denominations, where religion was used to keep people subjugated, to justify slavery, and to endorse persecutions of those who did not agree with the dominant religious institutions. Unfortunately history does not lack examples of where religion, including our Catholic faith, has been misused and where people have suffered greatly beneath religious opinions and authorities. We cannot undo this past, but we must make sure that our Catholic family today is free of the sins and faults of its past. Bigotry and prejudice of any kinds, patriarchy or repression, anti-intellectualism or blind dogmatism bring only disgrace on any institution but they are particularly appalling in religion. The very word “Catholic” means inclusive, all-embracing and we must be sure that we are a religious family in which all can feel at home. There are parts of our Catholic history which we cannot disown but of which we must repent. Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI have all—on repeated occasions—confessed the sins of the Church’s past and begged pardon of the world and its many peoples for our failures to be faithful to Jesus Christ. There are aspects of our Catholic life today which still require further repentance—and effective reform. The clerical abuse scandals that have come to light these past twenty years and the culture of privilege and secrecy that so long concealed these scandals are but one example. But we cannot focus on the shadow side of Catholicism and think that it defines who the Church is—nor can we allow others to caricature the Church by its faults and foibles.

Of course there are some Catholics who think all we need do is restore a sense of order and discipline in the Church and all will be well. If we make all ship-shape on the Bark of Peter, putting everything back the way it once was, then we simply blow the whistle and yell “all aboard what’s going aboard” and pull up the gang-plank. Those who want to be part of the rules and regulations of a well-run ship can get aboard; those who don’t must go ashore into the world, and the Ark of salvation can set off from the shores of this lost world and sail blissfully across the eternal sea to the safe harbor of heaven. Nuns must bring their veils, children their catechisms, adults their submissiveness, the clergy their canon-law manuals, and all will be well on the Good Ship *Semper Idem*. The only trouble is, of course, is that the Bark of Peter, ark of salvation though it is, has always been a rather messy place with a somewhat feisty crew. Our memories of a Catholic Golden Age are somewhat selective and those who want to retreat into the security of the principles, practices, customs, and beliefs they knew as children are too often driven by a nostalgia that offers comfort in the face of the unknown future. There are those Catholics of today who sing the familiar song of the Children of Israel who wanted not to go forward into the future of a promised land but to retreat to the security of the Egypt they had known. They believe they can find a security in the remembered fleshpots of the pre-Conciliar Church. On the other hand, the way ahead of us, ahead of those of us who embrace the Second Vatican Council and its many changes, both those reforms tried and those many more as yet untried, is not clear but we are not afraid of the future. John of the Cross gives us courage in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel* when he speaks of the Dark Night—“I went forth with no light other than that which burned in my heart.” We know that the path of faith takes us through the darkness of many nights; that the path of salvation is not well-lit. Christ, the light of the World

burns bright in our hearts, but our path, like his, is revealed only a step at a time. Cardinal Newman's prayer becomes our own.

Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th'encircling gloom, Lead Thou me on!

The night is dark, and I am far from home,

Lead Thou me on!

Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see

The distant scene; one step enough for me."

The very reason that some people find security and comfort in the externals of religion, the doctrines and the rituals, is the same reason why others have turned to the spiritual journey. Our lives are fraught with insecurity. We realize that more and more as the passing years teach us that all things do indeed slip away. We find that physically we can no longer do things that once were so easy. Indeed most of us have bouts with one illness or another, perhaps serious and even life-threatening, perhaps only serious enough to remind us that there is no promise of life-long health. The economic roller-coaster of the past few years has shaken our confidence in the financial security for which we have worked and saved. We see people whose savings have been wiped out and even who have lost their homes. We are appalled to see that marriages collapse and fall apart even after thirty or more years. Children whom we thought would live near us and whose children we thought we would help raise live half-way across the country, or even half-way around the world. We begin attending the funerals of high-school classmates, and as we see a friend widowed, our own stomach knots at the thought that the Angel of Death will one day snap the sacramental cords that wind around our hearts too. In all this inner chaos where do we turn? Religion works for some. Others, overwhelmed, flee into various avoidance

mechanisms—alcohol, pills, mad spending. Some fall into depression. And for some of us, many of us, a door opens, not into an escape but into ever deeper realities and we find ourselves journeying on a path of deeper spirituality.

While for many of us the path of the interior journey has only opened in our mid-life years, ever greater numbers of younger people seem to be discovering the draw of a rich and deep exploration of their innermost depths. Every year tens of thousands of young people from all over Europe and some from as far away as California and Singapore, Buenos Aires and Cape Town, Sydney and St. Petersburg flock to the ecumenical monastery of Taizé for prayer and spiritual refreshment. But it is not necessary to journey so very far for this experience. The Taizé prayer is celebrated in churches and cathedrals from Washington DC to Rome to Tokyo to Mexico City for those, mostly young, who want to form communities of quiet prayer.

Several years ago I was in Paris for Christmas with some friends, including a middle-aged priest whom I, and several other friends, had come to fear was losing his vocation. He was tired and discouraged with his religious community. He had been given several difficult assignments over the years and not been given the support and encouragement he needed. His masses had become rote, his sermons drivel. Food, drink, and entertainment had assumed disproportionate amounts of his attention and energy. He was becoming quite worldly. Rumor was that he was spending much of his free time with people whose life style does not reflect our Christian values. On this particular evening he and two married couples in our group had wandered off looking for a bistro at which to have their dinner while I and several others were attending an organ concert at the Church of Saint Etienne du Mont. When “Father X” arrived back at the hotel, he was a man afire with excitement. They had never made it to dinner. Seeing the Church of Saint Gervais open and young people streaming into it, they had wandered in to

see what was going on. It was the evening prayer of the Monastic Fraternity of Jerusalem, a religious community of men and women that follow the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld in the “desert” of the city. At a period when vocations to traditional religious orders are drying up, this community is flourishing and in its thirty some years of existence had grown rapidly because it speaks to the spiritual hungers of the young in ways that draws them into an awareness of the rich fountain of grace which God desires to open in each human heart. One would think that the young adults of Paris would be about as cynical and hardened as young adults can be, but the Monastic Fraternity of Jerusalem shows that if you gather the young for prayerful attention to the Word of God that can open in them an awareness of the Presence of God in their lives, lives can be turned around. This community gave this priest a renewed vision of where he should put his energy. Each night for the remainder of our visit he went back to the prayer. He made arrangements to speak to one of the monks about how to gather people for prayer and how to move young people from the common prayer to that prayer which is “the flight of the alone to the Alone.” Going back to the shrine Church which he administers, he began inviting people to gather regularly for prayer and slowly a community of mostly younger people is beginning to form and mature. These are young people who long felt no ties for the more formal rituals of the Church and who were often openly contemptuous of the rules and regulations of our Catholic faith, but now they are maturing in that very faith which once repelled them.

On a recent visit to this priest and seeing this developing community, I sat in on a discussion of young men and women who were sharing about their spiritual maturing. One young man, Ben, about twenty-six, said that he had never found the mass had any meaning for him. He went to mass until he went to college because his parents insisted on it, but he said that he found it rote and mechanical. “It was a big church. It probably held a thousand people. We

all sat in rows facing the front, seeing only the backs of the heads of one another. People came and left with anonymity. No one spoke to anyone else. The priest was way up there. I would see him at the altar—barely see him because he was so far away—and he reminded me of people you see on cooking shows on television. He was going about his thing—moving things around, lifting them up, putting them down again, and reciting words in a monotone I couldn't hear, or didn't see any purpose in hearing. I just sat there—or knelt there—and waited until it was time to go up for communion, but even then I didn't feel anything. They told me this was the Body of Christ. I would stick out my tongue and he would put a wafer on it but it would dissolve before I even got back to my seat. I'm sure it was my fault, but I just didn't feel connected at all to what was happening.” He went on to say, however, “Now it is so different. I come here every Monday and Thursday evening and we pray for an hour and more. It is quiet prayer. We sit in quiet. We sing—chant mostly—just simple refrains, things we can remember—it is almost in the dark. We listen to the verses and to the readings. And we sit some more in silence. It seems like the whole world comes into me in the silence. I see hungry children in Zimbabwe and old Palestinian farmers who have lost their farms and I hear the words of Jesus—come to me all you who labor and are heavy burdened. I see parents with AIDS in Haiti leaving their children orphans and I see old ladies with Alzheimer's right here on our street and I hear the gospel: whatever you have done to the least of my brothers, you have done for me. And when we have mass, usually on Thursdays, I take all this—the children and the old people and those with cancer and those being held hostage—and I put them in the chalice and I offer them to God in the chalice of my heart because I know that Christ wants to gather all creation to Himself to present it to the Father and make it perfect once again. And now on Sundays I go back to the old parish church and sometimes the ritual still seems sort of automatic, but I also know that the

whole world—and me too—is being gathered up to God and beginning to be transformed in Christ even as the Bread and Wine are becoming his Body and Blood.”

Father Albert Nolan, the Dominican priest from South Africa, writes:

One of the features of the mystical experience of union with God is that it always includes an experience of oneness with all human beings and with the whole universe.¹

I was struck when I read this because it was only the day after I heard Ben share about his awareness of Christ gather all things in himself to present to the Father. This young man who had been away from the Church had come to a very profound insight that many people who attend mass regularly, even daily, have not yet reached. For many of us, our prayer is a deep bond between God and ourselves, but it never reaches out to embrace the world. Too many people never make the connection between love of God and love of neighbor. Intense, they believe, in their devotion to Christ in the Eucharist, they are blasé about the Christ who dwells among us in the least of his brothers and sisters.

One of the last things I want to do is to make a false distinction between religion and spirituality, but I must ask that is there any point to religion if it does not lead us to spirituality? Unless our religious practices lead us into a deeper and personal relationship with God, and that means a relationship that opens our eyes and our hearts—and our pocketbooks when needs be—to others in their need, how are those religious practices different than the superstitious practices of ancient cults? I think this is what many of our young people sense when they look at organized religion today. They see a disconnect between our religion and our lives and they

¹ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 2006, p. 10.

cannot but wonder if there is anything more to religion than empty—and even superstitious—customs.

I also think this points a way for us to recover the new generations for the Church and for the Gospel. The interest does not begin with dogma or ritual or hierarchy. Indeed, until one has experienced the power of faith to change first our perspectives and then transform our lives, the rituals and hierarchies and dogmas seem to be little more than a baroque construct of conceits. I have come to believe that spirituality is the threshold to faith for the current generation. Abstractions do not speak to most modern people—but experience does. Gathering around the Word of God for quiet prayer can open the heart to grace and the open heart will, in time, open the mind to the richness of our Catholic faith.

But this means that we ourselves must become people of the spiritual journey—serious practitioners of the spiritual journey. We must pray. We must become people of prayer—not sayers of prayer, but people who know how to sit and listen to the Word of God and allow the Spirit of God to pray within us. And we must help our Catholic parishes become centers of prayer, places where people gather for contemplative prayer.

About a year ago I was driving past an Anglican Church which, over the years, had been in long decline. The property was well kept up due an outrageously large endowment that made a congregation all but unnecessary to this particular church. Clergy salaries, organists and choir directors—and landscapers—were all paid handsomely despite the moribund state of the parish. A friend who was a member, though rarely worshipped there, told me that most Sundays there were less than a dozen people at services. On this particular Wednesday evening I noticed thirty or forty cars parked there. I thought that perhaps there was a funeral. A few weeks later, again on a Wednesday, I noticed the cars again—even more it seemed. Indeed, whenever I would pass

on a Wednesday evening it seemed the parish was coming back to life. About three months ago I attended the wedding of the daughter of this friend who belongs to the parish and at the dinner afterwards I met the vicar. I mentioned to him that his parish seemed to be coming alive and asked what he was offering on Wednesday evening. Was it Bible Study? Was it devotions? Was it a healing service? “No,” he told me shaking his head. “We are renting out the undercroft to a Buddhist Sangha.

Out of curiosity I went the following Wednesday to see what this was about. It is a bit strange I suppose that I should go to a Buddhist gathering when I should never have paid that attention to it while I thought it was a sort of Anglican revival, but my interest was piqued. About a hundred people filled the hall adjoining the Anglican church. On a dais in the front sat a woman in her forties, her hair cropped short and clad in the deep red robes of a Buddhist nun. In my fifties I was clearly the oldest person there. The nun welcomed us all and asked that we all sit in silence for a few minutes—which we did. She then delivered a teaching of about forty minutes. She was a good speaker, though she never raised her voice above a quiet and even tone. Her message was quite practical. She related the pursuit of inner harmony to bringing harmony to our families and to our workplace. She quoted various Buddhist authors but also contemporary literature and some “pop psychologists.” She even quoted Pope Benedict and the Archbishop of Canterbury as well as Saint Francis de Sales and the seventeenth century French mystic Archbishop Fenelon. The talk was certainly not dogmatic. While it was filled with ideas from many sources outside our Catholic tradition, there was nothing in it that a Catholic could object to. It didn’t seem overly Buddhist, but it did give the listener some points to think about. This was followed by a half hour of silent meditation. There was no talking or chanting. Every so often—at irregular intervals—a chime was struck to remind us to refocus if our attention was wandering. There was

tea afterwards, but I chose not to stay. I think I was a bit embarrassed about being there and didn't want to be asked much about myself, but I also wanted some time to just think, even to pray. I had been given some things that I really wanted to turn over in my mind. What struck me most, however, was that a hundred people, mostly in their thirties and forties, were coming out Wednesday after Wednesday, for an hour and a half for a teaching and meditation time that while beneficial, was poor in comparison to what our Catholic tradition could offer. I would be surprised if very many in this audience knew about Saint John of the Cross or Saint Teresa of Avila. I think Elizabeth of the Trinity or Brother Lawrence would "blow them away." Why are we Catholics hiding our light beneath a bushel?

What can we do to bring the rich tradition of the spiritual life to the attention of the younger generations? Taizé prayer and the prayer of the Jerusalem Monastic Community are forms of prayer that draw some. The spiritual masters, especially of the Carmelite Tradition, need to be made more accessible to people. Contemporary authors such as Thomas Merton, Ronald Rohlheiser, Joan Chittester, all speak to people whose hearts are hungry for spiritual life. Many of today's "lost souls" would only be put off by formal liturgy and even the somewhat starchy setting of a church may not be the best place to gather them. Similarly Lay practitioners of the spiritual life might be the better agents for the gathering and teaching of people the initial steps of the interior life. People need to be listened to and not only taught or preached at and contemplative prayer groups should make sure that there is time for socialization and for interaction and not only for instruction. Indeed, if this is to be a strategy to reintroduce people to a side of our Catholic heritage they may never have known of, it will be important to give them not only instruction in prayer but an introduction to community as well because for their long term recovery of the Catholic faith they will need to be reintroduced into the community of the

Church. To simply bring people back to mass will not be a successful long term strategy as long-term maintenance of the faith requires commitment to a way of life in community and not simply individual acts of devotion or piety, however sacred.

All is not lost, but we must take seriously the challenge posed by the decreasing interest in the Church by the generations under fifty. We have the treasures to draw them home again to a rich life in Christ and in his Church. It will require that we open our hearts and minds to accept new categories of thought and new strategies of evangelization, but the promise of Christ that the Holy Spirit will be with us always has been borne out by centuries of experience in the Church and there is no reason to think that it will fail us today.