

The Spirituality of the Parish

"THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE PARISH"

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INTRODUCTION

The disadvantage of speaking last...

The spirituality of the parish - a most timely topic. It's time to reexamine: Where has Vatican II brought us? Where are we? In our spirituality do we see that Vatican II has had the exciting radical transformation we anticipated? Has opening the window brought in fresh air, or has the pollution in the disintegrating forces and dehumanizing of our ages' culture come in to "mess with Texas" and the rest of the world?

Specifically, the the 20 years plus of renewal been any ascent to a 20th century Mt. Carmel and to the living waters of holiness? Are we in point of fact closer to Christ? Has the Eucharist really effected more what it represents and represented now what it affects? Have our parishes continued to be the privileged places where spirituality is born, nurtured, rekindled and brought to fruition in works of charity, of justice? Have they created peacemakers in the cause of Christ and for the sake of our children and our children's children?

These are great questions for the data gathers, statisticians, and researchers of our day. I cannot begin to answer, after all, "I'm just a bishop" and as such no expert in anything, perhaps at best a general practitioner, dabbling here and there: asking more than answering, provoking people more than enlightening them. Let's see!

Five questions:

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1. What do we understand by spirituality?
2. What does parish have to do with spirituality?
3. What characterizes the spirituality of U.S. parishes today?
4. What are the hallmarks of authentic parish spirituality?
5. What can be done to nurture the spirituality of a parish?

I. WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND BY SPIRITUALITY?

First of all, we cannot simply identify spirituality as a phenomenon distinct and separate from Christian life. Our lived out discipleship is as much an expression of our spirituality as are our precious quiet moments to ourselves dedicated to personal communion with our god. We can be spiritual in our active ministry as well as in our private devotions or reflections. But it doesn't work out as easy as it sounds.

Our active ministry can suffer from the point of view of direction, depth or even authenticity if it is not fed by personal and communal prayer. Our spirituality can be lacking in authenticity if it does not spill out into works of charity and justice. In medius stat virtus continues to be a good principle.

Late 20th century writers on spirituality talk this way about spirituality: 1) "Christian spirituality concerns and embraces the whole life...a life renewed, transformed and transfigured by the Holy Spirit (Wakesfield). "Christian spirituality is not simply the "interior life" or the inward person--it is directed toward the implementation of both commandments of Christ, to love God and neighbor" (Ibid.). 2) "The subjective assimilation and living in charity of the objective, theological realities of revelation." So there is a concern for the subjective: there is most certainly a place in contemplative spirituality for the indirect effort in the

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growth and development for spiritual life. (A long-standing Catholic tradition as opposed to Protestant approaches to spirituality). It invokes the discovery of the inner self and the Spirit's activity in the "soul." (spirit selves). The spirit does indeed touch the heart of our own hearts, at the level where the ground of our personal being lies, where we yearn, where we really love, where there is not hatred, no ill-will, no rancor, no regrets--There we find peace with ourselves, with our God, with our world, and where we forgive and are forgiven: It is in the solitude of the heart where God moves and has His being, where the encounter of loners takes place, where the intimate dialogue of the I-thou occurs.

But it is more than this. The spiritual life is incarnational, it takes flesh in our total selves, because we are not body and soul, split in two as it were, we are body-soul composites animated by the Holy Spirit.

As we said in the Hispanic Pastoral Plan: "This spirituality (of Hispanics) has as its most important aspect, a sense of the presence of God, which serves as a stimulus for living out one's daily commitments." (VII).

II. WHAT DOES THE PARISH HAVE TO DO WITH SPIRITUALITY?

I can answer with one word: The Eucharist. But I have to explain.

I have to situate my personal encounter with God always in the context of the community of believers, the Church. It is there where I encounter God, in the fellowship of Christ's Body, the Church. The Church is Christ present, here, acting, touching, speaking, present: caressing us through his sacraments and word. Yes, I said caressing (in Spanish, cariños, caricias) assurances of love and presence. (But he is also present in the church through a Word that pierces like a two-edged sword: challenging us, and then the Good News become hard news, the consolation and healing turn into the

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anxiety and hunger for the fulfillment of God's prophetic word.

And all of this happens--you guessed it, in the parish! "The Church" is a concept, parish is a real place where hearts are lifted and broken, where people make promises and where promises are broken. Where people are brought together as one but also where they are fragmented: all are proofs that the parish is real because it is composed of real people, it is a cabinet of earthen vessels. It seems ironic but the parish lives' very humanness gives it credibility. (Edmundo Rodriguez)

But let's talk about the good things that happen in parish. Every activity is centered around the Eucharist--it is truly in the breaking of the bread where we the pilgrim people discover our identity as well as Christ's. There our hearts burn because of the seeing, touching, hearing that happens at Eucharist. In encountering Christ, we encounter ^{Christ}~~Christ~~ and as we feed on Christ, we feed on one another--on one another's patience and mercy, forbearance and forgiveness and through our mere presence and mutual witnessing. The presence of the bereaved husband and wife who just lost a son to AIDS: the presence of the newly married yuppie couple: the presence of students that come to us from the agnostic world of a secular university: the presence of the 80-year old neophyte baptized last Easter: the presence of a pregnant couple asking God for a safe delivery and a healthy baby. The presence of a lady in a wheelchair who has the brightest and most vibrant face of all as she is wheeled up to communion by mom. All of this builds up the body Sunday after Sunday.

The peaks and valleys of the life of the parish all help in the edification process also. In a neighboring diocese a bishop had to announce that their pastor is a victim of AIDS. In another parish, there was the

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untimely death of a young religious education coordinator. This winter several of our parishes had many funerals. It seems more than their share for one winter, including a few suicides here and there. In one parish three members of a family, mother and two adult children, parents themselves, died in a span of a few months. When these tragedies happen in a parish that has some semblance of vitality and cohesion, the hurt is somewhat shared by all and it becomes more bearable. Shared crosses are lighter crosses.

But on the other hand, joy shared multiplies the joy: The sacramental and social celebrations of the rites of passage do much to build up the parish family. Baptisms, confirmations, first communions, marriages, are still the moments we like to remember as the parishes' best moments. In some places (San Antonio e.g.) the parish fiesta was one of the best times. (The "Oh-no-not-another-fiesta" fiesta). Unforgettable too is the building and dedication of a new church.

What is really built up in all this is a common spirit that can go beyond the mere human spirit of togetherness. When all these events, activities and special moments are related to the Eucharist, they take on the witness of the Acts of the Apostles: "The whole group of believers was united, heart and soul ... the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all given great respect" (Acts 4.).

And our people expect the spiritual dimension from the parish. The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life (Report No. 7) shows that among a dozen or so issues, Catholic laity expressed the greatest support for the statement: "The Church should stress a personal, spiritual relationship to Christ" (p. 4, table 1). The same report makes the point that the parish—more than any other sociological aspect—seems to identify our parishioners as Catholics:

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"We typically learn and live our religious values in a family, and that family's values are in turn shaped by and help the religious practices of a local parish. We are all products of the particular, not the universal. Thus we understand less about American Catholics by lumping them together as Catholics than we do by examining them within St. Mary's or Christ the King or whatever the local parish. They cite Durkheim, the sociologist, who said that smaller communities--families, churches, etc.--develop their own "moral consensus", and much of what we tell about the past, interpret in the present, or hope for in the future is instilled in these communities. Reference is made also to Robert Bellah who says that parishes are "communities of memory" that nurture on identity with larger community purposes and standards that take us beyond the demands of American individualism.

From this data and reflection we take hope that the parish is serving well in helping us survive as disciples in a materialistic, greedy and agnostic world. It's good to hear that our parishes do have inherent resources that serve to stem the tide of our great American vices called individualism.

III. WHAT CHARACTERIZES THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE U.S. PARISH TODAY?

In one word: variety.

There is first of all and most importantly, the contemporary renewed liturgical resources for the nurturing of our parishioners' spirituality: we are finally "getting comfortable" with the renewed rites beginning with the Mass. (e.g. the papal visit). The Easter Vigil liturgy is becoming what it was meant to be: the reliving of the joy of our conversion, our ad limina experience of returning to the threshold of our personal/communal resurrection experience, the moment par excellence where our Easter fires are rekindled, as

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individuals and as a community bonded by God's own gift that comes from God's very life, the shalom of his own inherent well-being: "Peace" the Risen Lord say as we arise from our annual birth, and he gives us the shalom of the Spirit, the gift from the heart of God which is the source of the "well-being", the peace of the parish.

Together with this is the R.C.I.A., with its fresh, creative and invigorating possibilities for the sacramental life of the parish. The re-discovered gift in the process of conversion--that implies the journey of faith--on which we have all embarked, the call to ministry that is born in the living waters of baptism and the community's role of celebration, reception and acceptance of its own call to grow precisely as community. Truly then we have to accept. (Post V. II sp. is Liturgical).

The catechesis that accompanies the renewed liturgical life can have a profound on parish life but only if it gives priority to adult formation in faith. Parental involvement in the catechesis of their children is but a beginning to make sure that a mature understanding takes place, which in turn leads to the solid grounding of a parish's life.

Thank God we have lived in the century that re-discovered the Bible for the Catholic Church.

Parish renewal programs: such as Renew. Search for our teens and Marriage and Engaged Encounters. The above we could call Vatican II vintage.

But there are still organizations around that keep on feeding the folks: Legion of Mary, Apostleship of Prayer, prayer crusades, Holy Name, Serra, Secular Orders. We have the movements that are still alive and touching people with God's word and spirit: the Cursillo, Focolare, charismatics. There are groups, associates of Religious Congregations. Some groups still

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hold one to more traditional devotions and practices around titles of Our Lord, Mary and the saints. Devotions such as those to the Blessed Sacrament, the Sacred Heart, private revelations to Mary (Fatima, Lourdes, Guadalupe), St. Joseph, and other saints. Rosaries, novenas and scapulars and medals are still stocked in religious good stores and they apparently sell quickly.

In the Hispanic southwest Chimayo and San Juan de los Lagos are popular places of pilgrimages, and in Northern New Mexico the mysterious and enduring traditions of the Penitentes brotherhood in honor of Jesus the Nazarean are still very much alive and flourishing. Because of this rich variety of prayer life we can say: "Yes, in the Catholic world of the spirit of today, 1,000 angels do dance on the head of a pin!"

This variety does not seem to have hurt the U.S. parish, (besides there does not seem to be anything that can be done about it anyway).

Plurality is a part of our Catholicism and Christianity itself. There are four gospel versions, four Christ's, two distinctive sets of the beatitudes, two versions of the coming of the Holy Spirit, two traditions regarding the resurrection/glorification. All the nations around the Middle East and the Mediterranean--the total known world for the apostles--were present at Pentecost and each heard in their own language. Yes, variety is the spice of the Church.

Problems arise when one type of spirituality starts imposing itself as the best, the only, the most important. Respect is the keynote, as well as interconnectedness and sharing among the groups at every opportunity.

IV. WHAT ARE THE HALLMARKS OF AUTHENTIC PARISH SPIRITUALITY?

A parish is:

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- 1) United - and in turn characterized by genuine warmth (cariño). In spite of differences. People willing to sacrifice. "Why are they the way they are?"
- 2) Joyful - people glad to be together. Laughter the world needs good laughs--Are we in humorless world, a bitterness? Put down jokes...? People can play with one another.
- 3) Hospitable - open, inviting, attractive. Where the poor feel at home.
- 4) Missionary/evangelical/ - apostolic, reaches out: anxious for others to come in (Joe Dean)
- 5) Holds together: no matter what. The commitment is with God. Pastors may fail - laymen's - also - but life can go on no matter what crisis. Can cry with one another. A wounded healer.
- 6) In turn with the bishop and diocesan life--as well as with the universal Church.
- 7) Compassionate - thirsts for justice and peace. Responds to real needs of all the people. Remember "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" "Charity and Justice" (Just employees practice).
- 8) Have a story to remember. R.C.
- 9) A symbol or two: a statue, a structure, a cross, a window.
- 10) Includes all: excludes none.

And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them. And bless is he who takes no offense at me." (Mt. 11,2-6).

Jesus here is providing his credentials, the hallmarks of this identity: his words--what he is about tells us who he is.

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Similarly the parish's work, what it is about tells us the disposition of the heart of the parish. To be concerned about the poor is a sign of the closeness of a parish to the Lord of Mercy: el Señor de las Misericordias.

(BACK TO 8, 9, 10)

V. WHAT CAN BE DONE TO NURTURE THE SPIRITUALITY OF A PARISH?

First all the spiritual life is concerned as Gifts--as in an individual who is holy--holiness belongs to God, he shares it out of his benevolence - It comes to us as totally gratuitous.

But those gifts discovered and here's where the effort comes in. How can we discover the peculiar gifts of a parish?

Not any one thing among these--

* - beautiful, moving liturgy

* - exciting preaching

* - opportunities for adult sharing and witnessing

* - careful planning of activities, that they always include time for quiet, reflective prayer nourished by Scripture, with frequent questioning and self-evaluation.

What are we doing? We know we're doing many things, but have we developed a depth to our discipleship?

(e.g. novice mistress: "Before you do, be." E.g. Bishop Ruiz, "Either we are or we aren't"...