

COLUMNISTS

Spirituality is for everyday people

I've long been impatient with the way "professional" theologians and church personnel have neglected the development of spiritualities for ordinary Catholics. Most books and talks about spirituality that I've read and heard seem to assume that the spiritual life is restricted to contemplatives and others who lead a calm, peaceful, prayer-centered life. That, of course, leaves most of us out, since our lives are anything BUT calm, peaceful and prayer-centered.

If our assumptions are that spirituality pertains exclusively to our "interior life," that it is centered primarily on those times of "withdrawal" and disengagement from our ordinary life, that there are "professionals" whose specialty is spirituality, I suppose it isn't surprising that many of us give up on prayer.

I was recently reminded of a book I had read over 30 years ago. Taking it up again, I reread the chapter titled "Worldly Holiness." The book is John A. Robinson's *Honest to God*, published in 1963. In this chapter, Robinson bemoans the fact that most forms of spirituality have been adapted from medieval monasteries, and they prescribe a pattern of prayer more suited to medieval monks than 20th century lay Christians.

He writes: "This pattern is found in its purest form in the contemplative orders,



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but it can be adapted to different degrees of life in the world for the other religious communities, the secular clergy, and finally by much dilution for "the laity." Robinson goes on to write: "I believe the experts have induced in us a deep inferiority complex. They tell us that this is the way we ought to pray, and yet we find that we cannot," thus we conclude that we are not 'the praying type,' and we carry on with an unacknowledged sense of failure and guilt.

Robinson goes on to denounce the split between "religious" activities and "secular" ones, between worship and work, between ordinary life and spiritual life. He relies on the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian who described spirituality ideally focused on finding the 'Beyond' in the midst of life, not at its edges, or during free time. For

Bonhoeffer, religious people who separate spirituality into an independent realm are in danger of concocting an illusionary world 'of the religious flesh' that can lead to idolatry rather than to the true God.

There are many sources within our own tradition that encourage us to move toward an authentic spirituality of engagement with and in the world. In their letter, "Economic Justice for All," the American bishops wrote: "We need a spirituality that calls forth and supports lay initiative and witness not just in our churches but also in business, in the labor movement, in the professions, in education and in public life. Our faith is not just a weekend obligation, a mystery to be celebrated around the altar on Sunday. It is a pervasive reality to be practiced every day in homes, offices, factories, schools and businesses across our land. We cannot separate what we believe from how we act in the marketplace and the broader community," (25)

In the "Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity" of Vatican II we read: "The apostolate of the social milieu, that is, the effort to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which a person lives, is so much the duty and responsibility of the laity that it can never be properly performed by others." (13)

We need to encourage the development of spiritualities that support the active engagement of adult Christians in the real world of today, with all its problems and opportunities.

In their document, "Called and Gifted: The American Catholic Laity," the bishops of the U.S. describe criteria for discerning the soundness of spiritualities today. Most important are whether such movements foster psychological and spiritual maturity, and whether they encourage and support leadership in the home and workplace, in our societies and churches. Authentically Christian and Catholic spiritualities today must promote lay leaders who are knowledgeable and experienced, free and responsible, capable of conducting relationships of mutuality and respect in a complex culture.

I think we are just beginning to develop spiritualities based on lay involvement in the world rather than medieval monastery life. We are still at the stage of taking baby steps forward in this matter. It is time, I think, for lay people to assume leadership in this quest so that we can all benefit from the wisdom of a new set of "experts" who find God and embody Christian convictions as spouses, business and professional people, workers and consumers, neighbors and friends.



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