

COLUMNISTS

Spiritual practices should draw us toward God

Sometimes I see magazine articles or reports that tell us that there is a great hunger for spirituality in the U.S. these days. This surely must be true, if my own circle of friends and acquaintances is an indicator that can be trusted. I have witnessed a great quest for forms of spirituality in the lives of many of my associates.

One of my friends recently moved into and beyond a fascination with crystals. I think this might be associated with something called "new age." Apparently some special-status or power is attributed to crystalline substances. I'm not certain about the origins or expectations associated with crystals, but my friend has informed me that she has set aside her crystals for now.

Another friend has moved into a blend of Native American practices that he says enhance his sense of inner unity and peace, and let him experience a closeness to nature that he craves. He claims that his sense of harmony and being has never been greater.

There are groups of all sorts that delve into the writings of medieval mystics, ingest herbal medicines, engage in yoga exercises, pursue peace through Eastern meditation — I know at least *somebody* who



the moral life

BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

has adopted some variation of this mixture over the past decade or so. I have even seen ads for apparently Christian retreats that employ body-massage techniques, and people tell me these can be very productive for spiritual well-being and growth.

Obviously some of these activities are more worthy than others. I'm sort of critical by temperament anyway, so I remain skeptical of most movements like these. I certainly haven't taken on any of these practices myself. (Of course I also think some would characterize me as less than zealous about seeking spiritual experiences at all!)

But I have always benefited from an

awareness that for Christians, the direction of our spiritual practices and rituals — whatever their origin or form — is always relational. Spirituality is part of our quest to reach beyond ourselves toward God. Spirituality is one way we seek to transcend the human and reach toward the divine.

Through ritual actions, the promotion of interior attitudes, the formation of specific habits of thought, vision and action, we try to let a bridge form between our own humanity and divinity. That's "programmed" right into our being: We are beings who by our very nature are ready and waiting to receive God! And as St. Augustine pointed out, "our hearts will have no rest" until they are united with God — step by step and finally, totally.

I suppose some of this is at the core of our belief in the Incarnation, for one thing. Jesus is "both God and man." I used to think that believing in that doctrine meant simply accepting that it is factually true that Jesus incorporated "two natures in one person." Now I realize that that intellectual acceptance is only *part* of what it means to believe that tenet of faith.

Also involved is an acceptance deep within that we are meant for relationship with

God. That's who we are: people who seek to press beyond ourselves to be in union with God. That's what we find in Jesus. God's direction is to bridge the gap toward us, and the invitation in Jesus is for us to bridge the gap toward God. Now *that's* "pushing the envelope," as they like to say!

So in the end I suppose it isn't all that important which spiritualities we find important for ourselves. What is important is that we remain alert that our spirituality fosters relationship with God. Spiritualities that are not relational, and that do not draw us toward "the God of the Universe" are ultimately not helpful, because they cannot answer the deepest need that defines our very existence. They very well might provide us with some of our other needs, including finding a group to belong to, some needed healing, some support in times of transition, a degree of self-satisfaction, or even our desire for some other wished-for state of inner consciousness. But if we are not led through these experiences to relationship with the God of Jesus Christ, we would do better to continue on and search some more.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

Giving weakens power of materialism

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Matthew 22:15-21. (R1) Isaiah 45:1, 4-6. (R2) 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5.

"Repay to Caesar," said Jesus, "what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." The Internal Revenue Service will see to it that we repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. But what about God? What do you and I have that belongs to God? To put it briefly, everything.

"What hast thou that thou hast not received?" asked St. Paul.

One of the best ways to repay to God what belongs to him is by contributing to church support by giving generously to the Sunday collection.

A minister tried to find a creative way of dealing with the subject of money. He announced that if the congregation reached a certain sum in the Sunday collection that he would permit them to place a clock on the pulpit. If the collection exceeded their goal by \$1,000, he would let them plug the clock in. If they exceeded the goal by \$2,000, he agreed to look at it! Well, that's one way of doing it.

Notice, first of all that our gifts to God are payment on a debt, not a bribe. We don't give gifts to God in order to get something back.

For several years a man was very, very



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

generous in giving to the Sunday collection. The pastor went out to lunch with him one day and asked him why he gave so much.

"Well, Father, whatever the amount," said the man, "I know it is not enough. You see, I've known all my life that God loves me and has been extremely gracious to me. A few years back, it occurred to me that God was doing all the giving, the real giving, I mean. Oh, I gave regularly to the church, but it was way short of what my Lord has done for me."

"Well?" said the priest.

"No mystery, Father. I'm just trying to catch up."

There's a man who really understood what he owes God. We don't give to God because we hope to receive some special favors in return. We give out of gratitude

for what God has already done for us. Our gifts are a debt, not a bribe.

Another thing we must remember is that God doesn't need our gifts. In my church bulletin I always print this statement before reporting the Sunday collection: "Give not because of the Church's needs, but because you need to give."

We need to give, especially today, to combat the power of materialism in our lives. There is no more deceptive and deadly power on this earth. Luxuries become necessities; what was once extravagance becomes an essential. And, even worse, the more we have, the more we feel we deserve — until the power of materialism separates us from our neighbor and ultimately from God.

That is why Jesus had more to say about money than any other subject. Poison is all right in a bottle, but don't let it get into the blood stream. So with money: It is all right, but don't let it get into the bloodstream.

Money is America's god today. In the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, the number of college freshmen who said it was essential to be very well-off financially grew from 41 percent in 1968 to 74 percent in 1995. At the same time, the percentage who said "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" was top pri-

ority fell from 83 percent to 41. This information is detailed in "The State of Greed," in *U.S. News & World Report* (1/17/96). Meanwhile in 1968, the typical church member gave 3.14 percent of his income. By 1992, it dropped to 2.52 percent. "The State of Greed."

Our gift to God is not a bribe but a debt. We give not because of God's needs but because of our need to give. We need to show that it is God who rules our lives, not greed.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

- Monday, October 21**
Ephesians 2:1-10; Luke 12:13-21
- Tuesday, October 22**
Ephesians 2:12-22; Luke 12:35-38
- Wednesday, October 23**
Ephesians 3:2-12; Luke 12:39-48
- Thursday, October 24**
Ephesians 3:14-21; Luke 12:49-53
- Friday, October 25**
Ephesians 4:1-6; Luke 12:54-59
- Saturday, October 26**
Ephesians 4:7-16; Luke 13:1-9

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