

Where do we find spirituality?

Today I read often that Americans long for spirituality. Whenever I encounter statements of this sort, I find myself wondering what the author means by "spirituality." I also wonder what it is that those who say they want spirituality actually think it is!

At times I get the impression that what people mean by spirituality is not Christian spirituality at all. For example, some articles on this topic apparently assume that by pursuing a deeper spirituality we are actually trying to achieve some sort of "mystical" experience. If understood in this sense, spirituality refers to a moment or period of uncommon awareness or novel state of interior consciousness.

Other articles on this same topic suggest that spirituality refers to a state of mind that allows us to be raised above or beyond ordinary life so that we are mentally able for at least a short time to leave "the world" with all its concerns, joys and messiness behind.

I think both of these sorts of experiences may be interesting, and perhaps they are even necessary at times. Still, I don't think either one should be equated with authentic Christian spirituality. In fact, the quest for these interior sensations might actually reveal an absorption with self rather than a genuine



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By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

quest for God. They could represent more affinity with the kind of "feeling cults" that are part of contemporary self-help movements than with genuine Christian spirituality.

Now before everybody starts to fume and rage about these accusations, let me elaborate for a few paragraphs. It is helpful to start with a view of spirituality as a development of faith. In this context "faith" does not refer to our willingness to assent to the truth of statements for which we have no clear evidence — like "Mary has been assumed bodily into heaven" or "Mary was conceived without sin."

Rather, in this context faith refers to our willingness to let God be the one he wants to be. In this sense faith is understood not so much as an intellectual act by which we give mental assent to un-

provable statements. It is used here as a relational term referring to our personal willingness to let God define himself to us on God's own terms.

In the context of this understanding of faith, spirituality refers to our continuing effort to become aware of the powerful presence of God as God really is. As such, spirituality does not aim to take us out of or away from our real, everyday, concrete experience. In fact, genuine Christian spirituality opens us to God's presence today, here and now in the concreteness of our own very real, very human lives.

A friend of mine makes a humorous point when he says that sometimes churches have given us the impression that God's presence and activity on earth are enclosed behind the fences of a "religious nature preserve." He thinks we have assumed a false view that God's presence and activity are made known primarily when God "meddles" with the world, or interferes with nature. He thinks we have given the impression that God works in a kind of "sacred history" above the "secular history" we actually live in every day.

In truth, however, we learn from Scripture that God is present in history, in ordinary daily life and relationships, in our success and failure, in our sorrow

and joy. God is known in life, in ordinary thought processes and through our ordinary states of consciousness, in secular dilemmas and struggles, hopes and accomplishments. Spirituality should not invite us to invent magical worlds where God steps in and does what we ought to be doing, or where God magically corrects the difficulties we face in life. We should read Scripture not so much as magical fairy tales of literal events taking place "back when," as accounts of how God is acting right here in our actual lives now.

More than anything else, spirituality should let us know the God who comes to us in the human — in all the richness and frustration, concerns, hopes and fears that are already part of our human experiences. The "trick" of genuine Christian spirituality is not creating a parallel world or parallel consciousness to get out of regular life. The point of genuine Christian spirituality is letting God come to us in the human. Genuine spirituality helps us find God in what we already do and makes us willing to "let God be God" without trying to reduce God into some controllable extension of ourselves.

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

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