



Called to Be a Catechist

FOSTERING SPIRITUALITY

Inspiration and Professional Growth



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1	
Spirituality and Religion	3
<i>Fr. James Heft, SM</i>	
CHAPTER 2	
Schools of Spirituality	11
<i>William H. Johnston</i>	
CHAPTER 3	
An Introduction to Great Spiritual Classics	18
<i>Fr. John McGrath, SM</i>	
CHAPTER 4	
Spirituality and Popular Culture	26
<i>Vincent Miller</i>	
CHAPTER 5	
Spirituality and World Religions	34
<i>Sr. Judith Martin, SSJ</i>	
CHAPTER 6	
Spiritual Heroes for the Twenty-First Century	42
<i>Michael J. Daley</i>	
CHAPTER 7	
Pathways into E-Spirituality	50
<i>Sr. Angela Ann Zukowski, MSHS</i>	
ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS	58
RECOMMENDED RESOURCES	59

INTRODUCTION

We live in unsettling times. Our nation has been at war for more than a decade. The economy is shaky. Unemployment is a reality for many. The cost of higher education makes a college degree seem beyond reach. We are constantly bombarded with texts, e-mails, tweets, and information from technology that was supposed to make our lives less hectic. Kids doubt that the future holds the same promise and opportunities for them that it held for their parents.

Is it any wonder we long for a way to make sense of it all?

This book on spirituality speaks to our inner longing for deeper meaning in life and our quest for the holy. It will help you reflect on the meaning of spirituality; it challenges you to become a more spiritual person.

At each chapter's end, there are practical suggestions for adapting the ideas in the chapter to your ministry as a catechist. As you read (or re-read) the seven chapters, look for ways you can integrate the content into your lesson plans.

SPIRITUALITY *and* RELIGION: CHALLENGES *and* OPPORTUNITIES

FR. JAMES HEFT, SM

Influences like the internet, social media, television, and music can so powerfully impact one's identity that a person can lose touch with the religious traditions in which he or she has been raised.

In the past few years, media coverage about the Catholic Church has not always inspired confidence. We continue to read about sexual abuse by our clergy, the large number of Catholics who have left the church for another faith or none at all (one in ten, according to a Pew Charitable Trust Survey), and the growing number of “nones,” which is the increasing number of young Americans who no longer identify with any church or religion.

From 1970 to 1990, the number of people who identified themselves as “nones” stayed at about 7%. Starting in 1990, however, that number began to rise sharply, reaching 17% in 2010. And for those who are 18 to 29 years of age, that number rose steadily from 12% to 27%.

Couple these developments with another phenomenon—the increas-

ing interest in “spirituality”—and we discover that the world we live in is complex, to say the least. A decline in religion and a growth in spirituality? Sociologists use the word *churn* to describe the current religious scene in the United States.

Religion: Changing and Surviving

These developments affect not only Christians, who constitute 85% of the United States. They also affect Jews and other religious people in the developed world. Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of London from 1991-2013, asked why we need religion today to explain the universe since we have science, or to control the universe since we have technology. If we are ill, he continues, we go to a doctor, not a priest or a rabbi. If we feel guilty, we go to a psychiatrist, not to confession. Finally, he writes, “if you seek salvation you go to our new cathedrals, namely shopping centers, where you can buy happiness at extremely competitive prices” (“The Meaning-Seeking Animal,” in *The Tablet*, November 14, 2009, p. 12).

Despite all this, religion has somehow survived. But it has changed as it has survived. What should we make of all this churning? What contributes to this new situation? What should we think of the so-called “spiritual but not religious” movement? Is it mainly a negative trend, a positive one, or both? And what approaches should religious educators and catechists take in the face of these developments?

Historical Background: It Isn't That New

I think it would help to understand that all this churning did not begin in the last decade or even in the fabled 1960s. Seeds sown by the European Enlightenment (think seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) began to take root and sprout practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that made religion (in this instance, Christianity) a private matter, best kept out of government and economic life. Mostly understood as only a family matter—a good way to raise children—religion, in the minds of these thinkers, became dangerous (even caused wars) when it reached into the public sphere with its dogmas and condemnations. By contrast, science

is based on reason; these thinkers believed it was the sure path to a better future.

By the middle of the nineteenth century in the United States, influential writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson mocked organized religion (especially Calvinism) as rigid and irrelevant, and described preachers as bores.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, William James, a leading thinker in psychology and philosophy, described religion as “the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude” (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1982, p. 31). He further explained that when people thought of religion, they thought of some church that suggested to them “so much hypocrisy and tyranny and meanness and tenacity of superstition” that they just dismissed it (p. 335). James wasn’t especially happy about all this, but he did think religion was really best understood as what people experienced when they were alone and enjoyed deep thoughts. Today, in our urban environments, it’s harder to be alone, and a dizzying array of media makes deep thoughts rare.

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In the 1950s and 1960s, sociologists wrote about “teenagers” and “adolescents” as a stage brought about as a result of mass education, the legal condemnation of child labor, urbanization and suburbanization, and the creation of a consumer and entertainment culture. Now, instead of writing about the three stages of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, sociologists have discovered that they have to insert a fourth stage: emerging adulthood.

Youth today physically mature sooner than before and assume adult responsibilities later than ever. One sociologist, Jeffrey Arnett, describes emerging adults as unstable, locked into prolonged identity searches, focused on themselves, feeling in limbo and transition, and, paradoxically, retaining a sense of possibility and hope. In a highly mobile society where the internet, social media, music, television, and movies can exert

more powerful influence than a religious tradition or a single family, is it any wonder that an increasing number of emerging adults lose touch with the religious traditions in which they may have been raised?

Spiritual but Not Religious: Challenges

Christian Smith, an important sociologist of religion, describes the religious outlook of most U.S. teenagers as moral therapeutic deism (MTD). For them, religion has more to do with rules (morals) than relationships, gives great value to feeling good (therapeutic) about themselves, and speaks of God (deism) rather than of Jesus. They rarely spend time reading Scripture, and they don't understand the sacraments as encounters with Jesus. They are, as Smith describes them, "sub-trinitarian" (deism). Their lives are busy with school, social events, friends, texting, and entertainment; few of them give their religious faith top billing.

When teenagers get to college, they likely hear even more that being spiritual but not religious is to be more open, more adult, freer of the confining traditions of their parents, especially if their parents are religious. They might study a variety of religions and be taught that all religions are basically the same—teach the same values—and that what is most important is to be a good person. Many are taught that mature people transcend any one religious tradition and adopt a spirituality that embraces everyone.

Michael Lerner, a Jewish writer in the Reform tradition, described spirituality as "a feeling of awe, wonder, and radical amazement in response to the universe," an attitude that recognizes the "ultimate Unity of All Being" and the "sanctity" of every person. He continues: Spirituality is a trust that there is enough for everyone, and that the world is "filled with a conscious energy that transcends the categories and concepts" that religious people use to describe reality. By contrast, he describes religions as "various historical attempts to organize a set of doctrines, rituals, and specific practices which are supposed to be 'the right way to live'" ("Why Spirituality?" *Tikkun*, Vol. 15, No. 2, March/April 2000, pp. 7-8).

For people who root their spirituality in their religious tradition, such a sharp contrast between the two makes no sense. Opposing spirituality

to religion often ends up in seeking spiritual highs without the discipline offered by a community and a tradition. Lawrence Cunningham, a keen Catholic observer of the spiritual life, warns that much of the spirituality market today is scarred by a highly narcissistic preoccupation not unlike old self-improvement schemes.

Spirituality and the Lived Experience

That said, it would be wise not to dismiss completely the hunger for spirituality as always narcissistic or a hobby of the self-absorbed. In the latter part of the twentieth century, major Catholic theologians who sometimes disagreed with each other nonetheless agreed that greater attention needed to be paid to the lived experience of people.

German theologian Karl Rahner believed that in our own time, if Christianity was to survive, it would have to become mystical. By mystical he was not suggesting that everyone had to have extraordinary religious experiences, such as visions or ecstasies. What he wanted to stress was that religious practices, to be authentic, needed to take root in daily living and the awareness of mystery—another easily misunderstood word that he simply used to refer to that deeper part of life that is not easily understood.

Similarly, Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who often sharply criticized Rahner, thought the perception of beauty—not only in art but in the lives of the saints, especially Christ, and indeed the crucified Christ—is what first attracts a person to living the Christian life. The Christian, von Balthasar was fond of saying, is in love with the love that appeared in Christ. Once this beauty and love are experienced, there is a desire to live the lives of beauty that they see in the saints, in the great works of art, in the glory of nature and of God's goodness. For him, truth should never be separated from love, which is the core of everything.

To mention just one more theological giant, Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan, toward the end of his life, came to a similar conclusion: At the core of the Christian life is the experience of falling in love—the ultimate goal of life, where faith deepens by recognizing God's love for everyone.

All three of these highly influential theologians realized this: that the traditional objective proofs for God’s existence, that an intellectual grasp of Catholic teachings, and that just keeping the rules—none of these by itself—makes people spiritually mature. In short, for all of them, love prepares the way for genuine faith.

Taking these three theologians seriously suggests that the “spiritual but not religious” movement might actually be a positive development. Many of our young people have been baptized but have not yet converted, have been catechized but have not yet fallen in love. On the other hand, there are real risks, especially for those who no longer participate in the life of the church. The larger culture—primarily consumerist, materialist, and relativist—will offer them little encouragement to search deeply in their hearts for the meaning of life.

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Suggestions for Religious Educators: Opportunities

It is important to remember that the Holy Spirit never abandons the church, and especially those who, with courage, competence, and generosity, try to pass on the tradition to the next generation. There should be little doubt that over the past sixty years or so, we have undergone a cultural, and therefore religious, revolution.

In the face of these massive shifts, what might be some fruitful approaches for religious educators, especially those who work with young people? I suggest five approaches. There are surely many others, but I have seen these bear real fruit among teenagers and young adults.

1. Intergenerational contact: Informed commentators on religious education stress the importance of family involvement. When parents don’t support the religious education of their children, it is more difficult to make what children learn stay with them. Teachers need to get more

adults, especially parents (they have more influence than they realize), involved in this effort.

2. Service as an introduction to love: The three famous theologians I mentioned earlier stressed the centrality of love as key to religious maturity. Young people who are encouraged to serve and help others acquire a “feel” for love. To link that love to the gospel and to the church is one of the privileges and tasks of religious educators.

3. Silence for depth: I am not against social media, the internet, or smart phones. I am against letting them dominate and distract us from a thoughtful existence. There is an appointed time for everything (Ecclesiastes), and one of those things is silence. Youth especially need to learn this discipline, and religious educators should have the courage to lead them into it.

4. Community, a key context: Christianity is like the common cold: it is contagious. You get it from those who have it. The Christian community includes more than one’s contemporaries or one’s fellow citizens. It reaches back in history and includes believers around the world. Telling our stories and listening to the stories of others helps ground us in a larger context and longer history.

5. Doctrines, explanations, and reading: Even though experience and especially love are key doorways into a deeper and more authentic religious life, words and explanations are very important. After all, Christianity is a religion of the Word, who not only demonstrated in his life and death what love is but also taught it. We need to be prepared to give an explanation for the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15). Increasing one’s intellectual grasp of the faith actually deepens one’s experience of it and equips a person to speak about it.

Love unexpressed in word and deed is not love. Acting on these five suggestions should help believers be both spiritual and religious.

Your Thoughts

1 What do I think are the qualities of a spiritually mature Catholic Christian?

2 What significant and recent experiences in my life have deepened my appreciation for the relationship of spirituality and religion?

Try This

Make a list of all the religious traditions that are important to you. Consider how each one affects your identity as a Catholic. Then reflect on one religious tradition you would like to begin (for example, reading the Scriptures every day or joining a prayer group). Write a three-step action plan for incorporating this new practice into your life on a regular basis.

SCHOOLS *of* SPIRITUALITY

WILLIAM H. JOHNSTON

This chapter introduces four significant schools of spirituality: Benedictine, Dominican, Ignatian, and Eastern Catholic spirituality. Each offers a unique approach to prayer.

How do we discover the ways of prayer? We can learn at home from parents, at the parish from the liturgy or the parish staff, at school from teachers, under the guidance of a spiritual director, on our own from study, or simply by listening to the movements of our hearts as they turn to God in love. We can also learn from the riches of the church's tradition of prayer. From among many others, here are four sources from that tradition.

Benedictine

St. Benedict (sixth century) is a leading figure in the history of monasticism and the founder of the Benedictine family of religious communities. A brief phrase that expresses the charism of monastic life is *ora et labora*, "pray and work." This calls one to be devoted to God and to attend to the needs of self, community, and the wider world—a good recipe for a balanced life. At the heart of one's daily rhythm of prayer is Scripture, in particular the psalms—and this goes not only for Benedictines but for

the whole church in its daily prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours.

A method of praying with Scripture that developed in the monastic tradition is known as *lectio divina*, a phrase often translated as “sacred reading.” The method is ancient but remains fully relevant for us today.

Indeed, Pope Benedict XVI called for renewed attention to *lectio divina*, saying that he was convinced it could bring the church “a new spiritual springtime.” Its four parts can be practiced in various ways. The approach presented here is very simple. While useful for anyone, it is especially helpful for those new to *lectio divina*.

What follows is based on “A Monastic Primer,” found at the New Melleray Abbey website (newmelleray.org/primer.asp), where it is explained more fully and very beautifully.

The first step is reading (*lectio*). Beginning in a spirit of prayer, open your Bible to the passage you have selected and simply start to read. Read slowly. You are not in a hurry because your point is not to finish the reading but to let God speak to you, here and now, in and through the sacred text.

Then comes meditation (*meditatio*), sometimes referred to as repetition (*repetitio*). When a word or phrase grabs your attention and “speaks” to you, stop reading and simply stay with those words, prayerfully and slowly repeating them several times. No need to think about the text or draw lessons from it; just let God’s inspired word do its healing, transforming work in you. Repeat the words in this slow, prayerful way for as long as they hold spiritual power. When that passes, continue reading.

During this process, you sometimes will be drawn to offer God a brief word of prayer. This is the third component (*oratio*). Perhaps the phrase you are meditating on leads you to say to God, in some way, “Thank you for...” or “I’m sorry that...” or “Please help me to...” Such prayers may be very brief; then return to the reading or meditation.

At times, this process may lead to an inner silence. Here, no words are used and no thoughts are thought. You simply are present with the Lord in a wordless, loving communication. This is a form of “contemplation” (*contemplatio*), a fourth aspect of *lectio divina*. Stay with this prayer as

long as it lasts. When it ends, return again to the reading or meditation.

The regular practice of sacred reading will fill your mind and heart with a treasure trove of scriptural passages that can nourish your spirit with the power of God’s word. This is an especially fitting method of prayer for catechists who serve as ministers of God’s word.

Dominican

St. Dominic (thirteenth century) devoted his life to preaching the gospel. To be prepared for this ministry, Dominic and his followers devoted themselves to study. Of the various features of Dominican spirituality that we might highlight, let us focus here on this Dominican commitment to study, which they practice not as something alongside and separate from their prayer and spirituality but as a form of it. There is a true “spirituality of study” that all can cultivate—not only in preaching but in all forms of teaching and catechesis.

Anyone who teaches would want to learn more about those they teach (the learner), how to teach (the process of learning), and what they teach (their subject matter). A way to “pray” our studying of any of these topics is to begin and conclude times of study with moments of prayer, for ourselves that we may gain insight and wisdom, and for our students that they may benefit thereby.

But beyond this, the very act of studying and exercising the intellect God gave us in service to the welfare of others can become prayer. This happens when the time spent in study is also infused by the sheer joy of learning, and by our love—of the students we teach, of the subject we teach, of the knowledge and truth we seek to hand on, and of the Truth to whom we seek to lead our students, namely, Christ himself (John 14:6).

The more catechists can devote time to study in a spirit of prayer, the more their own catechist spirituality will be deepened and renewed.

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