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What Is Spirituality?

BY SR. CARLA MAE STREETER, OP

From TV talk shows to a growing number of New Age books, the search for spirituality is on. Why is this topic so fascinating?

The core of spirituality is human longing. We long for intimacy. If we admit it, we long for communion with the holy, that which is beyond our pettiness. But we long for intimacy with humans, too. We catch a glimpse of what spirituality is when we remember when someone was really there for us. Spirituality is experienced most as the tone of someone's presence when we are in his or her company. Spirituality is being "all there," when every part of the human is functioning as God has made it. When we know someone with this spirituality, we sense that person's real presence to people and events, a way of being that points to the holy, the mystery beyond our human limits.

Authentic spirituality is not just for church or the retreat houses. It walks around in galoshes, sunglasses, and jeans. It shows up at the supermarket, in the doctor's office, and behind the wheel. Spirituality is about being real. It is about being fully and authentically human, with little or no trace of the opaque egoism that puts the light of the divine within us under a bushel.

SPIRITUALITY AS CATHOLIC AND CHRISTIAN

Catholic Christians bring a distinct tone to the authentic presence we are calling spirituality. For all Christians, Jesus of Nazareth is the human icon of the encounter of the human with the divine. As a window on the amazing compassion of God for struggling humankind, Jesus is also a revelation of ourselves to ourselves. He presents a fully authentic humanness.

The incarnational pattern revealed in Jesus sets the tone for a rich spirituality that is mindful of the body as well as the soul. With smells, bells, salt, wine, oil, and silk, the Catholic community of saints and sinners brings a sensual, sacramental tone to worship in the Christian family. The context for this celebration is communal rather than individualistic.



Sr. Streeter teaches

systematic

(doctrinal) theology

and spirituality at

Aquinas Institute

of Theology, St.

Louis.

For those who are educated in Catholic doctrine, sin never rules the day. The presence of God in the center of life is the focus, relegating sin to a frame around this picture. Sin is not taken lightly, but it simply has no ultimate power in the face of love.

PSYCHIC ENERGY CONNECTS BODY, SPIRIT

Although we are well aware of the biological aspect of our lives, we are still discovering the marvelous psychic energy that knits together our "bodilyness" with the operations of our human spirit. This is the realm of the healing of images and emotion, the place for therapy. Often treated as stepchildren, the imagination and emotions are at last being recognized as doorways to the human spirit.

What are these "psychic motors" that move us to act out of value and that lay out a rich table of images for the mind to nourish itself? Eleven basic emotions have been named in history by such thinkers as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, and today by psychologists and psychiatrists. The more spontaneous emotions—arising unbidden—are love and hate, desire and aversion, and joy and sadness. The more considered—influenced by thought—are courage and fear, hope and despair (as powerlessness), and anger. These emotions are vital to the energy field in which we think.

If this psychic area is so important for human wholeness, how is it distinct from our human spirit? The spiritual-emotional operations are functions we do not share with the animal kingdom, as far as we know. These operations include self-reflective intelligence and choice. Humans' most basic spiritual activity is questioning. We question our experience itself; we question our understanding of the experience. We question whether our understanding is correct, and finally, we question what we need to do about what we know to be true. This is the human spirit in operation. It is concerned about a sound sewage system, and it is concerned about God.

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WHEN GOD COMES COURTING

How does the holy approach this remarkable human being? When the mystery makes itself known to a person, the human is filled with wonder and experiences being grasped by love.

If the person attends to this, several changes take place. First, the divine takes its place clearly in human awareness, effecting a religious conversion. Next, the new awareness usually changes behavior. The person realizes, I don't want to do some of the cheap stuff I've been doing; and thus moral conversion begins. Third, the love strengthens the person to face the buried garbage of his or her life, including decisions or events that left scar tissue. Psychic conversion may begin, often with therapy. Finally, the person might come to know herself or himself—how he or she processes things, avoids things, skips things. The person learns to be attentive, to intelligently question, to reach reasonable conclusions, and to act responsibly. Love's agenda is relentless, its goal the total healing of the human.

But love does not just make demands.

It comes with gifts in hand. Three graceful abilities begin to show themselves in attitude, speech, and behavior. The religiously converted long for an intimacy with the holy: We call this longing "hope." There is a knowing born of love: We call it "faith." And there is action born of religious love: Its name is "charity."

And still love is not finished. In the mind a prudence grows, a wondrous common sense amid the millions of decisions that lace up our days. In the will, justice appears like a rudder of fairness as we relate to those on the job or in the neighborhood. In the psyche two capacities permeate our image making and emotional energy: fortitude to deal with what threatens, and temperance, which moderates our sensual appetites and our need for food and drink.

Driven by a new obsession with what has become the person's primary love, a transfiguration is under way. The project is nothing short of holiness, a wholeness the human did not dare to dream of. This is the fullness of spirituality. This is the destiny of each of us. □

DEVELOPING LEADERS' SPIRITUALITY

In its 1994 study of outstanding leaders in Catholic healthcare, the Catholic Health Association's Center for Leadership Excellence identified a model of 18 critical competencies of leadership. Three competencies of spirituality are at the core of the model, having the most influence on leaders' behaviors: Finding Meaning, Faith in God, and Positive Affiliation.

Responding to the essential role of spirituality in outstanding leadership, the center has created a resource for developing these three competencies. To be released in June 1996, the resource—published as a guide for facilitators—includes descriptions of the behaviors and characteristics of these competencies, along with case study discussion and self-reflection exercises for increasing awareness of these behaviors and characteristics. The guide also includes helpful support materials:

- Tools for teaching such disciplines as centering prayer and discernment
- A glossary
- Reading lists
- An introduction to accelerated learning techniques applied to the development of the spirituality competencies

- Essays, including one by Sr. Carla Mae Streeter, OP

The resource is the work of a task force—Rev. Gerald Broccolo; Sr. Margarite Buchanan, RSM; Sr. Joanne Lappetito, RSM; Sr. Maureen Lowry, RSM; Sr. Sharon Richardt, DC; and center staff Regina M. Clifton, Carol Tilley, and Ed Giganti.



For more information, contact Regina M. Clifton at 314-427-2500.

NOT-FOR-PROFITS

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For-profits are not as responsive to their communities.

company could probably cut quality easier than a public company," he said.

But CHA's Cox said that although for-profit companies are very accountable to shareholders, they are not as responsive to their communities as not-for-profits are. "A for-profit hospital will pull up stakes and move tomorrow if the shareholders demand it," Cox said. "Because of pressures from their communities, not-for-profits are rarely able to act so precipitously."

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE?

As Catholic providers seek to renew their mission, forging a "new covenant" to preserve the spirit and ministry of Catholic healthcare in a competitive marketplace, it will be critical for them to keep in mind accountability to both the community and the individual patient. If not-for-profit Catholic providers cannot convince the public and the policymakers that they are caring for society's most vulnerable, and providing a community benefit beyond that rendered by for-profit facilities, then there will be good reason for the public to ask, What's the difference? □

NOTES

1. Kathryn Duke, "Hospitals in a Changing Health Care System," *Health Affairs*, Summer 1996.
2. Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, "A Survey on American's Perceptions about For-Profit and Not-for-Profit Health Care," Menlo Park, CA, December 1995.
3. Duke.
4. David Lawrence, "Nonprofit Versus For-Profit Health Plans," *Health Affairs*, Spring 1996, pp. 237-238.