

## What does spirituality mean for us today?

by Trish Madigan OP

Talk given at Women of Faith Dinner, 4 April 2004. Published in *ACMICA Enews*, issue 4, 2004.

---

Spirituality is something most people seem to feel that they have, no matter what their religious persuasion or belief system – something so deeply personal, existing in the sacred space of each one's unique relationship with the divine Other, that it is difficult to define or identify neatly. According to a recent writer on spiritual matters much of the trouble in the world can be attributed to “the bland leading the bland along paths of dubious spirituality”. The comment serves to highlight the difficulty faced when trying to grasp precisely what one means by “spirituality”.

The term “spirit” in Christian theology was originally an image or a picture rather than a concept. The image was of course that, which is also found within the Hebrew scriptures (*ruah*), of the stirring of the air, the breath or the breeze. The biblical image of “spirit” is feminine and essentially dynamic. “Spirit” is active, formative, life-giving power. It names a kind of being that is somehow shared by humanity with the spirit of God. Once caught up with this spirit of God a person becomes connected into a way of life originating in the magnanimity of God – the divine self communication which inundates the world, touching and embracing all people in their daily lives.

While Catholic theologian Karl Rahner refrains from giving a formal definition of this “mysterious and tender thing” he sees the centre of all spirituality in “a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our human existence”.

For Christians spirituality means one's entire life as understood, felt, imagined and decided upon in relation to God, in Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Spirituality is found only in human persons as they respond to the stirring of the spirit in their own hearts and lives. It is not so much the attainment of some ideal pattern of life – still less can it be reduced to any form of doctrinalism, legalism or ritualism. Rather it is a journey, and the real core of it is in the journeying. It has a definite communal dimension in that each person's spiritual journey is with and for others.

For Christians this spiritual journey is carried out within the community of the Spirit which is the church. The church is the community of the Spirit not in the sense of having a monopoly of the Spirit but in the sense of having being called into existence by God's Spirit poured out on the church at Pentecost.

**“For Christians spirituality means one's entire life as understood, felt, imagined and decided upon in relation to God, in Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.”**

It is also a life centred on Jesus as our brother and source of divine grace. In the Christian sacrament of baptism we are “clothed with Christ” (Gal 3: 27 – 28) and are

called to model our life on the life of Jesus – to enter into a rhythm or pattern of a life of self-giving, of dying to ourselves and being raised to new life in him.

Spirituality is a call to transcend ourselves; it always involves a call to action in the real world. “Spiritual attitudes” says John Paul II, “define each individual’s relationship with self, with the neighbour, with even the remotest human community and with nature itself” (Sollicitudo rei socialis n 38).

Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that it is especially in unplanned events related to the real needs of others that a word from the eternal breaks in upon us, interrupts us, challenges us, and demands of us a decisive answer.

For the Christian then spirituality is the movement of God’s Spirit in our hearts leading us to share that life of God, which we contact within ourselves, within creation and all other people, and within the community of the Spirit which is the church. It is lived with and for others within the boundaries of time and the material world we inhabit. The rituals and prayers of the Christian community help to remind us of God’s presence in time and in the material world through the seasons of the liturgical year. The key moments are Easter when we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus and Christmas when we celebrate the incarnation or entry of God into human existence. Each week and day of the year has its own spiritual rhythm. On Sunday of each week Christians commemorate the day on which Jesus rose from the dead, usually in a Eucharistic service, and each day of the week is sanctified throughout by special prayer times, especially morning and evening prayer. Meditation and personal prayer times are also important for the spirituality of the modern Christian.

Our Christian spirituality today is lived out in a historical and cultural context which differs from that of previous ages in that, shaped by the global forces of the 20th and 21st centuries, it is inescapably one of religious pluralism. We are becoming more aware of the “other” from all points of view, the religious “other” included, and we are beginning to take difference seriously. The existence of the other can no longer be considered peripheral to our faith. Consequently our spirituality cannot continue to be isolated, lived out in the secure sheepfold of the Church. In a way it must come out and meet the other, people of different creeds and faiths, on the street, next door.

**“Our Christian spirituality today is lived out in a historical and cultural context which differs from that of previous ages in that, shaped by the global forces of the 20th and 21st centuries, it is inescapably one of religious pluralism.”**

The new religious situation obliges us all to rethink our spiritual way of life. One could dare to say that Christian spirituality will only remain true to itself through close encounter and dialogue with other religions. More recent models of Christian spirituality have been presented to us in the lives of people like Mother Teresa (d 1998) and Bede Griffiths (d 1993) whose way of life, open to the pluralistic religious context surrounding them, had a tremendous impact, creating paths of mutual understanding and esteem among people of different religious traditions.

The spirituality of interreligious dialogue has the potential to lead us to deeper insight and into deeper participation in God’s own Being– the mystery of the Trinity – in which

God's unity is expressed in and through the distinction and otherness of persons. For the Christian, the unity and diversity among the partners in interreligious dialogue can be understood and viewed as an image, and a participation, in the dialogue going on at the very core of the ultimate mystery of the Being of God.