

The Essential Spirituality Handbook

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SECTION ONE

Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition

*You formed my inmost being;
You knit me in my mother's womb.
I praise you so wonderfully you have made me;
Wonderful are your works!
My very self you knew;
My bones were not hidden from you,
When I was being made in secret
fashioned as in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes foresaw my actions;
In your book all are written down;
My days were shaped, before one came to be.*

PSALM 139:13–16

1. The Use of the Term “Spirituality” in the Contemporary World

The word “spirituality” is omnipresent in American society today. One cannot go into a bookstore or read a magazine article or attend a wellness program or a health seminar without some reference to spirituality. But to what does this actually refer? In fact, if you were to look for the term in a Catholic encyclopedia published before the late twentieth century, you wouldn’t find an entry at all. You might find a listing under theology for a subset of that formal discipline, entitled “Spiritual and Moral Theology.” You might also find reference to what is known as the “spiritual life.” But what is implied in those terms is not necessarily what most people think about when they use the terms today.

If we turn to Scripture and the writings of Saint Paul, we discover that for him there were people, objects, actions, and thoughts which, if they were influenced by the Holy Spirit, could be considered spiritual. Paul also thought that all members of the Church, the body of Christ, shared in the holiness of Christ through baptism. Clearly, such people were “spiritual.” They were intimately connected to the Divine through all the persons of the Trinity, the third person being the Holy Spirit.

The term “spiritual” was sometimes later used in different ways, as in the medieval era, when it referred to property that belonged to the Church rather than to other owners. It began to be used in a way that we might recognize in the seventeenth century, but it had a pejorative rather than a

positive meaning. The French word *spiritualité* was coined to refer to the somewhat suspect interior prayer practices of certain groups, Quietists to be exact, who were out of favor at the time. Over the years, it has lost its pejorative connotation and emerged in our time as an oft-used term. Since the Second Vatican Council, in Catholic circles the term “spirituality” has generally replaced the older terms “ascetical” or “mystical theology.” Unfortunately, in general popular usage, it also seems to have multiple and often vague meanings.

That the term has come a long way is apparent in the commonly heard phrase all over America today: “I’m spiritual but not religious.” What this usually means is that a person wishing to define him or herself in this way is not affiliated with a religious community or has not discovered the religious community to be a place where the deeper longings of the heart are honored. They may feel that the faith traditions they have explored seem to be all about doctrine and ritual and not about soul care, or that religious people seem to be about making all sorts of judgments about who has it right and who doesn’t. Underlying this typically American phenomenon, we recognize further definitional issues which are important to keep in mind.

2. A Theological Understanding of the Term

When people stand within the Christian tradition and talk about spirituality, usually they are making some very real theological assumptions. They assume that spirituality has something to do with the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, whom Christians believe was sent to the Church at

Pentecost to continue Christ's work in the world. The Holy Spirit is the giver of gifts meant to build up the community. The Catholic sacrament of confirmation is about an outpouring of spiritual gifts that deepen and confirm baptismal promises. Doctrines about the Holy Spirit and traditions that interpret just what these gifts are vary, but put simply, the Spirit works through human beings to inspire, guide, comfort, and enlighten. We acknowledge this in the liturgy of the feast of Pentecost when we sing or recite the great Pentecost Sequence. The feast celebrates the moment when, after the crucifixion, Jesus' traumatized disciples gathered together in the Upper Room (Acts 2:1-42), and the Spirit, in the form of mighty wind and tongues of fire, descended upon them and filled them with its power. This event, remembered as the beginning of the Church, points to the centrality of the Spirit in the life of Christian discipleship. This is the life to which all of us, not merely those gathered in the Upper Room twenty centuries ago, are heir. We are the ones Saint Peter spoke of at that time: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). We are called to live in the Spirit. One of the great arts developed over the Christian centuries is the art of discerning the continuing movement of the Spirit, both in the individual and in the community, and distinguishing it from other sorts of impulses, movements, and ideas so that one can live authentically and in response to God's desire for one's life and the life of the world.

What this means is when most Christians use the term

“spirituality,” they are implying that the Holy Spirit is dynamically involved in their lives.

3. Spirituality as Constitutive of the Human Condition

There are other ways that the term “spirituality” is used today; however, some of them are compatible with theological understandings, and some of them have very little to do with Christian theology. An example of the latter would be the notion that spirituality is synonymous with the style or “spirit” with which an individual or group goes about its particular way of being in the world. Thus each man or woman might be perceived as having a unique spirituality. There could be said to be a Midwestern spirituality, or a spirituality specific to ballet dancers, or an adolescent spirituality. This is a very general and vague notion.

It is also common to hear the term applied to mainly personal practices or holistic cosmo-visions of established religious communities. Hence, we could speak of a Buddhist, a Native American, a Jewish, and a Mormon spirituality. There are, however, ways to think about the term that are more anthropological (in the sense that they refer primarily to the human person) than theological. This does not preclude them from being useful ways to think about spirituality if you are a Catholic Christian. In fact, they can be very illuminating.

One contemporary person who uses the term this way and whose writings are familiar to many American Catholics through his daily columns that run in numerous diocesan newspapers is Father Ronald Rolheiser, OMI. In his popular

book, *The Holy Longing*, Rolheiser suggests that every person has an inner fire, a desire, a holy longing:

...an unquenchable fire, a restlessness, a longing, a disquiet, a hunger, a loneliness, a gnawing nostalgia, a wildness that cannot be tamed, a congenital all-embracing ache that lies at the center of human experience and that is the ultimate force that drives everything else. This disease is universal. Desire gives no exceptions. ...Spirituality is, ultimately, what we do with that desire.

*THE HOLY LONGING:
SEARCHING FOR A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY*

Note that for Rolheiser, spirituality is what we do with our inbuilt longing, which he would assume is fashioned in us as creatures made in the divine image and likeness (a foundational Christian idea). Others have defined spirituality in somewhat different but not incompatible ways. For example, Church historian Philip Sheldrake gives a broad definition, asserting that “the word ‘spirituality’ refers to the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live. In other words, ‘spirituality’ implies some kind of vision of the human spirit and of what will assist it to achieve full potential” (*A Brief History of Spirituality*). Note that Sheldrake is not referencing the third person of the Trinity, but a dimension of the human person. (Sheldrake would also affirm the Holy Spirit, but here his definition focuses on the human experience and capacity to seek meaning and transcendence.)