



The INNER SPARK

*A Simple Guide to
Christian Spirituality*

Augustine Roberts, O.C.S.O.



Catholic. Pastoral. Trusted.

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The Inner Spark: A Simple Guide to Christian Spirituality
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Contents

Introduction.....	5
1) A NEW HORIZON	9
2) JESUS AND HIS MYSTERIES OF SALVATION	27
3) STAGES ALONG THE WAY	49
4) THE CHURCH: SACRAMENTS, MINISTERS, AND SAINTS	71
5) REVELATION AND PRAYER	101
6) DISILLUSION, FAITH, AND FREEDOM	129
7) LAWS, MORAL CONSCIENCE, AND INTERIORITY....	149
8) LOVE, COUNSELS, AND GIFTS.....	175
9) JUDGMENT AND GLORY.....	199
APPENDIX: THE MYSTERIES OF CHRIST AS PRAYED IN THE ROSARY	209
11) Acknowledgments.....	214
12) About the Author.....	214

Introduction

*“I have come to set the earth on fire,
and how I wish it were already blazing!”*

LUKE 12:49

One way or another, we all become aware of a dimension of human life that is latent in everyone. It is like an inner spark waiting to ignite a peaceful fire of openness beyond ourselves and beyond what our limited world has to offer.

This personal openness to what is transcendent is often called the “spiritual life” because in every human being there is a spiritual dimension that is receptive to a divine Spirit. Christianity believes that this divine Spirit is an interpersonal reality—in fact, a person—the Holy Spirit. Spirituality, or the spiritual life, is the human spirit in relation to this divine Spirit.

Christian spirituality, which is the heart and soul of Christianity itself, refers both to the practical daily living of the faith and to its explanation. That is why there are two aspects to it. The principal one is the deepening of the life of Christ and of his Spirit in each person’s daily

life, while the secondary element is teaching and writing about it. Spirituality closely relates to morality and virtue. But morality refers to outward behavior, and virtue means well-ordered behavior, whereas spirituality emphasizes our interior dispositions, attitudes, and decisions.

Many excellent books treat this systematically, but this short compendium comes from the fact that our technological society has produced a paradoxical combination of greater ignorance of what Christianity really is and, at the same time, a greater thirst for some kind of spiritual experience. The COVID-19 pandemic increased this thirst among people of all faiths, who search for deeper meaning in their lives. Christianity and its spirituality, if well understood, answers this thirst. It integrates personal fulfillment, universality, and a long tradition of mysticism.

This book attempts to describe the characteristics of Christian spirituality coherently and as simply as possible for the general reader—and for anyone beginning or renewing their formation in a more structured movement of Christian life. Another reason for this updated description is that many adult Christians learned their faith during their childhood or adolescence and are now looking for something deeper, but they are not sure what to do. To help them, these pages stress the foundation of all forms of Christian spirituality, which is biblical tradition as interpreted and lived by the saints and writers from before the time of Christ until the present day. The book follows

this tradition by showing how God guides his people, and each person individually, by his Word and Spirit. Jesus calls our personal sensitivity to his Word and Spirit “eternal life” or the “kingdom of God.” It is for everyone, because God loves everyone.

The Word of God in Jesus Christ, and God’s Spirit poured into the heart of each believing Christian, are the two complementary roots of Christian faith. They work together to redirect the believer’s deepest identity toward the transforming love of God and neighbor. Any presentation of this divine work and our response to it inevitably focuses first on one aspect, then on the other, but the different elements involved continually interact in any believer’s daily life.

The successive sections of this book cover in a few paragraphs the subjects that longer books take entire chapters to describe. They also include some practical suggestions for daily life.

A NEW HORIZON

*Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will give you light.*

EPHESIANS 5:14

At any moment in life, something special can happen inside of us. It's as if an unknown inner door begins to open, and something new appears. This new horizon can come during childhood or adolescence, perhaps as a young adult or even at a later age. A longing appears for something else—something different and better than “all this.” It is a mysterious thirst for something permanent and transcendent.

It isn't a question of escaping from ordinary daily life but of seeing that there is more. The new spark shines on something we had not noticed before. Centuries of experience have shown that this surprising awareness of some-

thing, or perhaps someone, waking us up from the inside is more than just a natural intuition or a reply to a question we might have. It is a deeply personal discovery that goes beyond any search for knowing the truth or for feeling personally loved. Instead of our own search, there is someone looking for us at the door of our personal consciousness!

A striking example of this new horizon comes from the aggressive control of religion by a totalitarian government in the twentieth century. In the 1950s, the Communist government in China persecuted many Chinese Christians and expelled or imprisoned all foreign missionaries. The police confiscated and burned all prayer books and Bibles in public bonfires. In thousands of country villages, farmers and their families soon forgot about such things. They were concerned with making a living by working in their rice paddies.

One of these rice farmers, married and with four young children, developed incurable cancer. At that time, country villages like his had little communication with larger cities, so any type of care in a hospital was impossible. The farmer's illiterate wife realized that there was no cure for her husband and that her family situation had become desperate. One night, she couldn't sleep, and while she wept silently, she suddenly heard a voice whispering, "Jesus loves you."

Startled, she remembered hearing that same phrase many years ago from a Christian missionary. Weeping now more than ever, she knelt beside her mat and prayed to Jesus

for her husband's cure. The next morning, when she told her children what had happened, the family began to pray to Jesus for a cure. After a week of this family's prayers, her husband was completely cured. All the neighboring villages heard what had happened.

The woman's oldest son asked the unavoidable question: "Who is Jesus?" She told him that all she knew was what she had learned from the missionaries who had read to them from the Bibles, which had been burned long ago. An old farmer from a neighboring village heard about this and remembered that he had buried his Bible in his backyard to avoid having it destroyed by the police. He dug it out at night and found that it was still readable, so he sent it secretly to the family via neighbors.

The big book fascinated the fourteen-year-old boy, who had learned the basics of reading Chinese in primary school. He and his family, however, were frightened that the police would discover their new treasure, so he decided to memorize at least the New Testament, beginning with the Gospel of Matthew. When neighbors began to ask him about Jesus, he could only recite the twenty-eight chapters of that gospel, and he soon began to do the same thing in the neighboring villages.

All who heard him recite the gospel, many of them illiterate like his mother, were deeply moved. They discovered that Christ's parables and teachings about ordinary life applied to their own lives in the country villages. In their

simplicity, these people opened the doors of their hearts to the Savior, who entered with the gifts and fruits of his Spirit. Thus began the multiplication of small Christian communities among the rice paddies of mainland China.¹

In the gospels, Mary asked, “How can this be?” (Luke 1:34). For both the Virgin Mary and the Chinese rice farmers, it was a spiritual awakening. This new horizon to human life brings a totally new dimension to the innate human capacity to transcend ourselves. It opens us up to the light of God’s truth and love. The transcendent capacity of every human person is God’s image and likeness engraved in all men and women at their creation. (See Genesis 1:27; 5:1–2.) It expresses itself in the longing for an eternal love, as St. Augustine (354–430) described in his *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find peace in you.”

In our time, Pope Francis issued an apostolic constitution, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, which explained such a transcendent capacity: “Human beings are distinguished by an irrepressible religious dimension that leads their hearts to feel the need—although not always consciously—to seek God, the Absolute. This quest unites everyone of good will. Even many who claim to be nonbelievers acknowledge this heartfelt longing, present in all men and women.”

1 This Chinese Christian evangelist became known as Brother Yun, and he tells his story in his autobiography, *The Heavenly Man*, co-written with Paul Hattaway.

DIRECTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

This inner capacity in us to know and love someone totally transcendent not only needs to be put into motion but also requires guidance. A similar thing occurs in a car or an airplane. The vehicle needs fully operational equipment, and it also needs a driver or pilot who knows where to go and how to get there. Without both aspects—inner capacity and exterior guidance—either nothing happens or there is a risk of a serious accident. Likewise, the human heart needs two elements: inner transcendence and good orientation.

The guidance will come from what we read, see, or hear: a word, a picture, a good example. The best guidance is to have all three elements together: good reading, good teaching, and good examples. Yet, these external incentives are not enough to light the fire. There must be an inner spark in the heart, an inner grace given by God's Spirit. It is only the Spirit of God who can truly open the human heart to receive the Guest who is trying to enter.

Only God himself knows why some people and not others receive this combination of outer orientation and inner enlightenment. Someone can recall what he or she heard or learned as a child, which is what happened to the peasant woman in mainland China. A similar combination of the past and the present happened to St. Augustine. He had received a good initial formation from his mother, St. Monica, but he did what happens so frequently today: he left his family for higher studies. He joined an esoteric

sect from ancient Persia and became a well-known public speaker in the more intellectual upper class of Roman society. In this context, Augustine fell into all forms of sensual vice and intellectual pride. Yet, he was always looking for “something more.”

Deeply impressed by the sermons of the bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose (339–397), Augustine gradually admitted to himself that he was full of sensuality and worldly self-seeking. One day, when he was in his early thirties, he went out into the countryside and simply wept. At that moment, he heard a voice tell him, “Take it and read it.” He put his finger on a page in the Bible and read, “Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh” (Romans 13:13–14).

Augustine describes his reaction in his *Confessions*: “It was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of my doubt were swept away.... I tasted, and I am hungry and thirsty: you touched me and I burned for your peace.”

One of the first persons who had this type of experience was the Hebrew patriarch, Abraham, who at the beginning was called Abram:

The LORD said to Abram: Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you