

Dear People Whom God Loves,

FOUR ESSENTIALS OF CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY

Before looking at how spirituality is specified into catholic, I would like for us to look at spirituality in a more general sense. I see spirituality as it applies to any religious seeker or anyone seeking goodness. I think that this could apply to any believer in God and in a different but real way to those who do not believe in God.

I think that this helps us to understand why some behaviors are healthy and some are unhealthy in living as spiritual beings. The same may be said of those who do not believe. I believe that all people are spiritual beings. I see all of us as more than matter.

This spirituality, as I see it, is the continual growth in love, compassion, understanding, mercy and respect. For some believers this is what we are becoming in a finite way, what is the infinite Love and Compassion we name God. Some believers in God would see God differently. This would influence what they understand as spirituality.

Those who do not believe in God can have the values of love, compassion, understanding, mercy and respect. They would not, however, have the conscious connection with the infinite spirit of Love and Compassion that we call God.

For looking at how this spirituality is specified into catholic spirituality, I will use the four categories that Fr. Ronald Rolheiser uses in his book "The Holy Longing". I see that the general spirituality flows into all four categories that he calls non-negotiable essentials for catholic spirituality.

First. Private Prayer and Private Morality.

Prayer reminds us that we are not alone in our journey, that a loving power greater than ourselves is on our side. When we ask for help from Loving Power we are admitting that we are dependent, that we can't control everything, and that we are not isolated even if no human is with us.

That prayer can deepen as we don't ask for things but surrender by allowing Loving Power to work in us in whatever way that Loving Power chooses. We trust without knowing what the outcome may be. That trust and surrender do not come easily or quickly. When we pray the Our Father, how deeply do we

mean "Thy kingdom come Thy will be done". I still have not been able to say and mean that totally.

We may all have different ways of praying. That is okay. The ultimate purpose is the surrender.

Our private morality is essential too. Are we growing in honesty and integrity? Are we using people just as a means to get what we want? Are we hurting people by our words and actions? Are we using our pride, anger, lust, greed, gluttony, envy, sloth, fear and self-preservation in harmful ways? These drives are good in themselves but we can use them badly.

As with private prayer our private morality is a slow and uneven process. We all fail many times. God (Love) is full of mercy. Love is assuring us that we are not alone and encouraging us to keep on the journey and not give up. God (Love) never gives up on us.

Second. Social Justice.

This concern for the poor and oppressed was deeply rooted in the Jewish religious tradition that Jesus inherited and lived. The Jewish prophets made this essential. Care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the little ones. Jesus absorbed that tradition.

In Jesus' life, society and religion were interwoven. There was not a religious society and a secular society. When he befriended the outcasts, he was challenging that society. Who were the ones that were put on the margins of that society? They were the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the sinners (the sinners were the people who didn't keep all the religious rules), the lepers, those with issue of blood.

He also saw how the temple taxes were hurting the poor. The poor were already burdened by the Roman taxes. He saw the chasm between the "haves" and the "have not's".

Jesus challenged the religious leaders who profited from this or at least did nothing to change it.

With this background we can see why social justice is essential for us who profess to follow Jesus. All societies (because made up as us humans) whether religious or secular are going to have these flaws. As followers of Jesus we are called to recognize this and to do something about it. At the same time as followers of Jesus we must not think of others as enemies and then be unjust in seeking justice.

Like all else on our journey, we grow into this slowly, painfully and unevenly.

Third. Mellowness of Heart and Spirit.

In some ways I think that this underlies the other three. When our hearts are soft we are more likely to be drawn into the others. At the same time the other three can bump us into softness of heart. Yet sometimes they don't.

Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees helps us to see how crucial softness of heart is. Softness of heart does not mean that we don't have principles and important beliefs. But at the same time our responses may be firm but with softness of heart our firm responses will carry with them compassion and understanding. People must know that we love them before we give them the hard sayings.

Getting back to the Pharisees. I don't think of them as bad people. It does seem, however, that for most of them there was no softness of heart. They observed all the religious rituals. They obeyed all the religious rules down to the tiniest detail. They did all of these good things. But – they separated themselves from those other people that didn't live like they did. They thought of themselves as the holy ones and had nothing to do with the people that Jesus associated with. It seems to me that they thought that they were the good people and the ones that mingled with Jesus were the bad people.

Jesus compared them to white washed tombs. White and shiny on the outside and full of dead peoples bones on the inside. They wanted to exclude people that weren't like them. They didn't like Jesus because Jesus was inviting all those awful people into the reign of God. Jesus was inclusive. They were exclusive.

For the same reason when Jesus was speaking to the chief priests and elders of the people he said "...the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the reign of God ahead of you". Jesus' inclusive love and compassion was drawing the tax collectors and prostitutes into the love and compassion that is essential in the reign of God. The chief priests and elders were resisting that invitation.

Love, compassion and open arms are certainly a part of spirituality for anyone who follows Jesus.

Fourth. Belonging to a Community.

We believe that the word was made flesh. We call Jesus, Son of God. Jesus is fully human and divine. That God (Love) enters into humanity in Jesus without Jesus losing his humanness. Words falter in trying to convey the mystery. Let us just allow the mystery to transform us. We call this the Incarnation.

God (Love) calls us into the reign of God through Jesus. But we may say that Jesus is not here anymore. Not in the same way as 2000 years ago. That is true.

But we might say that Incarnation is still with us. We call church the body of Christ. We the people of God are the body of Christ. That just as Jesus was inviting and drawing people into the reign of God, we the body of Christ (us folks) are called to do the same. Incarnation continues. We are to draw people into the reign of God.

Please excuse my faulty words. I know that there are better theological ways to express it. This is the best that I can do.

The body of Christ is a community of people. We don't walk the journey alone. We people who are sinners, different, miserable and hard to get along with are the community. We are not called to become the same in the way we think and live but to love one another. In fact if we were all alike I don't think that love would grow deep. Love grows as it reaches out to those who are unlike us.

When we come to celebrate the Eucharist we come as all kinds of different people. The body of Christ is not made up of look-a-likes. I think that it was James Joyce who said when speaking of church "here comes everybody".

Jesus said that when two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst. That presence is there when we celebrate the Eucharist. That is also why we call receiving communion receiving the body and blood of Christ.

We pray together. We come to God not just as individuals but as a community of people. We help each other. We help others in need whether or not we think they are part of our community or not.

I see love, compassion, understanding and mercy flowing through all of these four essentials. I don't do it very well. I think that I have a lot of company. Let us at least be willing to enter the reign of God. The great Love we name God only needs a crack to get in and transform us. If we are not yet willing to surrender, let us be willing to be willing; or at least to be willing to be willing to be willing. God (Love) only needs a crack. I suspect that Love will even help us open that crack.

Smile, God Loves You,
Father Clay