

Dear People Whom God Loves,

SPIRITUALITY

For this essay I am deeply indebted to the book "The Holy Longing" by Fr. Ronald Rolheiser. I begin with a quote from the introduction of his book.

"Many good, sincere persons struggle today with their faith and with their churches. Lots of things contribute to this: the pluralism of an age which is rich in everything, except clarity; the individualism of a culture which makes family and community life difficult at every level; an anti-church sentiment within both popular culture and the intellectual world; an ever-growing antagonism between those who see religion in terms of private prayer and piety and those who see it as the quest for justice; and a seemingly tiredness right within the Christian churches themselves. It is not an easy time to be a Christian, especially if you are trying to pass your faith on to your own children."

He begins by reminding us that we all have within us a deep fire of desire. A desire that we do not choose. A desire that is the human condition. To be human means to be driven. He quotes St. Augustine: "you have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you".

The Greek word for this desire is eros: from which we get the English word erotic. To be human is to be erotic. To be erotic means to be sexual but much more than that. Though in our culture we tend to equate erotic and sexual, eros can drive us in many directions. It can drive us to seek money. It can drive us to seek justice. It can drive us to sexual activity. It can drive us to protect the earth. It can drive us to protect our loved ones. It can drive us to pursue our musical or other artistic talents. It can drive us to pursue whatever talents we have been blessed with. It can drive us to seek fame and status. It can drive us to seek positions of power. It can drive us to seek scientific discoveries. It can drive us to advance in our trade, business or profession. It can drive us to advance in a religious institution. It can drive us most anywhere. It is helpful for each of us to see where we are driven. Then for us to ask ourselves; what is this doing to our life? What is this doing to the people close to me? What is this doing to people who are not close to me? What is this doing to my community, my county, my world? What is this doing to our earth?

I suggest that we not think of eros as either good or bad but rather just a powerful desire that we can use well or badly or some mixture of the two.

Fr. Rolheiser writes that spirituality is what we do with that fire within us. We are all spiritual whether we recognize it or not. Spirituality is not the same as religion.

When we channel the eros well we are made more whole. When we channel eros badly it tears us apart. When we are more whole we are a blessing to ourselves and others. When we are torn apart we are destructive to ourselves and others. Eros is like a bulldozer. A bulldozer may be used to shape the earth in a way that is beautiful and/or useful or it may be used to destroy everything in its path.

Fr. Rolheiser also makes the observation that we may direct our eros into all kinds of different paths so that we are torn apart. We become scattered and not whole. When our eros is that scattered we easily get into destructive behavior.

He writes that a saint is someone whose eros is directed toward God and the poor. To clarify this, I want us to reflect on "God" and "the poor". This will be my understanding of "God and the poor". He also writes of three very erotic women: Mother Teresa, Janis Joplin and Princess Dianna. We will look at that as well.

Who and what is God? What I write is the way that I imagine God. But it flows from our scripture that says that "God is love". Unfortunately there are parts of the Bible that are far removed from "God is love".

Since to be God is to be Love, all the choices that Love makes have to be loving. When we act lovingly we are choosing what we believe is truly in the best interest of the one we love. We are limited in our love and wisdom so what we do is not always in the best interest of the other person. Since God is infinite Love and Wisdom, God's choices will always be in our best interest.

Love (God) is always drawing us towards the goal of being loving, happy people – harmoniously related to each other and all of creation. We Christians believe that God is doing this through entering into humanity in Jesus and dwelling in us by the Holy Spirit.

When our eros is directed toward God it means that we are willing to be drawn into becoming God – like (Love-like). Then we are becoming what we are meant to be.

What does it mean for our eros to be directed to the poor? Instead of "the poor" I would rather use "those in need". I like that better because "poor" can often mean just those who are economically poor. I don't mean, however, to lessen our concern for those who don't have sufficient food, lack decent medical care and a decent place to live.

I think that “those in need” include all of us. That means me too. It can mean those caught in addiction, those caught in pursuit of wealth, power, fame and status, those caught in sin, those caught in medical problems (physical, mental or emotional), those caught in isolation and loneliness, those caught in feeling superior to other people, those caught in feeling inferior to other people, those on the margins.

If we can see people as people in need, this will soften our hearts and draw us into deeper and broader love. Also we must remember that our help is loving, wise and not paternalistic. We are all fundamentally equal. We are all in the human boat.

I see that directing our eros toward God and toward “those in need” is all one and the same. I think that this is what Jesus meant when he told us to love God with everything within us and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We now turn to the three erotic women:

Mother Teresa was not sexually active. She was erotic. She had fire in her belly. Fr. Rolheiser says that she was a dynamo of energy. She was disciplined. That means that her dynamic energy was channeled. It was channeled toward God and the poor. It wasn't spread in different directions. It was directed toward God and the poor. This is why she was considered a saint. Her spirituality was focused on “the one thing” God and the poor.

Janice Joplin, like Mother Teresa, was a woman of fiery energized strong eros. The difference is that her energy went in all directions. Fr. Rolhesier writes: “Unlike Mother Teresa, however, Janis could not will the one thing. She willed many things. Her great energy went out in all directions and eventually led to an early death. But those activities – a total giving over to creativity, performance, drugs, booze, sex, coupled with the neglect of normal rest – were her spirituality”. She split open her humanness. She was not whole.

Princess Diana was also a person of strong erotic energy. This energy was split in two ways. Channeled into a luxurious jet setter life and to helping the poor. She was not whole. This split must have caused her much pain. She was not focused on “the one thing”. Her focus on the poor made her like Mother Teresa. She was unlike Mother Teresa because she was not focused on “the one thing”. She was like Janis Joplin in her focus on the high life. She was unlike Janis Joplin because she was also focused on the poor.

I guess that many of us, probably most of us, are somewhat of a mixture like Princess Diana. Our lives and our will are not focused on “the one thing” only. We are focused on other things as well.

To be focused on “the one thing” doesn’t necessarily mean that we are doing exceptional things. It means that we are willing to be drawn into Love and Compassion which is God and that overflows into love and compassion for those in need. There are saints that are largely unknown. Becoming a saint is a gift. It is by the grace of God.

I suggest that we not ask ourselves this foolish question –am I a saint? I believe that if we think that we are a saint, it is a sure sign that we are not. I further believe that if we even ask ourselves the foolish question, it is a sure sign that we are not.

Spirituality is not something far off and remote. It is not the same as belonging to a religion. It is for everyone. It means accepting that we are erotic humans. When religion is doing its job well, it will help us be willing to be drawn into love and compassion. For a Christian this means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Smile, God Loves You,
Father Clay