



*[The following article is taken from a presentation by Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany to the Priests' Convocation, November 7-9, 2007, Otesaga Resort, Cooperstown, NY.]*

### **Priestly Spirituality in a Changing Church.**

Certainly there is no topic more timely than spirituality. On the one hand, there is a great hunger for spirituality, as evidenced by the plethora of books, tapes, videos and internet resources on this matter. On the other hand, we in the Church are experiencing consternation and frustration about how to respond to this hunger, especially among our own people. More and more Catholics, especially younger Catholics, are alienated from or indifferent to the church and find little meaning in its rituals, language, and traditions, which they experience as unrelated to their lives.

Hence we are perplexed when we see our young, and not-so-young, gravitate toward the evangelical churches and non-traditional spirituality centers, or choose secular settings over sacramental practices. Many of our people feel free to dismiss church teachings that are inconsistent with their own experiences with relationships and sexuality, or to ignore church proclamations about the beginning and the end of life.

Vocations to religious life have declined by more than 50% and vocations to the priesthood by more than 30% since 1965. Mass attendance in the United States has decreased by 30% to 40% since the Second Vatican Council.

Some attribute these trends to the implementation of the Council or to the Council itself. Others blame the scandal of clergy sexual abuse.

Quite frankly, I believe it is more than any one cause.

Let me cite several factors in the contemporary milieu that must be understood if we are to nurture our own spirituality and be responsive to the spiritual needs of our people.

The first is a loss of a sense of sin. This is evident in a variety of ways, most notably for us as Catholics, in the decline in the number of those celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation. While penitents have dwindled to a corporal's guard, those receiving the Eucharist at Christmas and Easter, or at weddings and funerals, even when they haven't darkened the doors of the church other than on such occasions, is all too frequent.

I am not proposing that we revert to the sin-dominated culture of the pre-Vatican II church, with its emphasis on weekly confessions or not receiving communion unless preceded by confession. But I am suggesting that for many contemporary Catholics and others, sin is no longer a reality that is significant in their lives. I say this is an obstacle to contemporary spirituality because if there is no sin, there is no need for a Redeemer. Maybe I'm all wrong in this regard.

Maybe sin really doesn't exist in today's world. Maybe sin was the result of a Jansenistic piety or an antediluvian approach to control the masses, which is no longer relevant in our enlightened, post-modern culture.

But the fruits of sin are certainly evident all around us. We see it daily in domestic violence, family breakdown, child physical and sexual abuse, addiction to alcohol, drugs, sex and pornography, and in gambling, street crime and school violence . . . as well as in the social sins of racism, sexism, ageism, militarism, homophobia and xenophobia.

But unless there is a willingness to acknowledge the existence of sin and evil in the world, to assume responsibility for it and to bring about the conversion of mind and heart that alone can rectify it, then there remains only a social approach to these ills, which is inadequate to respond to what is primarily and essentially a spiritual problem.

A second issue is the secularization of our culture. America remains a religious society, but increasingly religion is being relegated to our private lives as an aggressively secular culture systematically seeks to exclude religion from all public space. Religion is deemed acceptable for private life, but, when its adherents seek to gain admittance to the public arena, they are told "to check their bags at the door." Under the guise of enforcing an exaggerated notion of official "neutrality," the contemporary secular milieu actually promotes its own secular outlook to a privileged position in shaping public opinion and public policy. Under the guise of promoting tolerance, the secularist outlook fosters the very intolerance it claims to abhor.

In other words, there has developed the phenomenon in our national life that would seek to rule religiously based values "out of order" in the public arena simply because their roots are religious. In this view, pluralism means a public square purged of intolerance – which secularists define as the belief in exclusive truth claims which define right and wrong. They believe that any religious voice in a pluralistic society will either infect the body politic with unhealthy doses of fanaticism and ill will, or will contribute to the type of extremism and polarization along religious lines that has plagued Europe and the Middle East for centuries. Their fears are fueled further by the growing political voice of Evangelical Christians, the efforts of some Catholic bishops to use the threat of excommunication to dictate to political leaders or to the Catholic people how to vote, and the omnipresent threat of Islamic extremism.

Hence we have the anomaly in this country that in private, religion enjoys an overwhelming majority status (over 90% of people profess belief in God, and 80% claim adherence to some religion), but in public religion has a definite minority status or no status at all. It is either eliminated entirely from a public space, or if it does exist at all in our public affairs, our entertainment, our intellectual and artistic endeavors, it exists uneasily, disguised on its very best and blindest behavior, preferably as a form of vague non-denominationalism.

Consequently, we in the faith community are struggling with the challenge of how best to engage the public debate in a way that combats an elite secularism that is fundamentally antithetical to a spiritual message. Religious people across the theological and political spectrum, from the far left to the far right, are increasingly uneasy with the cultural drift that has developed. For religious conservatives, these forces are exemplified in the abortion syndrome, value-free secular schools and moral laxity. For religious liberals these forces are perceived in militarism, consumerism and environmental insensitivity - all of which are seen as a threat to creation itself and an alarming symbol of our lack of faith. In any case, a profound alienation created by hostile secular forces is at the heart of the religious community's desire to find its voice in the public policy of our nation.

That there be such a voice, I believe, is especially important given the nature of the issues that now confront American society. There is a spectrum of questions, running from in-vitro fertilization through the Iraq War, about which the public debate is not purely technical or practical but is filled with moral content. On an increasing number of issues it is impossible to formulate wise policy without asking what constitutes “good policy” in a morally normative sense.

Every day, technology produces choices for us that previous generations could not have imagined. In the past two generations, for example, we have cracked the genetic code and smashed the atom. Neither these nor the revolution they symbolize can be understood apart from moral analysis. Increasingly, then, a key policy question is, “When we can do almost anything, how shall we decide what we ought to do?” Or to put it more sharply still, “When we can do almost anything, how do we decide what we ought never do?” It is precisely, I believe, because this question is implicated in so many public policy issues today, that it is critical that religious bodies and spiritual leaders be able to enter the public policy debate.

The third issue is consumerism. In his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II lamented that consumerism which he described as “exhausting.” He noted that we, in the West in particular, are sculpted and shaped from cradle to grave to live and act like consumers. We are bombarded incessantly with high-powered advertising techniques that seek to define and create more and greater needs. The superfluous becomes the convenient; the convenient become the necessary and the necessary become the indispensable.

“Enough” is not a word that advertisers use. Our prevailing culture is about choice, more for less, and instant gratification. We see evidence of consumerism all around us. Our supermarkets give us 40 brands of shampoo to choose from and eight different types of potatoes. We have new gadgets and software every month; \$150 flights to the Caribbean and 120 channels on cable.

Furthermore, these high-powered advertising techniques not only seek to define and create more and greater needs, but they seek to shape the attitudes and personality of the consumer as well: the self becomes the center of the universe; other people are things to serve one’s needs. The moral norm is efficiency, the means whatever works. Let the chips fall where they may – unethical business practices, the exploitation of labor, or rapacious usurpation of the environment.

While not intending to take a pot-shot at our friends from the Evangelical Churches, I believe that a consumerist approach is one of the ingredients of their success.

A recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* by James Twitchel entitled “A Congregation of Consumers” points out that today’s Christians are first and foremost consumers – and that the complacent mainline churches are dropping out of the competition because they are not marketing “their products.”

What is it that makes their “product” so desirable? Sociologists point out that the churches that demand the most of people – tithing, bowing to firm doctrine and observing strict rules, are the fastest growing. Sacrifice, Twitchell suggests, signifies value. The more you sacrifice, the more you visibly value the product.

Another key to the product success of the Evangelical Churches is selling. Missionary zeal is at the heart of their attraction, not only because sharing the Good News with others is a basic Christian

responsibility, but because it means you yourself have found the Way. For many, Twitchell says, selling the faith to others “comes down to a kind of narcissism, like taking pride in your Prices.”

Another form of selling in which these churches engage is “innovations in supply.” They offer playgrounds, daycare, coffee shops, tapes, videos, souvenirs and a mall's worth of service. These churches also hire consultants and public relations experts to “grow their flock” and to adhere to market discipline.

Whether you agree with Twitchell's analysis that the reason for the success of many evangelical churches is the end result of a form of consumerism, there is no question about the fact that consumerism is deeply ingrained in our American psyche, and we must be keenly aware of it when seeking to address our people's spiritual needs.

Rather than cater to a consumerism which enslaves us, however, I would suggest that as Catholics, we are called to break free of this lifestyle of high consumption, wasteful depletion of resources and affluent use of service and leisure around us so that we might listen to what gospel values have to say: gospel values that tell us “Blessed are the poor in spirit”; gospel values that point out that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven; gospel values that remind us that we should be content to be fed and clothed.

While most would readily admit that these are gospel norms and values, unfortunately there are far too few people today who are willing to take the steps necessary or to make the sacrifices required to translate these gospel values into lived realities. For example, the poor person says, “Let the rich begin. I've had enough frugality already.” And the rich person says, “Why should I give up that which I have legitimately acquired? Therefore, let someone else begin and, then, we'll see.” The net result is that no one does anything.

Despite this pessimistic reality, however, there are signs that many people today have had enough of media-driven consumption patterns and self-obsessed lifestyles. They are heeding God's call to be different by learning to live simply, sustainably and in solidarity with people who are poor.

This solidarity with the poor is not, as Pope John Paul II notes in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, “A feeling of vague passion or shallow distress at the hardships of people both near and far.” Rather, “It is a firm and pervading determination to commit ourselves to the common good. It involves building a human community where liberty is not an idle word, where the needy Lazarus can sit down with the rich man at the same banquet table.”

I believe this is that kind of sacrifice to which we must call our people: “to share rather than to hoard; to be generous with ourselves, our time and our resources, and to consider how much is enough. For to live simply is not just to live frugally for its own sake – that would be like fasting without prayer or almsgiving. It is to live in such a way that human dignity is respected and all may reach their full human and God-given potential.”

It means taking personal responsibility for creating change and for understanding the impact our way of life is having on poor people and on the global environment we all share.

I am convinced that this approach to spirituality, rooted in the rich social teaching of the Church, is the best way to challenge our people to change their lives, to transform our consumer-driven society and to bring about God's kingdom in our day.

This approach surfaces another issue in the contemporary milieu: the bifurcation between spirituality and religion. More and more, people, especially young adults, make the distinction between spirituality, which is conceived as private, subjective and individualistic, freeing one to be in touch with the authentic self, with one's true inner core, and religion, which is viewed as an assent to a self-limiting creed that can lead people to become dogmatic, rigid and intolerant. This tendency to embrace a "spirituality only" or a "Catholic lite" approach to faith fails to appreciate the importance and value of tradition and community. Tradition, and the rituals which sustain it, is not traditionalism (or what the late theologian Jeroslav Pelekan called "the dead faith of the living"), it is the living faith of the dead.

Unlike a spirituality-only approach, with a religious tradition we don't have to start from scratch. We not only have a time-tested and track-proven perspective on life and its ultimate purpose, but we have a community that can challenge us to examine our biases and self-centered habits, and that can sustain us emotionally, esthetically, intellectually and morally through all the dry days and dark nights that inevitably occur on our life's journey.

Another problem in today's world and society is scientism, which maintains that only that which is empirically verifiable or demonstrable can be considered as objectively true. Anything else is to be viewed as wishful thinking or mere ancient superstition that cannot be trusted or given credence.

A common view of scientism is that evolution occurs simply because matter obeys some unseen law whereby a simple organism will, if it evolves at all, become a more complex one. Evolution is thus a blind process without purpose, and science will one day uncover the mechanical rules underlying every seeming mystery. Our own lives, therefore, are equally without purpose. There is no place for the supernatural in scientism.

The chemist Peter Atkins of Lincoln College, Oxford, puts it this way "the universe has evolved over the 14 billion years of its existence by the directionless, unguided processes that are the manifestations of the working out of physical laws. That we do not yet understand anything about the inception of the universe should not mean we need ascribe to its inception a supernatural cause, a creator."

Thus, as Dennis O'Brien, the president emeritus of Rochester University notes, the main strategy of scientism in presenting its views is to line up a set of religious claims and compare them to the claims of science and common-sense morality. When this comparison is made, the religious claims appear implausible factually and reprehensible morally. Creation in seven days, the virgin birth, raising the dead – scientism dismisses all these claims as absurd. And what of the morality of a God who asks Abraham to sacrifice his only son?

The flaw of this critique is that it puts forth a straw man. According to scientism the whole of human reality must be viewed through the lens of science. But a wholistic view of the world and a scientific view are not the same thing. While the detached view of the scientific observer has immense value when we are trying to arrive at a description of the natural world, it is not the only perspective to be taken into account.

Science is interested primarily, if not exclusively, in what is general and repeatable. But the experience of human beings is very different. Understanding human reality is not a spectator sport. It must be lived from within rather than observed from without. A person, in other words, must be understood as more than a collection of physical laws and moral duties.

Unlike the adherents of scientism, however, I believe there need not be a conflict between science and religion. Actually both are trying to do the same thing – namely, to explain the world we see by referring to a world we do not see. As Rabbi Neil Gilman notes, “both find the ultimate explanation for the immediately visible by postulating a world that is invisible and that accounts for why things are the way they are. That’s what myths do, they deal with the invisible to explain the visible . . . in this sense “the big bang” is much more theology than it is science. Both are poetry.”

Ultimately, then, it seems to me that if we do not find the compatibility between science and religion, life itself and all creation becomes meaningless and absurd – totally pointless.

Closely aligned with scientism is the renewed militant atheism presented by contemporary best-selling authors such as Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens in *God is Not Great*, who not only ridicule and debunk belief in God or the supernatural, but look upon faith as a disease, consider religious instruction as a form of child abuse and decry the harm religion has done and continues to inflict upon humanity.

The response to this aggressive atheism is similar to that of scientism, if not more so. As to the assertion of these critics that religion is capable of doing enormous harm – citing as they do The Crusades, The Inquisition and contemporary Islamic Jihadism, or religious intolerance toward those outside the tradition (gays, the separated and divorced or non-believers) – how do these advocates for a world free of religious beliefs and traditions explain away the six million Jews incinerated in the ovens of Auschwitz and Birkenau, the 20 million Eastern Europeans killed under Stalin’s brutal totalitarian regime, the untold millions slaughtered in the killing fields of Cambodia, and the genocide of China’s cultural revolution or the systemic effort within all of these godless ideologies to accept or even promote abortion, infanticide and eugenics.

Yes, what is missing, both in scientism and atheism is hope. Neither provides much consolation at a funeral and neither can respond to that insatiable quest for the Divine, the Transcendent, the Infinite, which has been at the heart of the human experience throughout all of recorded history.

Thus in the face of the Darwinian approach to life, upheld by scientism, wherein natural selection necessitates the ruthless and relentless destruction of individuals who have no meaning other than fostering the survival of the fittest, or following out the cosmic consequences of the “big bang,” and modern atheism, which has fueled only eugenic perfection, ethnic purity and materialistic supremacy, we believers are called to adhere to what the philosopher Gabriel Marcel has called a “metaphysic of hope.” Hope finds God not absent amidst the vicissitudes of nature, of human savagery or of revenge or retribution. It sees God in all the peculiar shapes that love takes, amid the chaos and pain of the human condition, God’s only ultimate goal to gather us in the embrace of divine love.

A mirror image of the scientism and atheism I have just mentioned is fundamentalism, both religious and political.

In its religious form, fundamentalism grants a privileged status to faith over reason, to sacred texts and doctrinal tenets. It refuses to grant validity to any evidence which might challenge or override this status.

Within our own Catholic tradition we see this fundamentalism in a nostalgia for the past or in an unwillingness to allow for the development of theological doctrine or of moral understanding. There are also strains of fundamentalism to be found among Protestants, Jews and Muslims. It is

understandable that in a world that has become so insecure, and in a post-modern age where all certainties, dogmas and doctrines are being questioned, that inevitably some try to go back to absolute certainties that might have been there or at least were perceived to have been there in the past.

There is a safety and security to this approach, providing pat answers or facile solutions to every problem – offering a kind of secure spiritual safety net or ABC approach to salvation, as long as one does not stray beyond the boundaries of orthodoxy.

Fundamentalism, however, is a closed system, often accompanied by a smugness and intolerance – by a condescending judgmentalism and anti-intellectualism that fail to appreciate complexity, seeing only black and white, without any shades of gray.

Fundamentalism, I believe, is one of the attractions of some of the evangelical churches and sects, but is also a retreat from engaging the world, from seeking to harmonize faith and reason, which both John Paul II in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* and Benedict XVI in his address last year at Regensburg stated are so critically important if our Catholic Christian faith is to grow and flourish, and to be attractive and credible in our contemporary world and society.

As Catholic Christians, then, we must not retreat from the secular world, nor must we approach it with a voice that constantly warns, judges, condemns and forbids. Rather, ours must be a dialogic process that listens both to those outside the church and to our own members. And when we speak, we must not do so in a didactic or condescending voice, but in a voice that is rational, civil, tolerant, patient, familial and above all forgiving.

While not explicitly opposed to religious faith and belief, I would suggest that the explosion of new technologies can also pose a significant threat to people's spiritual wellbeing.

Not only are there personal computers and the internet, but cell phones, iPods and Blackberrys, which, as an August editorial in *America* magazine notes, have created both a culture of distraction and a culture of constant work, where we are reachable around the clock and therefore unable to disconnect from the demands of the workplace. Ironically, these new technologies were supposed to lessen our workloads and free us from menial tasks like phone calls and letters. Instead, they have filled our lives with even more superfluous communication.

Equally significant, as we spend more time connected to these technologies, we can become more disconnected from one another, from our families and, because of a lack of quiet space, from ourselves and ultimately from God.

Certainly the dawn of these new technologies is not a cause simply for lament. Even I, who have been a great foot dragger and procrastinator in this regard, must acknowledge and stand in awe of the benefits they can produce.

But there must be a judicious caution about how these new technologies can affect a relationship with others and our own spiritual life. The great spiritual masters in every tradition have long counseled the need for solitude and quiet. We can experience God in many ways, even through internet sites like Beliefnet or Pray-As-You-Go, but there remains the need for solitude and quiet where God can speak to us in the silence of our hearts.

As the editors of *America* note in their commentary on this matter, without silence, without conscious disconnecting from the cares of the day, from ministry, and even from friends and families, it becomes increasingly hard to carve out space needed to listen to one's own thoughts and to God. St. Benedict wrote in his monastic Rule, 'Silence and the absence of noise in a certain manner encourage the soul to think of God.' To connect with God, then, it is sometimes necessary to disconnect.

The final challenge I would cite if we are to foster a contemporary spirituality is the rampant narcissism and individualism that permeate our culture and much of the world. It is not only we in the church who view this narcissism and individualism as a problem for individuals and society, but so do many psychologists, sociologists and even economists.

In his new book *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, the South African Dominican theologian Father Albert Nolan cites a false or superficial sense of freedom which is at the root of this problem. It is not the freedom to choose any brand of toothpaste you like, it is a more radical freedom. What people often seek, Nolan notes, is a freedom *of* the ego instead of freedom *from* the ego. Freedom of the ego means that I can do anything I like in relation to others. The more my will triumphs, the more free I am. But this is a dangerous illusion that only imprisons us further.

Freedom in the true Christian sense is freedom from the ego. In other words, it means we are not tied down by our own selfishness. It is a freedom to do God's will, to work for the common good, not just the selfish idea of what's good for me.

When we develop this freedom from the ego, we can recognize that we often project our problems on others, that we have a false image of ourselves and that we may communicate this false image to others.

As Jesus pointed out, until we really understand what is happening within ourselves, we have a real beam in our own eye. We're blinded by something we need to remove in order to see clearly and to understand that we are not the center of the world.

That is why Father Nolan states that narcissism or self-centeredness is the root cause both of personal failure and of social injustice. He suggests that the reason so many so-called liberation movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century failed is because they neglected the need of the individual to overcome personal selfishness.

Father Nolan cites as a specific example, the experience of his own native South Africa, wherein the hard-won freedom from apartheid was replaced "by greed, corruption, crime, hypocrisy and power mongering."

The solution to this egotistical self-centeredness, Father Nolan posits, is Jesus' own spirituality, which responds to the need of people to heal, to love, to forgive and to affirm; a spirituality based not on condemnation, blame or guilt, but one that liberates, persuades, encourages, enables and empowers.

This is precisely the freedom and spirituality which our Holy Father Benedict XVI presents in his marvelous new book *Jesus of Nazareth*. In this series of meditations and reflections, Pope Benedict challenges us to read the story of Jesus found in the Gospels not only with the eyes of faith, but in relation to the entire story of the Bible and the drama of Israel and the pilgrim people of God.

Benedict portrays Jesus as the promised new and greater Moses. Like Moses, Jesus speaks to God face-to-face. Unlike Moses, Jesus looks directly at the glory of God. Thus Jesus' unity with God and his filial communion with the Father are seen by Benedict as a key to understanding Jesus' works, deeds, sufferings and triumphs, which then become the foundation for developing our own spiritual life.

Reviewing Benedict's book, Peter Steinfels, the former religion correspondent for The New York Times, author of *A People Adrift* and co-director of the Fordham Center on Religion, states that *Jesus of Nazareth* "is leagues in advance of both the theological and biblical underpinnings of 90% of the preaching or catechetics encountered in Catholic America."

High praise from a thoughtful, yet at times critical analyst of our contemporary church. Having read *Jesus of Nazareth* myself, I recommend Benedict's book. For I am convinced that more and more our personal and communal spirituality must be rooted in the person of Jesus. Especially for us as pastoral leaders, we must seek to enter even more fully into a meaningful relationship with Jesus to see how his life, his words, his choices, his facing death and his overcoming death relate to our own fears and to the needs, hopes, fears and expectations of those whom we are privileged to serve. I believe it is only to the extent that we do this, that we can truly face our own fears and find the inner resources needed to re-energize those to whom we minister and lead them to a deep meaningful relationship with our Brother and Redeemer, Jesus, the Christ.