

## ***Reframing a Catholic Lay Spirituality to Ground the Church Reform Movement***

*Working Draft (5-25-12) / Montana Catholics Working Group on Lay Spirituality*

***This paper was drafted by members of Concerned Catholic of Montana. ACC believes it is an excellent illustration of how the reform movement develops from the “Ground-Up” rather than the “Top-Down,” and models dynamics of lay leadership and bespeaks of a participatory Catholic Church, rooted in our common baptism, the universal call to holiness and ministry, and the vision of Vatican II. As such, it is perfect fodder for the [Assemblies Community Network](#), ACC’s interactive online communications system to nurture reform in the grassroots US/Canadian Catholic Church.***

***To that end, we have created on the ACN a private Forum (under the tab labeled “PLANNING GROUPS, called [Montana Catholics Working Group on Lay Spirituality](#) . The group is open to others across the ACN who may want to participate in their efforts and who are interested making positive contributions through active participation in this private forum. To request access to the forum, one must first be a subscriber to the Assemblies Community Network. If you are not already, you can [SIGN UP HERE](#). Once you are admitted to the ACN, click “Planning Groups” on the Menu Bar and then click [Montana Catholics Working Group on Lay Spirituality](#). Once there, you will be prompted with a highlighted text bar stating “Members must be Approved. ” Click the link in that box to request access to the Planning Group (Private Forum). If you are already a subscriber to the ACN, go directly to the link above.***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

***“Asking the proper questions is the central action of transformation. Questions are the key that causes the secret doors of the psyche to swing open.” - Clarissa Pinkola Estes***

In just a few short pages we have attempted to ask and answer questions regarding a spirituality of and for the faithful. We learn who we are by asking questions and by our lived experiences. From both, we learn our values and our philosophy of life. While questions can challenge us, they also serve to instruct and affirm.

Questions leading to transformation lead to embracing new attitudes and new behaviors. We begin our dialogue by engaging a working definition of spirituality in order to help define this evolution. Then we attempt to address the differentiation of spirituality and religion.

We live in a time of discovery shaking the intellectual and cultural foundations of the Western world, and also of Christianity. Common assumptions are being called into question. Cherished beliefs and values are being pushed and pulled by new research and awe inspiring scientific breakthroughs. International travel, the global economy, and the Internet have resulted in unprecedented exchanges among the world religions, cultures, and nations. A blending of worldviews and perspectives is underway. Despite positive developments, we sense that our future is uncertain and unpredictable. The ongoing destruction of our planet's environment, a population growth that is outpacing available space and natural resources, our inability to prevent wars, and the growing economic divide between the haves and the have-not's make our future downright scary.

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In the midst of this change and turmoil we have no choice but to live our lives and make sense of our situation, as best we can. Many turn to or hold on to a religion as a source of meaning, direction, and reassurance. But the various religions and traditional belief systems are also in flux. Faith communities have been challenged and sometimes divided by new ideas and new interpretations of what many had assumed to be settled and solid doctrine.

As Christians we are part of a religious and theological tradition that hold deeply that truth is one and that there can be no real conflict between scientific knowledge and our religious beliefs. With that principle in mind, we need to search for, explore, and develop new frameworks for our spirituality; ones that are open to and can incorporate new knowledge and new ways of thinking about God, others, and the world around us.

Our journey continues as within these pages we attempt to explore that new framework of Evolutionary Christianity; the scientific and biological discoveries that cannot help but have a significant impact on our faith lives and our spirituality. The challenges associated with that transition are reliant upon an open heart and mind but if we persevere the rewards found in this new Cosmology lead us to a greater understanding of how we see God and Jesus in an evolutionary universe; the Divine within and amongst us.

As we affirm that everyone's spirituality is indeed unique and develops and evolves over time we do offer thoughts on developing and nourishing your own personal spirituality. It is certainly not "rocket science" and we do not presume to have all of the answers but hopefully you might find these few thoughts helpful and embraceable as you pursue your own personal journey. As we each continue to explore our own spirituality new insights will continue to come to light as evolution has always and continues each day to move us forward.

### ***THE NATURE OF SPIRITUALITY***

Before we can discuss the elements of an emerging spirituality, we are forced to grapple with the word itself and explain what it means to us. Spirituality is inherently difficult to describe and define with any precision for it means different things to different people.

We begin by noting that for some Catholics, the word spirituality points to the practices of prayer, penance, and fasting. Others might immediately think of church attendance, the Mass, the sacraments, or their favorite devotions. Still others would associate the word with a style of spiritual life developed by a particular monastic tradition or religious order such as, for example, Franciscan spirituality, Benedictine spirituality, Dominican spirituality, Ignatian spirituality, etc.

For us, the word means something more and something broader. Spirituality calls attention to a certain type of human experience and awareness and to a relationship with God or to what others may call a higher power, ultimate mystery, ineffable presence, or ultimate reality. Basically, spirituality is a way of life and a way of "seeing" or understanding relationships with others, the world, and us. It is our spirituality that provides us with a sense of meaning, purpose, relatedness and direction.

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Thomas Hart (1999, pp. 38-40) offers a number of descriptions of spirituality. For example:

- Spirituality is our lived relationship with Mystery;
- Spirituality refers to our deepest values and desires, the very core of our being;

Spirituality is also described as an inward journey, a holy longing, a yearning for meaning, one's enduring values, the essence of one's character, one's lived experience with the mystery of life, and that which puts life in our life. The idea of mystery is a common theme in any effort to describe spirituality. In this context, mystery refers to a dimension or a level of experience and awareness that the person knows to be real but is beyond description and understanding. Awareness or mindfulness involves an appreciation for the mystery, beauty, and awesomeness inherent in human life and the universe.

Melanie Svoboda (2005, p. 5) makes the following observations:

"... Spirituality is our basic outlook on life. ... our endeavor to perceive reality more and more with the mind (and heart) of Jesus. This means all of reality and not simply the so-called religious aspects of our life. Our spirituality colors the way we look at everything. ... [Spirituality] also includes our responses to reality, that is, the actions and behaviors that flow from that perception. ... and is expressed in the little daily decisions and choices we make: what kind of food we eat, how we talk to the clerk in the store, how much time we devote to prayer. [Spirituality] also includes the big choices we make: whom we decide to marry or befriend, the kind of home we live in, the type of work we choose to do."

And of, course our spirituality shapes our responses to the limitations, losses, and suffering that we all experience in life such as sickness, disability, the death of a loved one and our own death. Michael Morwood in his book *Tomorrow's Catholic* (p. 103) advises that when faced with difficult situations it is helpful to substitute the words "Life" and/or "Reality" for "God", for example "Life does at times ask me to carry a cross".

Fr. Ronald Rolheiser (1999, p.6) notes that, "Spirituality is not something on the fringes, an option for those with a particular bent. None of us has a choice. Everyone has to have spirituality and everyone does have one, either a life-giving one or a destructive one." He goes on to explain that deep within all of us, deep within our souls, there exists an unrest, energy, or desire wanting to be set free. And, according to Rolheiser, it is what we do with that desire, that "inner fire," and how we channel it that is our spirituality.

Rolheiser (1999, p.7) explains, "Desire make us act and when we act what we do will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration within our personalities, minds, and bodies - and to the strengthening or deterioration of our relationship to God, others, and the cosmic world." A person with a healthy spirituality is able to draw energy from that inner fire. That energy fills us with vitality, enthusiasm and exuberance for life. It keeps us glued together, integrated, so we do not fall apart. Spirituality helps us to integrate our body, mind, and spirit. The notion of integration is a theme that runs through most efforts to describe spirituality.

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Because one's spirituality is, a way of "seeing" or a way of interpreting experiences and finding meaning, our spirituality permeates every aspect of our life. At some level, it will affect every hour of our life and it will shape and guide every significant choice we make. It is only for purposes of analysis and discussion that we can separate out our spirituality as a separate domain. We experience and respond to life as a whole person. Thus, our spirituality is always interwoven with other aspects of our being and functioning such as our thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

### **RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY**

For many, their spirituality is connected to or strongly shaped by their religion. It can be said that religion is living from the outside in and spirituality is living from the inside out. A religion consists of a set of beliefs, doctrines, traditions, stories, rituals, and practices that support and sustain spiritual growth. It provides a language and a conceptual framework for describing and understanding the spiritual life. Religions are passed from one generation to another by some form of leadership and institutional structure. The elements of a religion typically include public prayer and worship by the community of believers, rituals that mark transitions in the life cycle or along the spiritual journey, a moral and ethical code, and a reverence for certain sacred writings and sacred places.

As compared to a religion, which is public and institutional in nature, spirituality is more a quality of the inner self or soul, that deepest recess of our being where we are conscious of who we really are, what is right and wrong, and what gives us meaning and purpose. Both religion and spirituality involve a sense of the sacred and the recognition that some creative power, life force, or deity transcends the visible and material world. Religion is a relational/communal practice of a set of beliefs while spirituality is the one on one connection to a higher power and our values, beliefs and behaviors are all an integrated expression of our individually chosen spiritual practice.

For us who are Christian, our spirituality is shaped by the ideas, ideals, words, and images absorbed from the life and teachings of Jesus, from scripture and liturgy, from relationships within a faith community, and from church teachings.

We are drawn to spirituality and/or religion because, deep within, we have a sense that we are somehow adrift, incomplete, and lack wholeness. We seek an anchor or a foundation as we encounter and cope with life's challenges. Both religion and spirituality provide a sense of meaning, direction, hope, relatedness and a moral compass. A religion or spirituality can help people live creatively and peacefully with troublesome realities such as troubled relationships, mortality, pain, grief, despair and outrage at the injustice and cruelty of life.

### **THE NEED FOR A PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY**

We are especially interested in identifying types of spirituality that are meaningful and helpful to the faithful. Over the centuries, the faithful have tried to borrow or imitate the spiritualities and spiritual practices of priests, nuns, and monks. While this has been helpful to many, those "schools" and spiritual practices leave something to be desired. Ninety-nine percent of

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the faithful are not monks, nuns, or priests. The way of life, responsibility, and environment of a priest or nun is significantly different from those of a layman or laywoman.

Yet to be developed is a framework for the spiritual life that fits well with the lives of the lay people who struggle each day with the ordinary but challenging tasks and responsibilities related to day-to-day living and the sometimes “messiness” it entails, for example, dating, career choice, finding a job, marriage, family parenting, caring for a disabled child or an aging parent etc.

Perhaps now, more than ever before in history, when we face so many challenges, some totally out of our control, when religion, the economy, the environment, and the political landscape seem to be beyond our ability to have any effect, it is truly more critical than ever to consider our own personal spirituality.

In the community we call Church as we are baptized “priest, prophet and king” into the mystical body of Christ, we begin to discover an interconnectedness that we all share and that can, when nourished by a wholesome spirituality, sustain us through that “messiness” of life. With our baptism as our cornerstone, we must develop a spirituality that grounds us through even the most difficult moments of life, when unlike those monastics with a routine regiment of prayer life and contemplation, we must move through each moment and face each crisis with love and caring, and that in and of itself is prayer. Prayer in our lives is often simply an awareness that we are not alone in this, that the Divine dwells in us and in all. That interconnectedness of all in the here and now and in all that has gone before sustains us.

Joan Chittister makes the following statement in her book *Following the Path*:

As Emerson taught, life is a “progress,” a passage through time, “not a station,” never a stopping place. It is a progression of events that leads to insight, to self-knowledge, to the direction of the home within. One experience at a time, we begin to understand who we really are and what happiness really is for us. Then what the poet Emerson wrote becomes glaringly clear: “Life,” he said, “is a succession of lessons which must be lived to be understood.” (2012, p. 174)

Richard Rohr has a wonderful “Daily Meditation” that he shares with anyone who wishes to receive it via e-mail (<http://www.cacradicalgrace.org/richard-rohr/dailymeditations>). He often includes excerpts from one of his books that are very meaningful for our daily life that we find so full of distractions. I share with you here a recent excerpt from one day last week.

Prayer is not the avoidance of distractions, but precisely how you deal with distractions. Contemplation is not the avoidance of the problem, but a daily merging with the problem, and finding its full resolution. It is a way “to look over [our] shoulder” for God (the brilliant insight of the anonymous author of the 14th Century book, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Chapter 32).

The persistence of the distraction can actually steady your gaze, deepen your decision, and increase your freedom and desire for God and for grace—over “this” or “that”

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passing phenomenon. The “shoulders” of the distraction become your necessary vantage point, and they create the crosshairs of your seeing. What you quickly and humbly learn in contemplation is that *how you do anything is how you do everything*. (Adapted from *Contemplation in Action*, p. 18)

So often in our lives, we must take a moment and ask ourselves the critical question. “What do I need to let go of in this moment to be at peace?” When we are able to answer that question and act on it, we find that in knowing that our relationship with the Holy envelops us in love, we can embrace life and truly find that peace deep within.

### **CHALLENGES --- THE NEW COSMOLOGY AND EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY**

As suggested above, modern science and the scholarship of many fields are prompting critical examinations of many long held religious beliefs and doctrines. In just the last 50 years, astronomy has discovered that our universe began with the so-called "Big Bang explosion about 14.5 billion years ago. Moreover, our universe is still expanding. In other words, creation is still underway. Our universe consists of billions of galaxies and each galaxy consists of billions of stars. Our planet Earth, our special home, formed about 4.5 billion years ago. It is an ordinary sized planet that revolves around an ordinary star (our sun). Except for being "our sun," it is like billions upon billions of others stars.

We are awestruck by what has been revealed by the Hubble telescope and we should be. We are equally captivated by what particle physics tells us about the subatomic world, a world that is in us and all around us but completely invisible. John C. Lennox (2009) makes the following observation:

“In recent years science has been taking us on a journey full not only of surprises but also of mystery. Cosmology on an unimaginably large scale and elementary particle physics on the incredibly small scale, have gradually laid bare to us the spectacularly beautiful structure of the universe in which we live. Its sheer size makes us aware of our own tininess. On the linear scale of size, we are insignificant - speck of dust in a vast galaxy, which is itself, scarcely more than a speck in the universe ... [We exist] between the incredibly small and the incredibly large dimensions revealed to us by nuclear physics and astronomy, respectively. Just what are we human beings? And what is this universe? Is it really our home, or are we just tiny transient beings that it has happened to throw up as matter and energy, mindless to exploit the inherent potential in the laws of nature?

None of us faces these questions dispassionately. The universe is far too awe-inspiring for that. Nor do we face them disinterestedly. We cannot remain untouched by such questions - after all, we are here. And so our minds insist on asking about the nature of our relationship to the universe." (Pp. 58-59)

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As Lennox is suggesting, science is changing the way we think about ourselves and about our place in the universe. As we ponder these unavoidable questions, we may feel our religious and spiritual grounding shifting from under us.

The field of evolutionary biology describes and explains the origin of life on earth and how an evolutionary process generates multiple and diverse life forms, including our own species. Microscopic organisms appeared on our earth about 3.5 billion years ago. About 500 million years ago, during the Cambrian period, there was a dramatic increase in the number and complexity of life forms. The first mammals appeared about 55 million years ago and the ancestors of modern humans arose somewhere around 2 million years ago. Our own species, *Homo sapiens* (modern humans) appeared around 200,000 years ago. To offer another perspective, we can say that there have been approximately 10,000 generations of anatomically modern man and 100 generations since the birth of Christ and just 25 since the invention of the printing press. We humans have been around for only a small sliver of the earth's history. We are definitely the newcomers to our Earth. We did not evolve from chimpanzees but we share common ancestors. Our DNA is 98.4 % exactly like the chimps and 97.7 % like that of gorillas.

Most of us want to believe that we humans are very special and that the world could not possibly do without us. As a matter of fact, other highly developed forms of life managed without us for millions of years. On the other hand, maybe we are special; perhaps our earth and its life forms have been preparing for our arrival.

For individuals who are immersed in a religion that reads Genesis and other books of the Bible in a literal fashion, the new cosmology and evolutionary biology pose many intellectual and spiritual problems. In addition, advances in scriptural scholarship, theology, archaeology, and cultural anthropology yield new ways of understanding the social, religious, political, and cultural context of first century Palestine and the life and teachings of Jesus. These and still other domains of research challenge Christians to look more critically at their notions of God, their understanding of Jesus, and various Christian doctrines.

### ***A TIME OF SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS TRANSITION***

Thoughtful and sincere Christians feel caught up in an intellectual and religious transition between two stories: the traditional Christian story and what many now call the "New Story" which comes to us in large part from evolutionary biology, physics, and astronomy. The two stories evoke dramatically different reactions. The new story amazes and awes us. It invites us to see the world differently. It challenges us to change. It is conscious of the connectedness and togetherness of all that exists. The Christian story seems tethered to a static, dualistic, and mechanistic paradigm oblivious to the nature of the Cosmos, as we now know it. Framed in old forms and based on old presuppositions, many Christian prayers, practices, and doctrinal statements reflect neither the depths of time nor the expanding and evolving universe. At the same time and deep within, we Christians hold to our Christian roots and to the gospel story—the story of God's on-going love affair with humanity in which the divine breaks into human experience in tangible ways and invites us into covenanted relationship. We yearn for a new

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spirituality that is grounded in both stories. We look for a new way to develop a spirituality that honors both stories.

In order to effectively merge these two stories, we must address two major challenges: 1) develop a new consciousness grounded in the universe story and 2) bring our theology and our piety into sync with this new and enlarged framework.

### **Challenge #1: A new consciousness grounded in the *universe story*;**

Envisioned here is a shift in human consciousness that allows us to see with a wider lens and in a deeper way. This shift is already under way. For many reasons, we view reality—ourselves, each other, the created world, and God—from a perspective that is very different from what ours was say fifty years ago. And to the degree that we have integrated current cosmology into our worldview, we are able to acknowledge the togetherness of all things in the universe, such that each and every part is somehow connected to every other part.

In an insightful book titled *Making the Shift*, Elaine Prevallet, SL provides one way to articulate this new consciousness. She says "the human race is now beginning to understand itself as the universe becoming conscious of itself." (p. 6) For Pravallet, the phrase "the self-consciousness of the universe", refers to the evolutionary development of the human species to the point of possessing the capacity of self-awareness (I can be aware of my own thoughts and feelings; I can be aware that I am aware). But, she says, it implies an even larger dimension: I am the universe becoming conscious of itself as a universe. To make it more concrete, she says that "...when I am aware of our planet's evolutionary history, when I am aware that I have the same basic genes as a worm (in a more complex combination), when I know that the human fetus recapitulates the stages of development of life forms that preceded the human, when I know this, I am the universe conscious of itself." (p. 6) Clearly, this new way of thinking has yet to be integrated into the collective consciousness of our culture or our church, which is why we struggle to find the vocabulary with which to describe our experiences and to tease out implications of this change.

### **Challenge #2: Bring our faith and piety into sync with this new world view;**

It is one thing to embrace the new cosmology and the process of evolution. It is quite another thing to do the analysis/synthesis of ways in which we can think about God and God's work, of ourselves in relation to God, as well as creating the language we need to describe what it means to live in a cosmos that is continually evolving and developing. This promises to be a long and arduous task. But it is not entirely new and the work has already begun. For example, Jesuit priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1900-1955) wrote extensively on the spirituality and theology of evolution. Sadly, his Church could not accept his perspectives and his works were not published until after his death. Over the last few decades numerous theologians and spiritual writers made progress on blending the New Story with the Christian Story. (See the bibliography and suggested readings presented below.)

### **How might we see God and Jesus in an Evolutionary Universe?**

In the above sections we have attempted to describe why it is important to seek new ways of thinking about God, of understanding the life and teachings of Jesus, and understanding the Christian religion. Now we offer numerous statements, and perspectives that need to be considered in any construction of a new and more relevant spirituality and religious perspective.

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Every faith tradition calls forth spirituality and has its own mentor/model. With the collaboration of leaders representing many spiritual and religious traditions, Karen Armstrong has drafted the *Charter for Compassion*. Based on core messages drawn from all religious traditions and spiritualities, it calls us to live by the golden rule – to treat others as we wish to be treated.

For the Christian tradition, Jesus of Nazareth is our model, mentor, healer, and savior. For us, Jesus embodied the Divine Presence in human form and he too taught the same golden rule: Love one another as I have loved you.

We strive to follow the way of Jesus, the Christ. (Ilia Delio. [The Emergent Christ](#), pp 110)

"To be a disciple of Jesus is not to cling to Jesus but to go forth as part of the cosmic family, to enter into new relationships. The message of Jesus can be summed up in several key ideas: make wholes where there are divisions, forget the past and go forward, allow the Spirit to work in you to create a new future; do these things because God seeks a new presence in the cosmos, a new unity in love, peace and justice. Jesus shows us that new life is possible; indeed, the risen Christ is the hope of the cosmos, the Christ who is coming to be in and through us."

As followers and imitators of Jesus, we must continually examine what we believe about Jesus. For example, do we view Jesus as the one who "...came down from heaven, was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified and died for our sins, descended into hell, rose again and ascended into Heaven", a thirty three year experiment by God in history? Or might we view the life and teachings of Jesus as a peak moment in the history of God's ongoing creation, embodying the divine way of being human, representing the dawn of a new awareness, a new way of living that he names the Kingdom of God? If it is the latter, how do we reframe key elements such as God's relation to us, ongoing creation through evolution, our view of heaven and hell, original sin, and the Paschal Mystery? And how does it change the way we pray and live in community.

We believe our spirituality can only be genuinely healthy if it is based on *basic* truths that are in accord with the Christian story and continuously reflected on and renewed based on an ever-changing view of the universe. Here and now, we can begin our spiritual journey by building upon basic truths from the Christian story and relating them to the scientific and historical new world-view of today.

### ***Basic Truths of the Christian Story:***

- God is infinite
- God is everywhere
- God sustains all creation
- God is unconditional Love

### ***How do we see these truths fitting into our new universal view?***

1. Every one of us is permeated with God dwelling in us and sustaining us. We see God as one who creates, loves and sustains everything, rather than an Overseer who rewards and punishes.

2. We must see ourselves as dwelling places for the sacred that began with creation. We are each temples of God. We view creation as an ongoing evolutionary process of never ending creativity and transformation.

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3. Nature is part of God's creation and it is up to us to safeguard it and use it wisely. All that exists in the Universe is in some way intimately connected and interdependent. We who call this planet Earth our home are confronted with many enormously significant issues and concerns.

4. The Adam and Eve story is a metaphor that is no longer consistent with our new universe view. The concept of Original sin is now viewed by many theologians as our human condition, our primal instincts not yet totally sublimated by our consciousness.

5. The theology of atonement/redemption seems dissonant when viewed through the new story of the universe.- We see Jesus of Nazareth as being fully human. His example and teaching during his life provided an opportunity to image God differently as an all loving, caring and forgiving being. Jesus died for what he did and said during his lifetime. His condemnation and death was the result of his standing up and acting on his beliefs.

6. The gospels are clear that the work of Jesus of Nazareth was to proclaim and call forth "the kingdom of God." With St. Paul we believe Christ has been raised to new life and now permeates creation.

7. We are convinced that in Jesus of Nazareth we are shown the face of that Gracious Mystery we name God. We believe the gospel invites us into an on-going love affair with the Gracious Mystery we name God who creates and sustains us.

We embrace this Universe story and recognize glimmers of it in both Hebrew and Christian texts. In our experience the Christian story becomes even more meaningful as we grow in our appreciation of the Universe story. Together these stories give us a sound basis as we are moved to develop our own spirituality through reading, studying, meditation and contemplation. We offer many reading suggestions at the end of this document to assist in the development of a personal spirituality that sustains us.

### ***ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS ON DEVELOPING ONE'S SPIRITUALITY***

Everyone's spirituality is unique. It develops and changes over time. It is a reflection of one's whole being and is shaped by multiple factors such as our personality, temperament, age, culture, and especially our life experiences. Because spirituality is and must be unique, no one can select or design spirituality for another person.

One's spirituality reflects one's image of God. We recognize that the bible, presents us with many and sometimes contradictory images of God. This is especially true of the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, some passages present God as distant, angry, judgmental, and even war-like. By contrast, Jesus speaks of God as "Abba," the equivalent of a child calling out to "Daddy." We choose to view God as loving, compassionate, merciful, and forgiving.

We must be attentive to and conscious of the language we use when describing our experiences and images of God. For example, when a teacher of religion imagines God in exclusively male terms it is difficult not to devalue women in the process. When we think of God, as male it is easy to overlook the fact that all talk about God is necessarily metaphorical.

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When we speak of God in exclusively male terms we wrongly suppose that men are more God-like than women. (Dreyer. Making Sense of God, pp. 21-22)

Whenever we attempt to speak about God we need to remind ourselves that we are not describing God; at best we are using images and thoughts that grasp at insights. With these images and thoughts we build a mental model of what God is like. We need to be wary of supposing that our mental model is actually what God is. (Michael Morwood. Tomorrow's Catholic, p. 7)

A healthy spirituality is characterized by such qualities as self acceptance and self esteem; acceptance of others; love; friendship; hospitality; forgiveness; generosity; gratitude; willingness to learn and to change; tolerance of differences in others; patience; courage; joy and playfulness; faith and hope; perseverance, a sense of freedom; prayer and meditation; balance and variety. (Svoboda. Traits of a Healthy Spirituality, 1996).

Our spirituality should always recognize and respect the value of our interconnectedness, and interdependence of all people, all living creatures, and all of creation. John Chuchman, in one of his beautiful essays says "When Jesus said, 'before Abraham was, I am,' he was not proclaiming a special and exclusive Divinity, but a heartfelt recognition that in a very deep and real sense, we all share one life, one destiny."

While it is important to your spirituality to find time to renew your consciousness of the Divine within you with prayer, contemplation, meditation and education, it is equally important to understand that all that you do in your daily life is co-creation with the Divine and living life with all of its creativity and chaos is essential to your spirituality. The faithful laity for the most part spend their lives in a family or work environment that leaves them struggling to find time or space for formal prayer. It becomes important in these environs to consciously make every task, every responsibility, every act of service to others a partnered prayer with the Divine that dwells within.

We need to find ways in our daily life to be mindful of God's constant presence and co-creation with us. After completing a difficult task at work or a complex homework problem, or a difficult cleaning or fix-it task around the house, we need to stop and think about our interconnectedness to everything and of the Holy indwelling within each of us and take a moment to express our gratitude.

It is helpful to generate reminders in our busy daily life that help us find dedicated time to develop our spirituality. Placing a note on our mirror in the bathroom, setting the alarm on our android phone or tablet and making the time and taking the time to nourish our spirituality every day is a way of enhancing our personal spirituality.

In many respects, the development of our spirituality is a life long journey and in many ways, this inner journey of the soul is a one on one with the Divine. However, a genuine and lasting spirituality is difficult to develop outside of a supportive community composed of individuals who

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will both challenge us and offer guidance. Moore (Care of the Soul, 1992) underscores this point as he explains that: “Religions around the world demonstrate that spiritual life requires constant attention.... For good reason we go to church, temple, or mosque regularly and at appointed times: it's easy for consciousness to become lodged in the material world and forget the spiritual” (p.204).

We humans are fundamentally social and communal creatures. Thus, our spiritual journey and formation requires ongoing communication and interactions with others and active participation in a religious or spiritual community. When in active communication with others who are also on a spiritual journey we can more easily remain conscious of our own ideals and values and we are less likely to give up when our own spiritual journey becomes difficult or confusing. Perhaps we might form or join a prayer group, a Christian book group or a small Christian base community.

We need to renew our awareness of God’s presence within us by sharing and eating bread and drinking wine whether it happens during the Eucharistic celebration or at our daily dinner table.

We need to remind ourselves frequently that the Spirit alive within us is also in all of creation.

We are opening ourselves to this realization and appreciation and recognition that God is no more and no less within everyone and everything than within ourselves. Spirituality recognizes and respects the value, interconnectedness, and interdependence of all people, all living creatures, and all of creation. Taking time to immerse ourselves in nature in some way provides us with this reminder.

We need to be open to the many methodologies that may encourage spiritual growth and fit with our lifestyle. Contemplation and Meditation are significant in developing a sound and healthy spirituality. These sometimes scary words, contemplation and meditation that we typically attribute to the life of monks and mystics in essence are simply “a wordless, trusting, opening of self to the Divine presence.” Bourgeault (Centering Prayer, 2004). (p.5) Along with contemplation and meditation the study of other spiritual disciplines and religions is also of great benefit in developing your personal spirituality.

As Christians, we see Jesus as our model and mentor, fully human with the same temptations, worries, and crisis that we face in our lives. Let the stories and examples from scripture guide us in caring for our friends, those we might even consider enemies, the environment, the world, and the universe. When in doubt, ask what would Jesus do?

In those same stories we learn that Jesus’ life references more than once his absolute need to separate from his followers to find time for contemplation and prayer so that he could be nourished by a One-on-One communion with the Spirit. This was as necessary to him as breathing so that he could go forth and continue his life giving ministry. Renewing ourselves in this manner is equally beneficial in developing our own personal spirituality.

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A reading of the gospels makes it quite clear that Jesus was not especially concerned with religious beliefs or doctrine. He was, in fact, often critical of those religious beliefs that had the effect of excluding people from the community and of doctrines that crushed peoples' spirit. He was primarily concerned with how people treated each other and especially with how those who are poor and devalued are treated by those having wealth and power.

As Christians, the life and teachings of Jesus show us a better way of living; a way that can save us from the life destroying forces of violence, selfishness, greed, envy, and dishonesty. He modeled for us a life imbued with the Spirit centered on love of neighbor. Thus, we strive to be loving, compassionate, caring, forgiving, and honest in all of our relationships.

In addition to Jesus as model and mentor, it is always wise to look around us for models. There are many "saints" and "prophets" within our midst that can guide us by their Jesus like words and actions and assist in our development of our own personal spirituality.

Some years ago, our now retired pastor recommended as a Lenten exercise that we develop our own personal "Creed". It was an extraordinary exercise that became very meaningful in the sense that it teased out our "true faith", (what we actually believed). We would recommend it to everyone in the process of developing their own spirituality. Over the years, revisit what you have written and continue to tweak that "Creed" as your spirituality evolves.

As we develop our spirituality we will find ourselves more in tune with social and economic justice for all people and we begin to care for and provide service to others. This is a deeply rooted and significant measure of our spirituality.

As faithful laity, with a fully engaged spirituality, we have a right to full, conscious and active participation in our Church's liturgical life. As Catholic Christians we know that liturgy, especially the Eucharist, is the source and summit of our spirituality. Denial of this right leads to a denial of our deepest sense of our spiritual selves. History has proven and continues to prove that denial of the laity to fully engage in all aspects of the life of the church be it liturgical, administrative, organizational or financial, leads to a church that has little life in it to engage with any story of the universe.

Developing an attitude of gratefulness for all that is, fosters healthy spiritual growth. Through all that comes along in life, we must remember that evolution has brought us to stand on two feet so that we are easily able to extend our hands upwards in gratitude for all of life.

Perhaps we can discover our spirituality within every moment of each day, smelling the spirit as we wake to morning air, tasting the spirit as we break our fast, feeling the power of the spirit as we live out our passions, touching the spirit as we hug a friend or say hello to a stranger, renewing our spirit as we sit at night looking up to the immense universe, strengthening our spirit by sharing our gifts at every opportunity. And assuredly celebrating the spirit each time we gather with one or more.

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These are just a few thoughts towards developing a personal spirituality. And as we continue to evolve, this document and spirituality itself are subject to that same evolutionary development. Each of us moves along the path of faith filled spirituality on our own and develops at our own pace. We hope you will find something within this document that will resonate with you and will help you in your search of your own personal spirituality.

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