

Lay spirituality and the layperson's call to bring Christ into the world

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By Sister Mary Garascia

Did you know that in English, the word “set” has the most meanings – 430 of them? In fact, many words have extensive meanings, including spirituality.

At its most basic, spirituality means a worldview and way of life based on belief that there is more to life than our material body and our lifetime. For Christians, that means belief in a spiritual self (the soul) and an eternal relevance to our existence (heaven). But “spirituality” is used in lots of other ways. It can reference a historical period (“medieval spirituality”), a type of prayer (liturgical spirituality), geography (Eastern Catholic spirituality), or world religions (Hindu spirituality). In Catholicism many spiritualities flow from religious orders (Ignatian, Carmelite, etc.), and there also are many “subsets” (women’s spirituality, creation spirituality, African American spirituality). And of course, there also is “my spirituality,” particular elements of spirituality that I choose over others because they best support my own faith relationship with God and others.

A newcomer in our Catholic realm is “lay spirituality.” To provide some history: during the centuries before Vatican II (1962-1965), the spiritual life of non-ordained or lay persons was mostly seen as less holy or noble than that of priests, and also that of religious who, though not ordained, took special vows and were not married. Sexual behavior was regarded as especially “worldly” or unholy.

Little breakthroughs in this picture started in the 19th and first half of the 20th century. For example, Vincent Pallotti described the mission of the Church as a collaborative and complementary effort which needed the participation of the laity, and St. John Henry Newman called for an educated laity who could explain their faith to others. Theologians in the first half of the 20th century taught that baptism, not ordination, is the foundation of discipleship, and spoke of the Church as the body of Christ or people of God rather than as a hierarchical institution. Lay movements spread from Europe using the simple “see-judge-act” method, which enabled non-ordained people of all ages and classes to analyze their situations and apply Gospel values to them.

Vatican II used these ideas and others to teach about the calling and role of non-ordained members of the Church. Its most central teaching is that laity belong in and are responsible for the world. In other words, the lay person’s relationship with the world is their path to holiness. If that sounds simplistic, it actually isn’t.

In scripture, the world is both good and bad. God says “it is good” after each moment of creation, and John’s Gospel has that well-loved passage “God so loved the world...” But John’s Gospel also describes the world as a darkness into which light finally came. The New Testament “world” was the realm of evil powers and devils, hostile to the kingdom of God. The earliest forms of religious life were hermits and early monasticism, both flights from the world.

By contrast, Vatican II saw the world as problematic but also with potential to grow ever more fully into the kingdom Jesus talked about. Helping this happen is the mission of the non-ordained, called to bring Christ into every secular realm: service industries, politics, business (including wealth and finances), and everything else in or related to the realm of lay daily life and work.

This “bringing Christ into” the world happens in many ways. It happens through relationships in the work world, in conversations, in

the small but important ways of being loving in our work situations. It happens in the reflection we do to figure out “what Jesus would do” in situations that bring conflict or that can compromise our values. It happens when lay persons participate with others in complex actions to bring about changes in systems or laws or organizations, so that they better promote the common good. The bottom line is that every lay person, whether a boss or an employee, has the same call: to help the Spirit infuse the world with the light of Christ, and through doing that grow in personal holiness.

If the foundational characteristic of lay spirituality is that it is worldly spirituality, its next most important characteristic is generativity. Lay persons produce and form the next generation of holy lay people. For many lay persons, that means marriage and family life, whose joys and challenges are another path to holiness for them. That said, of course there are other ways that lay people are generative and help with forming the next generation of disciples of Christ.

It seems to me that as a Church, we could be better at assisting non-ordained Catholics to integrate faith and their everyday lives in families, the work world and the local and global world community. Although Vatican II promoted this integration, in 1975 Pope Paul VI invited lay Catholics to help pastors serve the ecclesial community. This invaluable and necessary service is now very prominent. Although it also is a graced path, it should not distract from the mission of lay spirituality.

A typical parish does offer some support for lay spirituality. I think of Marriage Encounter or Matrimonials, Small Faith Communities, some movements like “Better World,” some aspects of organizations like Knights of Columbus, social justice committees. But programs miss so many people. We miss those with irregular work schedules, those who do not attend Church regularly, those whose past educational experiences make joining these programs intimidating.

I certainly do not have many solutions, but perhaps a few things might be considered. More people will visit Churches during the Lent/Easter season, so preachers might look for links between liturgical readings and the call of the laity. Confessors might suggest penances that invite reflection on family life, work and civic responsibility. Parishes might choose a lay spirituality “giveaway” for Easter services. Catechistical leaders might check textbooks to see whether lay spirituality is adequately discussed at every level. The internet could be used. Perhaps devotional groups could be invited to include a “see, judge, act” methodology. And there could be a lay spirituality committee to add better ideas to this list!

Our world desperately needs the holiness of lay spirituality. It needs the infusion of virtue and belief that ordinary people carry with them into the everyday environments in which they move. Healthy lay spirituality can be a remedy for the invasive individualism and secularism of our culture. Supporting the mission of lay persons in the world must be one of the essential ministries of our Church.

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