

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN
THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF
YOUNG PEOPLE

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I distinguish between the RECORD of what the Church has achieved and the VISION of what the Church might achieve.

In terms of spiritual development we may wish to distinguish between:

- (a) membership scalps or pew fodder - those on the role,
- and
- (b) those on the spiritual pilgrimage.

I want to side-step all talk of spirituality as some kind of ennoblement of the human psyche, or alertness to the world beyond ourselves, or even to some form of latterday mysticism. Even less I avoid the idea of self - indulgent pietism from within the Christian Church - and not from doctrinaire reasons - the vision and the goal is specifically Christian.

I want to develop this point because I believe that much of what is rejected by young people is not the kind of Christianity that anyone would care to commend.

If I must speak of CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY then I mean that experience which focuses on the communion we have with God in Christ, and the ways in which that communion is initiated, maintained, and improved.

I also have to insist that a true Christian spiritual awareness is by no means confined to the "interior life". Such a notion is too limiting to do justice to a spirituality inspired by God incarnate in Jesus Christ.

The word SPIRITUALITY I take as recognising that the way we are with ourselves, and the way we are with other people, depends on the way we are with God. I cannot equate spirituality with disengagement or with other-worldliness. Indeed, other-worldliness can be the antithesis of a spirituality based on incarnation - Word made flesh - God with us.

There may be many kinds of 'other-worldliness' ranging from a complete detachment from day to day affairs to a total absorption into the trivia of living for the moment. For example, I look at the other-worldliness of suburbia ! There, we see a selective engagement and disengagement. We see personalised religion sometimes at the cost of effective discipleship. I believe it is important to distinguish between the affluent, leisured classes, where "spirituality" is a valued part of the private sector of life, from the other-worldliness often manifested in oppressed groups. In the latter, the disengagement is a prelude to radical action. For example, in the United States, negro spirituals and singing the blues turned out to be the crucible for the civil rights movement. In the same way, George MacLeod's Iona experiences of retreat and contemplation were designed to equip people for radical action in the hurly burly of society.

As a Christian educator, I am interested in this question of designing growth or learning experiences in the realm of spiritual awareness and engagement - and I shall return to this. First of all I suggest that there is nothing anodyne about Christian spirituality - nothing quiescent, nothing which suggests complacency or apathy.

I offer three criteria for truly Christian spirituality.

1. It should be INCARNATIONAL

It has to do with God's love manifest in all aspects of human existence - inspired by, and modelled upon, Jesus Christ. One of the twentieth century's great models of Christian spirituality was Dietrich Bonhoeffer and we recall how he wrote of Jesus as being "the man for others" - and called on Christians to be men and women for others.

2. Christian spirituality should be REDEMPTIVE.

A more contemporary word for redemption might be LIBERATION. Christian spirituality is always directed toward the freedom of individuals and communities from political, social and psychological oppression, corruption and injustice. Redemption or liberation is all about the rebuilding of lives and new beginnings - and this is ever a pressing concern of the spiritually aware person.

3. Christian spirituality is ORIENTED TOWARD THE KINGDOM OF GOD
- the reign of God - the sovereign influence of God in the lives of men and women.

This calls for attitudes focused on the purposes of God - and so, for a sense of VOCATION. And from this volition to serve God in serving others stems the action and activity of Christian discipleship. And all this flows from a consciousness, an awareness, of the God who is both author and finisher of all life.

These criteria, taken together, require us to take seriously the socio-political context in which we live our lives.

It may call us to immerse ourselves to engage in struggle on behalf of those who are oppressed, disadvantaged, overwhelmed, disheartened or whose progress is impeded or frustrated through injustice. This simply reminds us that reconciliation, harmony and peace are by no means the sole aims of Christian activity.

Also in this context we can say that the spiritual life is in no sense static. It is not a state of being: it is a process - an engagement - directed toward the future. Christian spirituality is forward looking and is motivated by a sort of "sanctified discontent". Those who are caught up in Christianity are impelled to refuse to be at ease but are involved in something approaching "holy disobedience".

Consider these quotes:

- 1st "The fact remains that people who are living in need are fully and properly provided for."

2nd "How can I make you believe the misery of the poor ?
How can I make you understand that your wealth comes
from their weeping ?"

The 1st quote is from Margaret Thatcher speaking on 22nd December 1983.

The 2nd is from St Basil, sixteen hundred years ago.

The state of the poor is always of crucial importance for spirituality.

These insights are succinctly summarised in the Beatitudes taught by Jesus.

"Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor;
the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them !
Happy are those who mourn;
God will comfort them !
Happy are those who are humble;
they will receive what God has promised !
Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires;
God will satisfy them fully !
Happy are those who are merciful to others;
God will be merciful to them !
Happy are the pure in heart;
they will see God !
Happy are those who work for peace;
God will call them his children !
Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God
requires;
the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them !
Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you
and tell all kinds of lies against you
because you are my followers.
Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven.
This is how the prophets who lived before you were persecuted."

Here is the fusion and the praxis of the life of awareness and reflection and the life of action and servanthood.

When I think of spirituality in these terms I see a lifestyle that is both attractive and challenging to many a teenager. This is the opportunity that all too often the churches are missing. Once again I turn to Bonhoeffer writing from a Gestapo prison cell:

"What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed, who Christ really is for us today."

To ask that kind of question is to be spiritually alive.

And so, at last, I come to the question of the Church's role in all this. More specifically, I ask the question:

Can spirituality be taught ?

or

Is it caught rather than taught ?

I believe it is both caught and taught. Not taught in text book fashion but by experience and reflection, and through role modelling, and through an educational process which is open and which encourages the valuing of justice and peace.

The process of spiritual development can be facilitated (I don't mean contrived) through appropriate rites of passage. A proper understanding of how these transitions operate would be of enormous value to the Church in shaping its future policy in its work among teenagers. We need to provide for the passage of our young people from one stage to another and to help them mark and chart that journey for themselves.

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