

Spirituality and the parish

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WE SOMETIMES LOOK ON SPIRITUALITY AS SOMETHING esoteric, reserved for people of a religious disposition. Nothing could be further from the truth! The spiritual is simply one dimension of our being human persons. It is something we all share. It is our ability to see beneath the surface of life, to discern deeper meaning under the veneer of everyday experience. Gerard Manley Hopkins spoke of seeing ‘deep down things’. The spiritual is as much part of us as all the other dimensions of our being human.¹

It is true, of course, that we may not always be in touch with our spiritual dimension. That is not surprising, since the same is true of the other dimensions of our being. We are bodily persons and yet can be blind to much of the richness of bodily presence and touch. We are also social persons and yet, in our highly individualistic society, we may not recognize just how interdependent we are and how crucial the social realm is in our everyday lives.

Similar cultural factors can drown our spiritual dimension too – the speed and noise of modern living, the emphasis on instant gratification purveyed by advertising in our consumer society, the tendency to see ourselves atomistically as individuals among other disconnected individuals, the postmodern rejection of any meaning and purpose common to human life.

Yet the spiritual in us is so deep-rooted it does not drown that easily. Paradoxically, the very factors which threaten it also cause it to struggle to the surface and fight for survival. In fact, these days spirituality seems to be making a strong come-back. This is in marked contrast to the diminishing popularity of institutional religion, especially in those churches with more formal and highly-organized structures of worship and rules for living.

Is our spiritual hunger fed by parish life and worship?

In pondering the question of the ‘refounding’ and therefore the future of the Church, I want to ask whether there is a mismatch between our spiritual dimension and the life and worship experienced in most parishes today. Even when we are in touch with our deepest spiritual

hunger, do we find that hunger being fed by our parish life today or do we find ourselves searching elsewhere for sustenance?

Many people do not find their spiritual hunger satisfied by what they experience in their parishes each week. Admittedly, that is a vast generalization and I am not making this assertion on any formal analysis of research material. Nor am I wanting to suggest that it is true of every parish and certainly not of everything going on within each of our parishes. I am simply suggesting that for many people for much of the time their spiritual hunger is not being satisfied by much of what they experience in their parishes.

If this is true, it could make us look at the drift away from regular church-going in a different light. Such a drift might not be indicative of a weakening faith on the part of many parishioners. Something similar might be said with regard to young people. The widespread absence of this age-group in our churches today need not necessarily be interpreted as a lack of spirituality among them. After all, they are human persons as much as the rest of us. They too have a spiritual dimension deep in their beings. Modern youth are not a new breed, lacking any spiritual dimension. Perhaps, their very evident non-presence in our churches might suggest that they too do not experience the presence of the spiritual in parish life and worship.

In raising these questions I am aware that there is a danger of confusing the popular with the truly spiritual or genuinely religious. We are not in the game of audience-ratings. The answer to diminishing congregations is not full churches, however attractive that prospect might be to many church people. Dwindling congregations, fewer and ageing priests are only a symptom of a much deeper problem. I do not believe that the problem is that the Gospel has lost its appeal. It might be that the appeal of the Gospel is not being heard. And that might be because it is not being communicated.

A dichotomy between spirituality and religion

But that cannot be the solution either – to blame the priests for not doing their job. I would like to suggest that the real underlying problem we are facing has something to do with a dichotomy between spirituality and religion in today's world. The spiritual dimension is woven into the very texture of people's everyday lives. It is not an extra ingredient, an add-on factor. In religious practice people should feel that the down-to-earth integrity of their everyday lives is being acknowledged and celebrated. Down-to-earth gives the clue. What is celebrated is not just some esoteric, quasi-mystical dimension of their

lives. It is much more mundane than that. It involves all the nitty-gritty, ambiguity and glory that makes up their multi-dimensional everyday lives. The spiritual, the deep-downness referred to by Gerard Manley Hopkins, is only one dimension of this richness.

Could a major part of the problem be that many people imagine they are doing something 'extra' when they come to church – something over and above their everyday lives? The truth surely is really quite different. It is primarily in their day-to-day lives that many people encounter God – not in some 'religious bit'. This is brought out by Margaret Rogers in a recent *Catholic pictorial* article.² She writes about a young woman, Jenny, in her mid-twenties with three children under six whom she looks after on her own. Her partner prefers to go out with his mates for a drink. She gets virtually no help from the rest of the family, seeing little of her brothers, and having to attend to her mother who has some form of mental illness. One of her children has a chronic medical condition needing frequent hospital visits. So Jenny has to cope with awkward bus journeys, made more difficult by having the other toddler in tow and by long waits at the clinic. Money is very short and future prospects are poor.

Each day she got the little ones ready, walked them to school, returned home, out again to take the middle child to toddler group, shopped or returned home with the baby. Before she had time to think she was back again to collect him. Often one or more of the children would be fractious, one might be ill, or the weather might be bad. Time spent with the children and the constant demands that little ones make, the whole gamut of household chores and seeing to her mother filled her days, week in week out, month in month out. Some days she ached just for a bit of time and space for herself, for a bit of variety and a chance to do something different.

Jenny is not a church-goer and knows little about the Gospels or creeds ('I'm not into that kind of thing'). She would certainly not look on herself as a 'holy' person. She simply accepts the hardship of her life and gets on with it with real faithfulness and commitment. She has no 'head' knowledge of God and only names him as an expletive.

What an apparently dismal life! Margaret Rogers fully appreciates its hardness and drudgery. But she also sees the 'deep down' wonder of Jenny's life. Her words make this point much more convincingly than any of mine:

If we substitute the word ‘Love’ for God (‘God is Love and anyone who dwells in Love dwells in God and God dwells in him/her’) then it looks a very different picture. Jenny had plenty of knowledge of God but it was a knowledge gained through the heart and through her life experience. Each day as she ‘denied herself and took up her cross daily’ she entered ever deeper into the life and mystery of Love (God). Jenny’s story is that of so many people in our society, who in hidden ways, behind closed doors, live out a life of love, commitment and dedication. A wise woman friend of mine once said: ‘Parenthood is the way we ordinary people find out what Love (God) is all about.’ It can take us to the sharp edge of self-sacrifice and self-denial in a way that little else in life can.

Margaret is suggesting that the stuff of really profound spirituality is there in abundance in Jenny’s life. The tragedy is that she is being given no help in recognizing the miracle of her tremendous self-sacrifice or in being able to see that in this self-sacrifice God’s love is in her and she in God.

It should be part of the Church’s role to give her this help. It is tragic that the Church seems unable to respond to her need. If only the words and actions of its liturgy were sufficiently in tune with the nitty-gritty of her ordinary, everyday life, they would enable Jenny to recognize that her daily round is, in fact, ‘holy ground’ and the deep presence of God is there. Sadly, that is not the case at present and Jenny is being deprived of that sense of her own dignity and goodness.

Bridging the chasm

Jenny’s story, typical of so many, brings out just how wide is the chasm between spirituality and religion. How can that massive chasm be bridged?

Margaret has given voice to the profound spiritual dimension in Jenny’s life. In the light of the gospel she has interpreted the ‘deep down’ profundity of Jenny’s apparently dismal and hopeless life. In so doing Margaret has probably helped many people like Jenny to find meaning and dignity in all the hardship of their lives. Knowing Margaret, I suspect that Jenny herself will have been helped too, since Margaret will only have attained the insight she has shared as a result of a lot of rich mutual listening and sharing between herself and Jenny.

What about Jenny’s parish – and the parishes of the many other Jennys in our world? In an ideal world, Jenny should be able to find in her parish the encouragement and inspiration she has received from

Margaret. At present that does not seem to be the case. Could Margaret's article help to change that situation? No and yes! No, if it is simply read as an interesting piece and then laid aside. Yes, if it helps to initiate a process in a parish whereby the everyday lives of people are listened to as 'holy ground' where God is encountered. To be listened to in this way, people need to be empowered to give voice to the experience of their everyday lives 'in the assembly of the faithful'. That in itself is no easy thing to achieve. And those listening need to listen with antennae finely tuned to recognizing the presence of God 'deep down' within the life experiences they are privileged to hear. Such discernment may be a rare gift in a parish and one that needs to be fostered and made available for the benefit of the parish as a whole.

Parish liturgy and everyday life

Even if this process is going on within a parish, how can the spiritual profundity of everyday life accessed in this way find its way into the celebration of the parish liturgy? After all, it is from the celebration of the liturgy that parishioners should hope to draw inspiration, encouragement and hope for their lives. How can the rich vein of spirituality latent in Jenny's life come to be celebrated in the liturgy of her parish? Unless that can be achieved the Vatican II ideal of 'full and active participation' in the liturgy will be meaningless.

The problem with our liturgy is that it tends to be celebrated as if it was taking place on a higher plane than everyday life, certainly not the plane on which Jenny is living her life. So the bidding prayers are more down-to-earth, though even they tend to be focused on issues of more general and even international concern. And the homily provides an opportunity to flesh out the meaning of God's words in terms of everyday life. Yet, sadly it is an opportunity we priests rarely make the most of – our words are often up in the air and rarely connect with the 'down-to-earth' lives of people like Jenny. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that a combination of celibacy and clerical culture leaves us largely out of touch with the nitty-gritty of most people's everyday lives.

I have no secret formula for making our liturgies the life-celebrating and liberating experiences they should be for people like Jenny. We priests tend to blame the intransigence of liturgical law. Maybe that is an excuse we hide behind. After all, the Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states very clearly:

The Church very much wants all believers to be led to take a full, conscious and active part in liturgical celebration. This is demanded by the nature of the liturgy itself . . . This full and active sharing on the part of the whole people is of paramount concern in the process of renewing the liturgy and helping it to grow, because such sharing is the first, and necessary, source from which believers can imbibe the true Christian spirit.³

That provides the over-riding principle for our interpretation of more specific liturgical law in parish life. In other words, how we interpret every other liturgical law in parish situations is to be judged by whether it helps or hinders ‘a full, conscious and active sharing’ in the situation we are dealing with.

And ‘sharing’ here means more than being given a specific function in the liturgy. It is about whether our everyday lives are named, celebrated and inspired by the liturgy. A liturgy could be rubrically perfect and yet in gross violation of this basic principle. If sharing at this profound level is impeded by the legal inflexibility of liturgical texts, then such inflexibility must take second place. Likewise, if ‘full, conscious and active sharing’ is impeded by laws forbidding someone like Margaret to feed the congregation by her inspired insights into the word of God and its impact on everyday life, then the respect we owe to these laws must give way before our respect for the congregation’s need for the word of God to satisfy their spiritual hunger. Respect for the homily as applying God’s word to the realities of everyday life demands competence in being able to understand and interpret God’s revealed word. That is why a priest is given professional training at this level. But what about competence in the nitty-gritty of everyday living and being able to discern this as a sacred place for encountering God? Most of us priests lack proper competence at this level, whereas some lay people are particularly gifted in this way. Does not the principle of ‘full, conscious and active sharing’ in the liturgy demand that parishioners are not denied the rich interpretation of their lives in the light of God’s word that such gifted lay people are able to give?

Speaking God’s revelation

As an example of such a homily, let me instance the following passage taken from a letter I received a few years ago from a close friend of mine, Paula, at whose wedding I had officiated. She was writing from Australia, describing the wonder of their first child,

Simon, and how he had revealed so much to her and her husband, Ian, about the presence of God in their lives:

The miracle is that a small, dependent baby has the power to teach us what love is all about. All of this he does without words, simply by looks, gazes and touches. The first thing he learnt to do was smile. That struck me as saying something about our need to communicate – our need to feel related to each other. Among the gifts a baby brings is the gift of joy. It's infectious and wonderful.

They have the gift of revelation. They reveal both the human and the eternal. I watch Ian and Simon and in that process Ian's tenderness, gentleness, strength and vulnerability is revealed. It is as if a baby allows us to be truly ourselves. They accept and give unconditionally from the word 'go'. That is liberating for those who are privileged to have them in their lives and share their journey with them.

So babies reveal something of the human in men and women. And our great God is in all this, calling us to grow, give and receive graciously.

I am continually confronted with this thought:– if we, with all our limitations and petty insecurities, can love so much, and simply ache with tenderness and be driven with a desire to nurture, how great is our God's love. That's mind-blowing, wonderful and freeing. So perhaps for the first time in my life I feel this deep and powerful sense of being connected to our creator God. I have begun to comprehend the unconditional love our God lavishes on us.

We know that through the gift that is Simon, our God is calling us to love and not to count the cost, to be dependent and to know no fear, to accept ourselves and one another, to bask in our God's love and know the peace that brings. Parenthood is a gifted, wonderful and challenging experience – and an incredibly humbling one.

I read that letter out as my homily on one occasion. I suspect that the parishioners listened as they had never listened before – or since! I have received some further letters (potential homilies) from my friend, a beautiful one on the continuing revelation involved in parenting (they now have two children) and a very challenging one on married priests (three of the last four priests in her parish have married). They are both written with enormous wisdom and love, but sadly space does not permit . . .

I am not advocating liturgical anarchy in our parishes! I am simply suggesting that observance of liturgical law should be faithful to the fundamental liturgical principle of 'full, conscious and active sharing'. Liturgical inflexibility can dehumanize parish liturgy and so can be in

serious violation of that basic principle. Such inflexibility only widens the chasm between the spiritual and the religious. Writing about this in an earlier book,⁴ among a variety of pointers for the blueprint of a Vatican II parish I suggested that such a parish should be:

. . . a parish in which creativity and imagination (neither of which is synonymous with gimmickry) are used in a spirit of responsible freedom in the preparation and celebration of the liturgy so that it resonates with whatever is affecting people most profoundly in their lives or is of deep concern to the community as a whole;

. . . a parish which feels not only free but even obliged to bend the letter of liturgical law in order to achieve its authentic spirit, even when this involves such practices as general absolution and the careful adaptation or even composition of eucharistic prayers for particular occasions.

Spirituality, parish and local context

I began writing this article when Liverpool Archdiocese was just beginning a consultative process to discern its key priorities as well as those of each parish and deanery. To kick-start this process all parishioners were given a leaflet listing twenty-four pastoral priorities (resulting from two earlier clergy meetings) and asked to select their top three, adding others if they so wished. The heading on the leaflet gave the first draft of a mission statement for the Archdiocese:

The mission of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Liverpool: To be faithful to the mandate of the Lord Jesus to evangelize: ‘Go into the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.’ (Mk 16,15)

At an earlier clergy meeting this draft mission statement was criticized as too general and rather anodyne. Despite its Gospel language, there was nothing in it to arouse enthusiasm or put fire in the belly. It could apply equally well to any diocese in the whole world. It was totally a-cultural. It did not speak specifically to that part of the God’s world embraced by the boundaries of the Liverpool Archdiocese.

This brings out very clearly the need for the spirituality of a parish to be contextualized. It needs to be tuned into life, if it is to be tuned in to the call of God coming from the midst of life. This is not something that can be done easily. It requires a lot of listening, especially listening to those who experience this particular culture/society or the church in this specific locality as depressive and dehumanizing – and often these voices are stifled and not easily heard. It also requires a positive attitude

of appreciation and celebration, recognizing human goodness wherever it is found, even sometimes in the most surprising places, and seeing the grace of God present and at work there. One of the most beautiful things I read in a collection of parish reports from various dioceses was written by the priest in an area where the numbers of Catholics had dwindled dramatically and yet the parish as a liturgical centre had burst into new life through being open to celebrate the ‘spiritual’ in the lives of the people in the neighbourhood:

Increasingly, our parish ritualizes the important events in the lives of individuals and in the life of the whole community, is a refuge for those of any religion or none who are in need, a place where celebrations of all kinds take place to which all are invited. It is becoming an agent for toleration, integration and love with the whole community and a pointer to the wider world outside. It has ceased to be a ‘chaplaincy for Roman Catholics’.

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NOTES

1 Kevin T. Kelly, *New directions in moral theology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992), ch 3.

2 *Catholic pictorial*, 4 February 2001.

3 Norman Tanner (ed and trans), *Decrees of the ecumenical councils* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990) II, p 824.

4 Kevin T. Kelly, *From a parish base: essays in moral and pastoral theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999).