

Method in Spirituality. SACEC Winter Series July 24

Spirituality sums up our living as integrated biological, sensitive, thinking, deciding and loving people. It is about how we bring together the various aspects of our lives, get our personal 'ducks in a row,' align what we do with what we know and believe, how we relate to everyone and everything else – family, friends, neighbours, the universe and God. This is spirituality.

Too many of us feel that Catholicism has lost its creative energy and credibility in the face of a changing world outside and scandals within. We are hanging on to a spirituality and theology that barely make sense while our organisational structures are outdated.

Could we achieve our spiritual goals more deliberately and with clearer awareness of progress or otherwise, using our own God-given personal resources, abilities and skills? How do we claim agency in our spiritual journey? Is there a way of living intentionally that is faithful to the mission, values and vision of Jesus and the scriptures, is nurtured by our rich Christian tradition and matures in the milieu of modern living?

I believe there is such a method, innate in all of us that does not rely on uncritical acceptance of what others (authorities) tell us. The following notes set out some relevant issues.

1. Getting our true bearings. The heart and soul of Christianity, of the vision, message and life of Jesus, is in personal integrity and care for one another. "Love God and love your neighbour." The meaning of the traditional word, 'holy' is now better understood as integrity, authenticity, being genuine. 'God acts through secondary causes, including people' (Denis Edwards). Being close to God is being close to people, being authentic human beings. Loving is about caring and the quality of our relationships.
2. The process of living. During childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, much of our growing was through accepting the authority and credibility of others. We gradually took more responsibility for our decisions until we were independent and took control and responsibility for ourselves. How did we do that? Without ceasing to listen to others, we attended more to our own experience, learned how to make sense of it, work out what is real and come to our own perspectives on life. We looked for worthwhile goals (often unconsciously), assessed their value, the pros and cons, and decided and chose what we thought good for us and others. Then, with a sense of being true to ourselves, we acted. Similarly, Richard Rohr refers to the two halves of life in terms of a container and its contents. See also 1 Cor 13:11, "When I was a child"
3. A natural human method. This pattern of activities or operations is inherent in humans. At heart, it is the method of science. Begin with data, what is observed, form a theory or hypothesis that makes sense of the experience, and test the theory, hypothesis, the idea or insight. If the explanation stands up to scrutiny, consider its value in a relevant

field – everyday living, primary production, manufacturing, further experimentation, etc. If it is judged to be worthwhile, do it.

The discovery and implementation of this method of systematic thinking sparked and empowered the science revolution. It is grounded in experience (external and internal), concrete data, and is applicable to all knowing and doing.

4. Method. Here is a brief overview of the method (pattern) proposed by Bernard Lonergan for spirituality, based on the structure of our interior, psychological operations.

Be attentive. Be mindful. Notice what is happening now. Pay attention to the moment, to the experience as it occurs – sensations, sounds, sights, in nature, in prayer, church, unexpected moments, in conversation. What is the experience, the facts, the data and the signs of the times.

Be intelligent. Use your head! Understand what is happening. Make sense of the experience. Get the idea. Notice how parts fit together. What do the facts suggest? How do I make sense of certain experiences? The penny drops - you 'get' it. You form a theory, hypothesis or concept to explain the experience, data, facts.

Be reasonable. Don't jump to conclusions. There may be more than one apparent solution. Need to go back and check the facts, the evidence and the data. Am I correct? Is this real or true?

Be responsible. Make decisions and act on what you know. Is this something worthwhile? Is there a value at stake here? But what are the options? What do I base my decisions on? Feelings play a role here. Check out the options and decide. I must choose, commit to a particular action!

Love and be in love. Love (and caring) takes us beyond ourselves. We become 'entangled' with another with their perspectives, desires and needs. 'I' becomes 'we.' The matter is out of our hands to an extent. We feel drawn to an experience or commitment beyond our normal horizons. "There is in the world, as it were, a charged field of love and meaning; here and there it reaches a notable intensity; but it is ever unobtrusive, hidden, inviting us to join. And join we must if we are to perceive it, for our perceiving is through our own loving." (Lonergan)

5. Interiority. While 2. above is a valid method in both the natural and human sciences, (e.g. physics and psychology) there are important differences. Humans have feelings, psychic sensitivities and self-awareness that the things studied by the natural sciences do not have. In the human sciences, we are part of the action. Ignatius Loyola highlighted the importance of attending to interior dispositions and 'movements' in his reflections on 'discernment of spirits.'
6. Creating a better world. Joseph Cardijn promoted the 'See-Judge-Act' method. His concern seemed to be primarily on formation through engagement with the external

world, social justice, community and political issues. This concern for the external world, and its implications for formation, are central to the method proposed here.

7. Lonergan's method takes a more basic and broader approach. It is based on the patterns (structures) to our experiencing, thinking, reasoning, deciding and reaching out beyond ourselves, that are built into us. Understanding these structures and responding to the demands they make on us for authenticity provide sure guides for genuine human living and a system or method to work with.
8. Each person's spirituality is unique. Traditionally, it was assumed that there is another 'purely spiritual' world of immediacy with God, where perfect bliss, harmony and love prevail. Much of Catholic spirituality and theology focused on implementing that 'world' on Earth. We now realise that we can have no particular knowledge of or access to such a world. It is like imagining there is a perfect way to bring up children when in fact the personalities and set of relationships are unique for every family. Even with all the wisdom and planning we can muster, each family has to create itself anew.
9. Authority. Authority is legitimate power; power is based on cooperation – whether offered as free informed consent or compelled in open or implied ways. As we grow, develop and mature, we become authorities in our own living to a greater or lesser extent. We can choose to give it away, passively allowing others to take it, or we can claim it for ourselves. In former times it was acceptable to refer to lay Catholics as sheep. The sheep have now morphed into adult, educated, thinking people, capable of acting on our own authority and taking responsibility for our own lives.
10. Small groups. People seem to be at their best in small groups where they can combine integrity in what they say and think, openness to the views of others, share ideas and feelings, acknowledge developing positions, form real relationships, and build self-confidence and a sense of identity. The energy and direction come from those involved. To achieve anything on a larger scale, we need organisation but maintaining the personal goals of the members of a small group in the face of demands for conformity for the sake of organisation requires consistent attention.

These are some of the challenges and opportunities presented to Catholics in this change of era. We need to educate ourselves, develop our personal sense of what constitutes a truly good life. With confidence in ourselves, the love of God, the vision of Jesus and the Spirit in our hearts, we can claim our personal authority, live free and be all we can be.

A method and system for intentional, spiritual living, based on how we construct ourselves as persons will be an invaluable asset as we continue the wonderful adventure of life.