



# ASPECTS OF CATHOLIC SPIRITUALITY



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## INTRODUCTION

### **'BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD'**

An experienced senior manager agreed to advise a promising management trainee and invited her to meet him. The young manager arrived and was clearly highly intelligent and progressive. She told the senior manager that she knew his reputation and was delighted that he had agreed to mentor her. She talked incessantly about what she was looking for in her career and what she was expecting to get from the organisation. After 30 minutes she left. The senior manager felt disappointed and useless. He had agreed to mentor the young woman, not because he would gain anything himself, but because he wanted to use his vast experience to do what he could to ensure the company's future. As it was, he had not had chance to say anything and wondered why the young woman had sought him out since she clearly believed that she knew exactly what she needed to do in her career and was not really interested in what he had to say. She did not notice that he never said anything during the mentoring session.

Sometimes our approach to prayer is like the above story. We tell God how good God is and then we make a list of demands or requests. Sometimes we couch these in language that indicates our own views and even our prejudices. There is of course nothing wrong with praising God and asking him for things but God does not need our praise and God knows what we need before we ask. After all, God is not a like a senior manager who is only interested in us while we are at work. God is a parent

who loves us all the time and only wants to give us what is good for us. We do not have to earn this. God gives us it because God loves us and pours on us all that is good in the form of grace. The Gospels show that when Jesus prayed he withdrew to somewhere quiet and isolated. He told his disciples not to 'babble on' in prayer and he made clear that God will always care for us and give us what we need.

This booklet, therefore, is based on a series of half day presentations given in the Diocese of Hallam. It explores different approaches to spirituality and to prayer based on the tried and tested experience of the major religious orders. Many of these approaches have existed in the Church for many centuries. They differ from each other in what they emphasise but they have in common techniques through which we can open ourselves to the waterfall of God's loving and merciful grace, so that instead of talking to God we create the space for God to talk to us; to mentor us in the way the senior manager above wanted to help the trainee had she allowed him to do so. Often the key to this listening is silence; something we tend not to be very good at.

## IMAGINATIVE PRAYER

### **'The prayer journey of one who tries, fails and sometimes experiences'**

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have been with Jesus when he was on Earth? To listen to and watch him. To feel his personality. Is he easy to talk to? Does he have a sense of humour? Is he chatty and friendly or serious and a bit strict? What is he really like?

You can use your imagination to do just this; to meditate and reflect on a specific event in the New Testament so that you are carried back to Christ's lifetime and be actually part of the event in question.

What is prayer? Catholics of a certain age know the answer immediately. According to the Penny Catechism, it is *'the raising of the mind and heart to God.'* There is nothing wrong with this definition except that most of us do not do it. We go to Mass, go on pilgrimages, we say the rosary and other prayers and do other devotions but we never experience God on a personal level. Sometimes prayer is just asking for what we want or just reciting words. What we ask for reflects our view of how things should be. We try to put ourselves in charge; we try to mould God to our image instead of the other way round. The American Franciscan, Fr Richard Rohr, says that, *'one reason that religion today is in such a desperate state is that prayer is not transforming people. Instead it is supporting them in their egocentric ways.'* In other words prayer should change us so that we are attuned to God.

This is not to attack the many devout people who frequently pray and indulge in religious devotions but the fact is that most of us learned how to pray as children and have never 'grown up' in prayer. Our prayer practices are comfortable and reassuring with no element of risk. We tend to think of the God we are praying to as a distant figure who demands our praise and, if he is pleased with us, might give us what we ask for. We should regard God in a different way. We should instead work on the basis that the God we love will do anything we want provided it is good for us. Our desire, therefore, should be to develop a relationship with God.

Many of us never actually take time to be present to God. We have not prayed until we have looked at God face to face and said, *'I love you.'* Our prayer should be as natural as breathing. Our relationship with God should be similar to that of people who love each other who have been together for a long time; talking becomes less and less necessary; just being together is enough.

We should use scripture to pray because, just as the sacramental Christ is present in the tabernacle, so Christ, the Word of God, is contained in the Bible. We speak of the Bible as being the word of God but, actually Jesus is the Word.

As an example, think about the Gospel story in which, on the day after he baptised Jesus, John the Baptist is standing with some disciples. He sees Jesus walking past and says, *"There is the Lamb of God."* Two disciples follow Jesus who asks them what they want. They don't know how to answer and so ask him where he is staying. He tells them to come and see. They go and spend the rest of the day with him.

Read this story and then go through it in detail identifying things to think about. What was the weather like? What sounds, sights, smells were there? Why did John call Jesus the 'Lamb of God.' rather than 'my cousin?' Why

were the disciples tongue tied when Jesus first spoke to them. What did they do all day at Jesus' house? Did Jesus cook them something? Were they laughing and joking or did Jesus spend the time teaching them? Presumably the disciples needed to make a living so why did they choose to spend the whole day with Jesus? What were the men thinking when they came away from Jesus? Their lives were about to be turned upside down. Were they in a quandary or completely at peace? Did they feel they had to be with Jesus again?

After doing this sit in silence for about five minutes using your imagination to think yourself into this story either as one of the characters or as an onlooker. It can help to write down what you felt and experienced perhaps by making a type of record in a personal prayer journal. It is not uncommon for people who use their imaginations in this way to genuinely feel that they have had a personal encounter with God in Jesus Christ.

It is easy to scoff at this but to do so would be to discount both the power of God manifested in his longing to have contact with us and the power of the human imagination to reach out and touch God.

Imaginative prayer is not the only type of prayer. There is also the prayer of silence which involves being still for a time, perhaps 15/20 minutes, and trying to clear the mind of all thoughts. Repetition of a mantra, i.e. a single word or short phrase – perhaps the holy name, '*Jesus,*' is good way to concentrate the mind. When thoughts intrude, dismiss them without judging them and return to clearing the mind so that God has space to work and to speak.

Another ancient method is '*Lectio Divina*' in which a scripture passage (perhaps the Gospel of the day) is read slowly and thoughtfully. The passage is then read again with stops and pauses. The individual or persons involved then listen to the word in their hearts and speak to God about a word or phrase that has resonated with them.

Finally, be patient and persistent. Enhancing your prayer life takes time and we cannot always expect a special experience. Often there is dryness and we feel we have not reached God but God will do the work and work through us provided we create the space for him to do so. What is important is that we are present to God and in a loving relationship with God.

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## FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY

### 'Christ is enough'

St Francis was from a middle class family and something of a socialite. He became a soldier, went to war and ended up in prison for a year. In prison he was noted for his 'beautiful spirit.' On release he went off to war again but fell ill and dreamed that he saw large amounts of armour. He misinterpreted this dream, believing that it indicated he would be victorious in battle but then he had another dream in which he was asked, *"Who do you wish to serve, the master or the servant?"* When he answered *"the master,"* the voice said, *"then why do you serve the servant?"*

It was at this point that his conversion began and he went home to Assisi. One day a beggar asked him for *'alms for the love of God.'* Francis did not respond and later deeply regretted this because he realised the beggar had been Christ. He did not make the same mistake again and, on meeting a leper he embraced and kissed the man even though he was repulsed by leprosy. (Pope Francis did the same recently with a man deformed by terrible tumours) Francis continued his conversion, rejecting all the values of this world and spending three years rebuilding churches. He gathered a group of like-minded men and they began to preach the gospel adopting a habit the shape of a cross with a rope belt and sandals.

In about 1209 Francis went to Rome where he gained papal approval for the rule of the Franciscan Society.

Francis had an obedient heart. He strove to be humble

and fasted seven times a year. He loved and was devoted to the Nativity story because God had humbled himself to become a man born in poverty. He made the first crib. He also loved the Cross, the sight of which reduced him to tears and the Eucharist which he saw as another sign of God's humility in that God conceals his glory in bread and wine. Two years before his death, in 1226 at the age of 44, he received the stigmata. He was canonised two years later following many miracles attributed to him.

Franciscan spirituality is based on three pillars. These are:

- **To have the spirit of the Lord within ourselves** – Life is a journey towards God the Father in the footprints of Jesus his son and this journey is made possible for us by the intervention of the Holy Spirit. People who have the spirit within them will behave like Christ. This is what the Holy Spirit does; it transforms us into being like Christ so that Christ is apparent in everything we do.
- **To live without owning anything** – Franciscans live in obedience, chastity and in the footprints of Our Lord. Everything must be attributed to God – this is 'true evangelical poverty' and 'true humility.' All the good things we have come from God and the most God gives us is Jesus Christ who held nothing back in demonstrating God's love for us including accepting an horrendous and humiliating death.
- **Our response** – We must be ready to give back to God in praise of thanksgiving and in witnessing to others that Jesus is everything and all-powerful.

Franciscans accept that only a small number of people are called by God to fully commit their lives to this spirituality. Others are called to equally valid vocations such as marriage and parenthood but Franciscan spirituality is still something that people can strive to follow as far as they can within the context of their own life and vocation. The

message of Francis is for all people and not just those with a calling to the religious life. Franciscans spirituality has at its heart the realisation that good deeds are important but that God wants not just our deeds but our hearts as well.

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## **SALESIAN SPIRITUALITY**

### **'The Gateway to Spirituality is Relationships'**

The Salesian Order was founded by St John Bosco who lived about 150 years ago in Turin where he ministered to the young people who were being sent there to work and to live in terrible conditions. He developed a spirituality to meet their needs and which today's Salesians still follow in their work with the young. Because it is largely for the young it differs from what we normally think of as spirituality and provides a different way of looking at life, but it is relevant to people of all ages.

The principle that underpins Salesian spirituality is **relationships**. Spirituality is not personal between God and ourselves. Instead we belong to each other as Christians in fellowship. We are all sisters and brothers of each other and of Jesus and it is through our normal relationships with others that we are able to engage with the presence of God and live in God's Kingdom. God has breathed life into each one of us and now we must breathe life into each other. People are fundamentally good and will blossom through relationships which are good, positive and allow them space to develop so that they can soar and touch the face of God.

Several great works of literature, such as Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, are based on the Faust legend in which someone sells their soul. In one episode of *The Simpsons* even Bart does the same. We are all capable of doing this, not usually for money or so that our picture gets old instead of us, but when we turn in on ourselves and away from others, or when we cease to be able to

laugh and play we lose part of our soul. When this happens we lose our sense of dignity and can fall apart as people. The alternative is the '**lay form of holiness**' in which we are able to see God in the everyday things that we do and within which we can relax in the knowledge that we are beloved of God and that God is in charge, therefore, no matter what happens, everything will be alright.

Salesian spirituality is structured around a '**Preventive System.**' Compare a child left in a play pen and one in a garden sitting on a rug with toys. Which child is the safest? Whilst the boy in the playpen can come to no immediate physical harm he is far from safe. He lacks attention, stimulus and relationship. The other boy is free and is safe provided someone is there looking after him. He is more likely to hurt himself but he can play, experiment and delight in the world around him. Because he is not alone he feels able to take risks trusting that he will be protected. We are the same as this second child. Jesus stands beside us, we can take risks in the knowledge that he will be there for us and, in the same way, we need to be there for each other. The message is that God is everywhere. He is 'in our face' every moment of our lives and we can have a relationship with God through our relationship with others.

*There are four Salesian Attitudes:*

- **Respect** – we need to feel respected and should show respect to others. We should talk to others and listen to them. We should be consistent in our relationships and should smile, praise and be ready to apologise.
- **Understanding** – We should seek to put ourselves in the place of others and understand their motivation.
- **Affection** – We should let people know how we feel about them and, in our close relationships, how much we love them.

- **Humour** – We should be able to relax in our relationships and allow ourselves to just waste time. Children play and we are children of a God who is running the World, not us, therefore, we do not always have to be doing purposeful things. There is nothing wrong with adults taking time to enjoy themselves – it strengthens relationships. St Francis de Sales, from whom the Salesians take their name, said that the biggest sin is that at our death we give back to God a life un-enjoyed. Life is not a route march and God expects us to enjoy it.
- The first letters of the above four attitudes spelled **RUAH** which is the Hebrew word for breath, wind and spirit. If you live with these attitudes you will be living in the Spirit of God.

St John Bosco taught that if a relationship fails and someone says or does something hurtful we should put their actions down to **thoughtlessness** rather than a more sinister motive. This gives them the space to retract, apologise and save face so that the relationship can be restored.

Don Bosco also taught that we should be **cheerful**. This can be a challenge when we are anxious but we need to remember that ‘God loves us to bits, so we can be cheerful.’

St John Bosco identified four factors as necessary for our development as spiritual people;

- **Home** – which is where we belong
- **School/Education** – through which, all our lives, we learn so that our spiritual development is continuous and up to date.
- **Playground** – where we relax, celebrate life and try new experiences.
- **Church** – where we reflect on our journey through life.

These should be seen as relationships and not buildings. For example church describes, not a building, but any experience, spiritual or secular in which we encounter God. No matter what our vocation in life an essential part of it is that we constantly seek to build relationships that develop us spiritually.

Ultimately, faith is 'trusting in God' and not obedience to a set of teaching or rules and that spirituality is not just about engaging our minds but also about engaging our hearts.

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## **CARMELITE SPIRITUALITY**

### **'All things are passing but God never changes'**

Carmelites are not just an order of nuns and friar priests; in fact, lay associate members are the largest section of the order. In a nutshell, the purpose of the Carmelites is to be 'love in the heart of the Church'. The order's origins go back 800 years when a small group of laymen decided to seek God by creating a religious community on Mount Carmel in Palestine. They chose this location because it is the site of the prophet Elijah's well, and in the land where Jesus himself had walked. Very little is known about these people except that their spiritual aim had been to 'make God known and loved', which must be the aim of all spirituality. Mountains have a symbolic importance in Carmelite spirituality; both the Old and New Testaments contain references to important events that happened on mountains, and our spiritual journey to God can be likened to climbing a mountain in that it is a lengthy and difficult task that presents many challenges but also beautiful views. The imagery of a mountain reminds us of God, and people of different faiths approach the top of the mountain from different starting points at the base. When we start the spiritual journey we are spread out and distant from each other, but as people ascend they draw closer to union with God and the distances between them shrink. So for Carmelites, the top of the mountain – the experience of God – brings human beings closer together.

The Carmelite charism is 'contemplative', based on the belief that we long for something or someone, deep in our hearts. We trust that God is the answer to that deep longing, even though at times we may feel that something



else will satisfy our desires and we get distracted by various false idols. Carmelites believe that we are called to be friends with God, which means speaking with and listening to God with intimacy, frankness, and trust. The Carmelite charism involves not only prayer but also community-building and service to others. Fundamental is the belief that God is not necessarily found in the obvious places such as churches, but also in the 'pots and pans' of everyday living. Love is regarded as supremely powerful. St. John of the Cross said, "If love is lacking, then put in love and you will draw love out." Carmelites recognise the need to be alone in silence at certain times, but most are not hermits. They recognise that the way to God requires practical displays of love and this is impossible without contact with other people. Carmelites are expected to work as well as to pray.

The spiritual patrons of the Carmelite Order span both the Old and New Testaments. Carmelites have particular devotion to the prophet Elijah who called the people of Israel back to God by confronting them with the question: *'in which God are you going to trust?'* Carmelites also have particular devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, whom they regard as their sister. Their devotion to Elijah and Mary is strong, but only to the extent that these two people point us to God.

God wants all people to be saved and to know God. Human beings can know God simply by being human, because God's grace is at work in every man, woman and child in the World.

One of the most difficult things for human beings to cope with is not being in control. We like to be in the driving seat, and we find ways of staying in control. This need for control can limit us spirituality in that we may not be prepared to take risks, and remain locked into a practice of religion that feels safe but that won't help us truly find God. At times, we all follow false gods, and that one of

these can be religion itself. Religion is not God, but it can be the most subtle of false gods because, unlike others, it promises not just security in this world but in the next. It can also make us feel that if we practice religion we have got our spiritual lives sorted.

Pope Francis is calling us to look for God where God is. He is wanting us to ask, "What is my God like?" and "Where am I going to find God?" For Pope Francis, a primary place to find God is not in the practice of religion but amongst the poor.

We come to church to hear Mass, to celebrate the sacraments, and especially to receive the Eucharist. We do so, not for the sake of ritual, but in order that we can go out into the World carrying Jesus in our hearts. The going-out is the main purpose. Church is not an end in itself.

We need to think about the way we pray. Often our prayers consist of giving God a list of demands. This is limiting. We often settle for not very much, whereas God wants us to have so much more. In fact, God wants us to have everything: God wants us to have God. Our physical senses give us the ability to experience the wonders of God's kingdom, but they are untrustworthy guides to our relationship with God because they can fill us with a 'warm fuzziness' that does not tell us how close God is to us or how close we are to God. God does not do warm fuzziness! God continually challenges us to climb a little further up the mountain, and this may be a difficult and painful climb requiring us to relinquish control and trust in God.

Think about a child brandishing a bread knife. A bread knife is a good thing; we cannot cut bread without one. In the hands of a three-year-old child, however, a knife becomes a dangerous thing that could harm the child and others. But if a child has got hold of a bread knife, they might not readily part with it. Our childhood faith can be similar; we hang on to the ideas we had when we

were immature Christians, but we have perhaps failed to progress and grow in our faith. We hold on to things associated with Church that are not bad in themselves but which impede our spiritual development. Sometimes practices that were relevant to our faith when we were children are no longer suitable now that we are adults.

In the Old Testament, Elijah challenged the false god Baal and called down fire from heaven to prove that the Lord God of Israel was the only true God. He then had to escape the anger of Queen Jezebel by going into the wilderness where, despite his success, Elijah became depressed and troubled. In the end he was told to stand at the mouth of a cave on Mount Horeb to witness God passing. A hurricane, earthquake and fire came, but God was not to be experienced in any of them. When these had passed, Elijah experienced a gentle breeze or, put another way, 'sheer silence' and knew that this marked the presence of God. In other words, Elijah found God in the absence of any sense of God.

Carmelites say '*be quiet and still and hear the word of God*'. Their *Rule of Saint Albert* talks about Carmelites praying 'in their cell', by which is meant not simply a little room but rather relating to God in the heart. The use of silence is essential. It is about creating space for God. We should try regularly to spend some time in 'sheer silence', and not fill every quiet time with 'religion' or activity. There is nothing wrong with religious practices like the rosary and other devotions, but they can be a distraction from encountering God in silence.

Silence can be difficult because when we are alone we encounter ourselves and our sinfulness which can make us stop, dispirited, on our spiritual journey. However, the Holy Spirit will see our silence as an opportunity to fill the space silence has created in our lives, and will sow the seeds of spiritual growth in us. This growth is never quick; it will take a life-time. Neither is it easy, but it will allow

God to find us. In this way Christianity is different from other religions, which seek to find God. In Christianity, God finds us. All we have to do is allow God to do so.

Carmelites also place great importance on meditating on the Scriptures and especially on the humanity of Jesus as shown to us in the Gospels. Each day we should try read a short passage from one of the Gospel accounts, and then spend a few minutes thinking and praying about what we have read. A good starting point is the Gospel of Luke. Whilst there is nothing wrong with reading other spiritual books, the Gospels are the authentic Word of God and will always have priority over other religious writings. Finally, if we begin to spend time in silence and reflect on God's Word in the Bible, our lives will be changed in ways that we cannot imagine.

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## **BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY**

### **'Tune into wisdom and don't grumble'**

Very little is known about St Benedict and even that which is known cannot be guaranteed with absolute certainty. He was born in Italy in 480 of distinguished parents who sent him to Rome to study. He was upset by the loose morals in Rome and decided to embrace a religious way of life. He went into the hills outside Rome and lived in a cave as a hermit relying on just one other person who brought him food. After a time people began to regard him as a holy man and gathered around him. He, in turn, started to organise them into a monastic community. Later he founded a second monastery at Monte Casino, the site of the famous World War II battle. It was here that he wrote his 'Rule' which was to become the guiding document for all Benedictine Monasteries and others as well. So far as is known this was the only thing he ever wrote. He is believed to have died in 547.

The Rule of St Benedict was originally in Latin but has since been translated into many languages. It comprises 72 chapters but is only a small book because many of the chapters are extremely short. Much of it is more like a spiritual reflection than a set of rules. In it, St Benedict recognises the need to be flexible to meet the needs of local cultures, circumstances and conditions, therefore, he gives abbots of monasteries the authority to change the rule as they see fit. At the centre of the rule is the requirement that each day monks pray at seven different times although St Benedict makes clear that they should also pray all the time. They are also required to read and study the scriptures and to carry out physical work.

There is no discrimination in this work and monks who hold higher positions with the community are expected work the same as the rest even if this means carrying out menial tasks.

The requirements of the Rule were the main reason why the monastic life had such an influence on the development of western culture and civilisation in that it had created a climate of prayer, reflection, innovation and settled harmonious community. A monastery has to earn its own keep and this is why they still carry out a range of activities from running schools to selling agricultural produce and brewing cider and wine.

The Benedictines have monasteries, both male and female, across the Globe including in Africa, Cameroon, India, Guinea, Brazil and Vietnam to name but a few. In these communities the Rule of St Benedict is being adhered to but also altered to suit local needs, reflected by different habits and styles of prayer so that the Gospel of the Lord Jesus makes contact with a culture and then is expressed in a way that is in line with that culture whilst still being part of the Benedictine Order and the universal church. New monasteries are still being established, nowadays, usually a result of a bishop asking an existing monastery to establish a presence in his diocese; clear evidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in our World.

Monasteries are neither a democracy, nor an autocracy. Decisions are made by the community of monks or nuns voting usually on an issue put forward by the abbot or abbess. In voting, a monk or nun recognises that they could be called upon to be part of whatever is being voted upon. The abbot/abbess can instruct a monk or nun to do something but the usual practice is for them to consult about a proposed course of action although a monk or nun does recognise that what they are being asked to do may be the will of God. The abbot/abbess is both leader and servant of the whole community and they must know the burden this imposes on them. They must not be

hypocritical and must demonstrate all that is good and holy, primarily by actions rather than words. They must never show any favouritism for one monk over others regardless of rank or status but they should be prepared to adapt their style to deal with the personality of individuals under their charge. They need to have some concern for temporal issues but their prime focus must always be the spiritual.

The essence of being a Benedictine is 'living in a community.' Not all do this and instead work in parishes, some of which have been run by Benedictines for hundreds of years. Now, however, there is a move to withdraw from this type of work in favour of the core purpose of community living.

Benedictine Spirituality stresses the primacy of prayer, reading scripture and work and are the means by which Benedictines try to '*tune into wisdom.*' An essential aspect of this spirituality is the welcoming of guests who are seen as Christ in human form. In Chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "*I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*" Benedictine monks do not just take Jesus to guests. Instead guests bring Jesus to them. As a result, guests are met in all humility and prayer and made welcome. Guests who are poor and/or pilgrims are seen as even more special.

Benedictines are expected to help each other regardless of how menial a task this may require them to carry out.

Under the Rule grumbling is regarded as extremely negative behaviour and a serious sin. Benedictine monks are expected to accept whatever they are called upon to do no matter how menial without grumbling.

Benedictine oblates are lay people who try to live the Rule of St Benedict in their everyday life. Some of the rule does not translate easily into modern life but some of it does. Oblates say the morning and evening prayers and go to

Mass as often as possible. They also try to live a simpler life without all the latest goods in so far as they can. They are attached to an individual monastery so that being an oblate becomes a vocation in itself and they enter into a spiritual relationship with the monks. They are encouraged to, each year, attend a retreat at the monastery.

Finally, prayer, reading and reflection on scripture, and work carried out in a spirit of love for God and for neighbour are at the heart of Benedictine spirituality. Grumbling and complaining must be avoided.

