

Spirituality: What is It? What is Its Source?

Spirituality has its name and its source in the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, that third person, the Holy Spirit, has not received the praise and adoration that the Father and Son have received from the Church. The irony and sadness of that reality is that the Church was created and called into being on Pentecost by that very Holy Spirit.

Remember the Biblical account in Acts of the sound like violent winds and tongues as of fire descending upon those assembled— Jews, Galileans, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, etc. They began speaking in their various languages and to everyone's amazement they understood each other.

Thus began the mystery of the Church which has gone under the label of Christian ever since that day. Why it was not called the Church of the Holy Spirit, its creator, is part of the mystery.

We call ourselves Christians because of Jesus the Christ. We become Christians, however, because the Holy Spirit has called us to faith. That has been the pattern ever since Pentecost.

John's Gospel reiterates numerous times the account of Jesus telling his disciples that he was leaving the scene and turning God's work over to the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father would send, and who would be in charge until He returned.

Clearly, we are now living in that age or era of the Holy Spirit. This, therefore, is the source of Spirituality. The Holy Spirit is God's presence in us, in the Church and in the world.

There is an entire, full-fledged dimension to our faith that extends into the realm of the Spirit that has unfortunately been underdeveloped by the very Church the Holy Spirit called into being on Pentecost.

Unfortunately, the Church has on occasion taken on a life of its own developing its own systems of belief and rules rather than continuing under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. Alas, much of the exclusiveness, conflict, arrogance, and separation within the Church has come about by this self-perpetuating attitude that is alien to that inclusive Church of Pentecost.

The rise in efforts to reclaim the causal connection between the Holy Spirit and the Church is a true spiritual adventure. Today we are a significant part of that reclamation.

What is Spirituality? The following thoughts are shared to help readers appreciate the unique quality of spirituality and the profound opportunity of embarking upon a spiritual journey as a satisfying and exciting way to orient and live life.

The term spiritual frequently and erroneously is used to describe practices and activities that clearly are not spiritual, but strictly religious in nature. It is not always easy to differentiate spiritual qualities from religious activities although they are two very different phenomena.

They are closely related and frequently appear together. Yet, they offer two totally different experiences and represent two divergent orientations to God.

There are many people who practice religion with great fervor, but who miss the joy of a spiritual life without ever understanding why. They only know that their religious practice does not satisfy their deepest yearning. Consequently, many people give up on religion because it does not quench their spiritual thirst and seems to be lifeless.

On the other hand, there are people who are also disappointed in their religious lives but who work ever harder and harder at their religious practices in hopes they can squeeze from them something that brings them that inner peace for which they yearn. Unfortunately, it never happens because peace is a spiritual gift not the result of our religious efforts and pursuits.

Religion is not designed to produce peace but rather to engage us in useful and constructive activity as God's people. It is spirituality that bestows peace because peace is a spiritual gift.

While any effort to differentiate spirituality from religion is simplistic, it is nevertheless a place to begin.

Religion is in part observable action, which people carry out in the forms of tradition: worship, caring behavior, and compassion among other exercises of faith. These are the things that religious people have done and feel compelled to do because they are considered to be God-like or God-pleasing acts. There is, of course, an historical record of people having done them ad infinitum. Scriptures are full of such actions and they call us all to such action. Religious Christians would speak of the Christian thing to do. Religion can also be expressed in systems of belief. This use of the term religion takes us very close to the realm of theology that is yet another dimension of faith that needs to be differentiated from spirituality. Theology is a study of how God is perceived to be and how God acts.

In this writing spirituality is understood to be the essence of that inner connection with God who is immediately present to us in our world, in the Church and within our own personal lives. A spiritual experience is one in which God's Spirit touches and transforms us and nourishes our spirits. A spiritual life is one that is in a growing relationship with God, in which relationship one seeks to allow God to take over the control of one's life in all things. A spiritual life is a life of surrender to God. This phenomenon of allowing God to control our lives is an area of consideration in and of itself.

This mysterious inner relationship directly with God is not observable as are religious activities and traditions. However, when out of this unique relationship certain actions of worship, compassion and behavioral changes begin to occur, these expressions of spirituality become religious actions and are then observable. When a religious expression or activity emerges from a spiritual experience with God and becomes observable by others it becomes repeatable and therefore marketable. It can be taught and passed on from one generation to another. It can be held up as a worthwhile model and used to train people to repeat a particular behavior. When such behavior is carried out in practice because of its obvious worth to society and it is in the name of God, it is religion.

The irony is that one can actually be involved in religious practice that is compassionate, loving and generous all in the name of God, but unless he or she is also involved in that inner spiritual connection to God in a self-giving mode, the religious practice in and of itself can be hollow and produce only temporary satisfaction.

Spirituality is that essence of our relationship with God that is initially created solely by the Holy Spirit who calls us through the good news of Jesus into this life-giving relationship. This unique relationship is strictly a gift from God and will never occur apart from the Holy Spirit, regardless of the amount or degree of intensity of religious practice or activity in which we might engage.

The differentiation between spirituality and religion can be understood by noting that religion can be taught by one generation to another while spirituality has to be 'caught' one individual at a time. It is a personal conversion experience that alters one's inner being and not just the assimilation of information or the acting out of particular behavioral patterns.

The Spirit of God who lives within us all because we are created in God's image, is constantly engaged in the business of 'transforming' us from within to become new creatures in Christ. It is an exciting metamorphosis that from the outside can be invisible but from the inside is powerful, joyful, and peaceful. It is a fantastic journey well worth pursuing. Where to begin? With prayer! Prayer is the key.