

## Toward a Spirituality of Communion

*Richard P. McBrien*

The most important spiritual question of our time is also the most important spiritual question of any time: How does one live in communion with God, under whatever name — the Holy, the Sacred, the Transcendent, the Wholly Other, Being? For Christians, that question has been essentially modified by the coming of Jesus, by his invitation to discipleship, and by the distinctive spiritual dynamic he proclaimed, embodied, and fulfilled in his own “passing over” through self-sacrifice and death to new and eternal life.

What Jesus taught us is that communion with God is achieved through communion with one another and with the whole created order — a communion, in other words, that is not only individual but communal, and not only personal but cosmic.

At the core of Jesus’ preaching and ministry is the reign, or kingdom, of God (Mark 1:15). One can inherit the reign of God only through love of one’s neighbor (Matt. 5:38–48). Indeed, the whole of Jesus’ preaching and teaching was concentrated in the one commandment of love: the love of God and the love of neighbor, with the latter being the expression and proof of the former (Mark 12:28–34; Matt. 22:34–40; Luke 10:25–28; cf. 1 John 4:20). On this one commandment the law and the prophets depend (Matt. 22:40). Among the many and diverse implications of this commandment are that we should not presume to offer sacrifice to God unless and until we have been reconciled with our sister or brother (Matt. 5:23–24), nor should we presume to ask God’s forgiveness of our sin unless we are also ready to forgive those who have sinned against us (Luke 11:4; Matt. 6:12).

Nevertheless, it would be wrong simply to equate love of God with love of neighbor. Religious acts that establish or strengthen the bond of communion with God, such as liturgical and private prayer and various forms of contemplative and mystical experience, pertain

more directly to the love of God than to the love of neighbor (Matt. 6:1–15; 7:7–11; Mark 14:38). On the other hand, “religious” access to God through prayer, mystical and otherwise, can never completely be divorced from the principal sacramental encounter with God in the neighbor. The great picture of the Last Judgment in the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46) offers one of the classic illustrations of this principle.

To be sure, entrance into the reign of God is not conditioned solely on one’s love of neighbor. Jesus announced that “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near,” but he added that one must first “repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). In his hearers’ minds, repentance would not be a matter of making an act of perfect contrition and “going to Confession,” but would consist of a fundamental reorientation of one’s whole life, of changing one’s whole outlook on reality and establishing new patterns of thinking and behavior based on that new outlook.

This repentance and conversion experience demanded also a belief in the gospel of forgiveness that Jesus preached (Mark 2:5, 10, 17). He drove home his point with various parables, especially those in Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son in particular. Jesus was so committed to the forgiveness of sins in the name of God that he made himself the friend of outcasts — the publicans and sinners of Matt. 11:19 — and did not avoid their company (Mark 2:16). Indeed, he rejoiced over their conversion (Luke 15:7–10; Matt. 18:13).

For Jesus, the antithesis of a repentant attitude is one of self-righteousness and presumption. He repudiated the proud Pharisee (Luke 18:9–14), the elder brother who resented his father’s benevolent reaction to the prodigal son’s return (Luke 15:25–32), and the discontented laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1–15). He said that publicans and harlots would enter the kingdom of God before those Jews who thought themselves better than everyone else (Matt. 21:31–32), for God, he said, will exalt the humble and bring down the proud (Luke 14:11; 18:14). Each of us must pray that God will forgive our sins just as we have forgiven the sins of others against us (Luke 11:4; Matt. 6:12).

Jesus’ message was not given only to faceless crowds as he moved from place to place. He deliberately gathered disciples around himself, encouraging them to leave home, and indeed everything else, take up their cross, and follow him (Mark 1:16–20; 2:14; Luke 9:57–58; 14:26–27). Thus, Jesus advised the rich young man who asked how he could become his disciple first to sell all that he had and give the money to the poor (Mark 10:21). In other words, the call to

discipleship is a call to the imitation of Jesus himself (John 13:15). The disciple is to act like Jesus: with compassion, humility, and generosity, and as the suffering servant of others (Mark 9:33–50; 10:41–45). This love for others, as an expression and proof of one's love for God, is the distinctive and essential mark of Christian discipleship (John 13:34–35). Such love, however, is not to be reserved for one's family and friends. The disciple is also commanded to love the enemy (Luke 6:27–28), to renounce revenge (6:29), to avoid judging and condemning others (6:37), and to be careful not to dwell on the speck in the neighbor's eye while missing the plank in one's own (6:41–42). Everything is summed up in Paul's classic hymn to love: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13).

The love of God and the love of neighbor, and all that each implies, are not possible without the gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is *the* gift of Jesus to his disciples (Acts 2:38; 8:17–20; 10:45; 11:15–17; Heb. 6:4), and it is given not just to an elite few but to the whole community of disciples (Acts 1:15; 2:1–3). It is a gift that enables the disciples to "live according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:5).

Spirituality, in the end, is a comprehensive term that pertains to our way of being transcendently human, that is, of living a fully human life that is rooted in the life of God. To be spiritually human is to live by a higher principle, rather, by the highest principle, which is Being itself. God is the principle of personal, interpersonal, communal, and even cosmic transformation. To be "open to the Spirit" is to accept explicitly who we are and who we are called to become, and to direct our lives accordingly, in response to God's grace (presence) within us. Christians name that Being God, and name the reality of God's relationships with us as Father/Creator, Son/Redeemer, and Spirit/Sanctifier. It is the life of the Holy Spirit that incorporates the Christian disciple into the body of Christ, the church, and through whom the Christian has access to God the Creator in a life of faith, hope, love, and service.

The spiritual challenge for our time, and indeed for all time, is somehow to maintain a proper balance among, and a dynamic integration of, the essential "ingredients" of any authentic Christian spirituality. For reasons given already, this spirituality must be at once trinitarian, christocentric, pneumatological, and eschatological. But it must also be visionary, sacramental, relational, and transformational. It is visionary when it incorporates the new way of seeing reality (the fundamental notion of repentance, as we have seen above) and of seeing through things to their spiritual core, of thus "interpreting

spiritual things to those who are spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:13). It is sacramental insofar as it is based on the conviction of faith that everything is imbued, to one degree or another, with the hidden presence of God and is thereby a potential instrument of God's saving activity on our behalf and the world's. It is relational because we are by definition relational beings — beings in relation to God, to one another, and to the world. To be human is to live in community, just as to be Christian is also to live in the community that is the church. The relational character of Christian spirituality requires a sensitivity to the presence, the needs, and the gifts of others, as well as to the created goods of the Earth. Finally, Christian spirituality must be transformational, that is, always open to the presence of the Spirit as a power that heals, reconciles, renews, gives life, bestows peace, sustains hope, brings joy, and creates unity. An authentic Christian spirituality — for our time and for all time — requires that the Spirit be allowed to work in us and in others so that, through the instrumentality of the individual and of the church, the transformation of the world into the reign of God might continue to occur.

Although there is only one Spirit, there are many different spiritualities, even within the church itself. As we seek to define the core and challenges of Christian spirituality for our time and for all time, we need to be guided by certain basic theological principles:

1. We are body-spirits, not spirits somehow imprisoned in our bodies. A spirituality that depreciates the body and sets the body and the spirit in some kind of dualistic tension is not a spirituality for our time or for any time.
2. We are radically social beings. No Christian spirituality, for our time or for any time, can lapse into an individualism that ignores our connection with one another and with the wider natural and cosmic orders.
3. We are individual subjects, that is, distinct centers of consciousness and freedom. Even though we share a common humanity with others and a solidarity with the whole created order, we remain unique individuals, with our own distinctive experiences of God. As such, no Christian spirituality, for our time or for any time, can impose itself as the only Christian spirituality.
4. We are graced. The presence of God enters into the very definition of who we are as humans. We are created by God, elevated and redeemed by Christ, re-created by the Holy Spirit, and destined for eternal glory. No Christian spirituality, for our time or for any time, can be based on a repression of our humanity as if there were something essentially corrupt or dishonorable about it.

5. We are sacraments of God. Indeed, all reality has a sacramental, or mysterious, character. God is present to the whole of created order, animate and inanimate alike. No Christian spirituality, for our time or for any time, can prescind from creation and the environment we inhabit. In the spirit of Ignatius of Loyola, a Christian spirituality, for our time and for all time, strives always to see God in all things.

6. We are destined, along with creation itself, for the final reign of God, a kingdom of justice and peace as well as of holiness and grace ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," no. 39). No Christian spirituality, for our time or for any time, can ignore the demands of justice, peace, and human rights, or be indifferent to the needs and cries of the poor, the powerless, and the marginalized.

7. We are sinners. Accordingly, there can be no authentic Christian spirituality, for our time or for any time, that is fashioned independently of the cross and of the constant need for repentance and forgiveness. It is a spirituality marked by sacrifice and by denial, not so much of the flesh as such, but of selfishness. It is ever on its guard against the counterforces of pride, apathy, temerity, lust, hypocrisy, sloth, and envy.

8. We are ecclesial persons. There is no authentic Christian spirituality, for our time or for any time, that is not rooted in the liturgical, sacramental, and devotional life of the church. It is a spirituality activated and nourished by the preaching of the Word and in particular by the celebration of the Eucharist, which the Second Vatican Council referred to as the summit and source of the whole Christian life ("Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," no. 10).

9. We are called to be virtuous persons. An authentic Christian spirituality, for our time and for any time, is rooted in, and is a lived expression of, the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love; of the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance; and of the related virtues of humility and gratitude, of mercy and concern for the poor, of forgiveness and truthfulness, and of stewardship for the environment.

10. The call to holiness is a universal call ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," chap. 5). An authentic Christian spirituality, for our time and for any time, is not multitiered or hierarchical — one set of levels for the elite (priests and sisters, monks and nuns, brothers) and another for the laity. Every baptized Christian is called to perfection, whether ordained or not, whether religiously professed or not, regardless of gender, race, ethnic background, or social and economic

status. We are all one in God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

How one achieves that communion with God and with one another, and indeed with the whole of God's creation, is, always has been, and always will be the most important spiritual question of our time.