

Introduction: Medieval Spirituality

Spiritualities of the Catholic Church: Over the centuries, God inspired the creation of various religious orders, each of which possesses its own charism to address a particular need. "I'm not religious, but I am spiritual." How often have you heard someone say something similar? Or perhaps even said it yourself. In our secular culture, being "religious" is often seen as being narrow-minded, judgmental and a bit of a nutcase. It may also mean being overly concerned with rules, regulations and laws. At the very least, a religious person belongs to an organized religion and consistently attends services.

In contrast, being "spiritual" has come to mean someone who has a relationship with God, even if "god" is simply defined as a higher power or the forces of nature. Generally, a "spiritual" person doesn't go to church or adhere to organized faith practices, but lives according to an individualized moral code.

This sort of clear-cut distinction between being religious and being spiritual is a relatively modern construct. Such a dichotomy would have been completely mystifying to most of our ancestors. In the Catholic sense, religion may be thought of as the structured belief system of our faith - its theology, organized practices and doctrines on an almost corporate level. Spirituality is the way those beliefs are lived personally, daily and privately.

Spirituality covers the domain of religious experience of the divine. It is primarily experiential and practical/existential, rather than abstract/academic and conceptual." In some ways, religion is like Vatican City and St. Peter's and spirituality is like your hometown and home parish. The same sort of things happen in both places, but one is public and the other is more private; one is for everyone, the other is for you and your family; one is almost too big to comprehend, the other is part and parcel of daily life.

Many members, one Body: The Catholic Church has recognized, almost from the beginning, that living the faith is not a "one size fits all" proposition. The Church in Jerusalem had a different character and flavor from the Church in Rome or the Church in Ephesus or the Church in Thessalonica. As the faith matured, even more varied spiritual approaches began to emerge under the inspiration of saints such as Dominic and Francis, extending even to modern times with Mother Teresa, Sr. Faustina and others.

Obviously, if someone is contemplating a vocation as a priest, sister or brother, the different spiritual paths are an important part of the discernment

process. A person with a passion for serving the poor would not fit well in a Trappist monastery nor would a contemplative who longs for a life of study in a Benedictine Abbey be happy working as a Dominican on a college campus.

However, the spiritual traditions are important to lay Catholics as well, sometimes formally as a member of a secular order, but also informally as the charisms, styles of prayer and inspiration of the founders of the spiritual ways influence daily life. If God's creation is anything, it is diverse, and God intentionally desires every diversity. That diversity is most evident in the uniqueness of every human person and various temperaments. While union with God, the end of spirituality, is a desire of every human heart, different persons with different temperaments will naturally find different paths through different prayer forms to that union. Throughout history, God has inspired the creation of various religious orders and congregations, each with its own charism to address a particular need in the Church. In responding to their charisms, each developed a spirituality that reflects and supports their charism.

Any layperson desiring a deeper relationship with God would be wise to pursue the various spiritualities of the orders and congregations for one that might be helpful to her own temperament. For example, a mother with a longing to experience the quiet and solitude of life within a cloister might find making an annual retreat at an abbey helps make her a better wife and parent. A businessman who is moved by images of starving children may decide to make a regular contribution to the Sisters of Charity for their mission work. Or, more simply, a person who finds great joy in uplifting poetry may become immersed in the works of the Carmelite John of the Cross, while a more active person may want to try out St. Dominic's Nine Ways of Prayer.

To choose a spiritual way within the Church is to enhance the religious experience, not oppose it. It is a way to grow and mature in faith while still being an active participant in the corporate life of the Church.

How to choose: A person doesn't so much choose a spiritual path, but rather as he or she discovers the path that fits the best with personality, temperament and overall - outlook on life. Sometimes, by virtue of attending a parish run by Jesuits or Dominicans or Franciscans, a person will become more closely united with that way. Other times, reading the lives of the saints, examining the way of life of the professed members of an order and good old-fashioned prayer, asking for discernment and guidance, will still be the best way to find a discipline and practice that helps build a person's faith and spiritual life.

Benedictines: The Rule: Hence, brethren, if we wish to reach the greatest height of humility, and speedily to arrive at that heavenly exaltation to which ascent is made in the present life by humility, then, mounting by our actions, we must erect the ladder that appeared to Jacob in his dream, by means of which angels were shown to him ascending and descending (see Gn 28:12). Without a doubt, we understand this ascending and descending to be nothing else but that we descend by pride and ascend by humility." - Rule of St. Benedict, Chapter VII

Do you enjoy Scripture reading, formal prayers of the Church and have the gift of hospitality? Benedictine spirituality may be for you. Founded by St. Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century, the Benedictines are the oldest of the spiritual communities. His "rule," or book of guidance, has been adapted and adopted by many other communities over the centuries. The Benedictine answer to spirituality is the Scriptures, the scriptural way. Benedict tries to be nothing more and nothing less than Scripture at full throttle. To quote the holy rule: Let nothing be preferred to the work of God, which refers to the Divine Office. The center of Benedictine life is the gathering in the Church for the various hours of the praise of God in common.

The ingredients of Benedictine spirituality are to "center life on praise of God, life together (we don't go to God alone) many hours devoted to prayerful reading of Scriptures alone, and hospitality - to call that spirituality is significant. Benedict said the Lord is received and adored in the guests.

Dominicans: To Preach the Word: A man who governs his passions is master of his world. We must either command them or be enslaved by them. It is better to be a hammer than an anvil." - St. Dominic Do you love to study and have a passion for explaining the faith through writing and speaking? Then consider the Dominican way.

While Dominican scholars like St. Thomas Aquinas have shaped Catholic theology for centuries (the theologian of the papal household has traditionally been a Dominican), the goal of Dominican study is to understand the truth in order to preach the Good News. In fact, St. Dominic, the founder, explicitly said that the order was created for "preaching and the salvation of souls.

Dominican spirituality derives from the reality that anything that is true points to God the Creator, and therefore all learning, knowledge and understanding ultimately teaches us about God. The more we know of God, the more we can love God. Therefore, Dominican spirituality begins with study, always with the question in mind: 'What more does this teach me about who I am and who God is in my life?' Additionally, as the Order of Preachers, we are aware that love is the

ultimate truth and true love cannot be contained. And so while all insights draw us into a deeper understanding and love of God, they are always given to be shared so others can also better know and love God.

"It is in the act of sharing that we experience the joy of exercising our baptismal call to share in prophetic mission of Jesus," he adds. "*Comtemplata alis tradere* - that is, giving to others, the fruits of our contemplation. Dominican spirituality, then, is ultimately a path to God through the search for knowledge, contemplation of that knowledge for deeper understanding of the Divine and the joy of preaching that truth to the world."

Franciscans - The Way of Simplicity: We adore you Most Holy Lord Jesus Christ, here and in all of your churches throughout the world and we bless you, because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world." - St. Francis of Assisi
Does the simple life attract you? Do you want to see all of life as gift and all features as united in Christ? Then look to St. Francis and the Franciscan Way.

Franciscan spirituality is "very simple and very personal and very devotional. Devotional means it is related to personal individual prayer to Christ and Our Lady and their presence in our life." Like its founder, the beloved Francis of Assisi, Franciscan spirituality stresses personal devotion to Christ, particularly to Christ in his incarnation, his passion and death and his presence in the Holy Eucharist. Franciscans look to the "Christ child, Christ crucified, Christ in the Eucharist."

Perhaps the best-known quality of this "school of spirituality, is an emphasis on simplicity, humility and care of the poor; it's not a complex spirituality." It is, however, one of the most popular paths, appealing even to non-Catholics and non-Christians because of its affection for all creation and love of life.

Jesuits: The Ignatian Exercises: Receive, Lord, all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will. You have given me all that I have, all that I am, and I surrender all to your divine will, that you dispose of me. Give me only your love and your grace. With this I am rich enough, and I have no more to ask." - St. Ignatius Loyola
Do you long to know the will of God in all things? Is a straightforward, no-nonsense approach that finds God in the everyday things of life appealing? You may find Ignatian spirituality appealing.

The founder of the Society of Jesus, also called Jesuits, St. Ignatius Loyola, was a soldier who came to the point of conversion after having his leg broken. During his recuperation, he had only the Lives of the Saints and the Life of Christ to read. (He wanted the romances.) Ironically, his great legacy, the "Spiritual

Exercises," is one of the most widely read books in the Western world. Practical and to the point, the exercises are a month-long program of meditations, prayers and contemplative practices.

"Ignatian spirituality is focused on finding God in all things. It is centered on the idea that the experiences of God are not reserved for one Sunday during Sunday Mass, but God can be found at every moment of our life and every moment we can experience God. All things that are part of our lives help us experience God. The Jesuit Way is "contemplative in action. It's for the person who lives an active life, but maintains a contemplative life. If you are a young mother, Ignatian spirituality says that God can be found in your relationship with your children, your husband, your friends, preparing the sandwiches in the morning, in the office, in the struggles raising children, in the love you experience in raising your children in addition to the formal times you go to Church. It pays a great deal of attention to feelings, desires and emotions as ways God calls us. Ignatian spirituality is intent on reminding people that the temptation exists to box God into one hour on Sunday. The great gift of Ignatian spirituality is finding God in all things."