

SESSION 1

Spirituality

Channeling Our Life-Giving Energy

Sharing

Briefly share on one of the following questions:

“How am I right now?” or

“What good news would I like to share?”

Lifting Our Hearts ...

... in Song

Play or sing one of the following or another song of your choice:

“Gathered in the Love of Christ”

“Your Love Is Finer Than Life”

... in the Quiet

Pause for a few moments of silence and enter more deeply into the presence of God.

... in the Word

Read aloud Psalm 33:6-9, 13-15, 20-22.

LONGING FOR THE HOLY

Take a few minutes to ponder a word, a phrase, a question, or a feeling that rises up in you. Reflect on this quietly; then share it aloud.

(Even if no one wishes to reflect aloud, permit sufficient time for silent reflection.)

... in Prayer

Conclude with this prayer spoken together:

Gracious and loving God,
the world around us astonishes us with its beauty.
Into this remarkable world you have placed us,
your sons, your daughters,
created in your very image.
May we always remember who we are
and to whom we truly belong.
Amen.

Our Companion on the Journey

St. Augustine

“Our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

St. Augustine (4th-5th centuries, North Africa)

AS A YOUNG MAN, Augustine lived very intensely. He had a mistress and an illegitimate son, explored many different philosophies, and tried to make his mark in the world by becoming a dazzling teacher of rhetoric. His mother, Monica, was a Christian and prayed that her son might follow her in that faith. Eventually, after a pain-

ful interior struggle and thanks to the counseling and instruction of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, Augustine converted. In time, he became Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. His many sermons and writings profoundly influenced the course of western theology. His autobiographical book, *The Confessions*, is a classic account of the human struggle involved in channeling vital energies.

Encountering Wisdom for Life

GO INTO ANY BOOKSTORE today. Lining the shelves of at least one section you will find all sorts of books grouped under the title “Spirituality.” Self-help, pop-psychology, health and wellness, esoteric practices are all mixed in with the sacred texts and classic writings of the religions of the world. What, we wonder, *is* spirituality? Or perhaps we wonder: What does Christianity have to do with all this? Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, a Canadian Oblate of Mary Immaculate and author of *The Holy Longing* and *The Shattered Lantern*, can give us some insight. He helps us to explore the question, “What is spirituality?” and the allied questions, for example, “What prevents me from living a deeper spiritual life?”

Rolheiser begins by prompting us to pay attention to the deepest currents of our lives. In each human being, he suggests, there is an energy, a life force that is most often experienced as desire or longing. We long for many things, we feel restless, we seem compelled out of ourselves toward something *more*.

Some ancient Greeks used to say that we are fired into life with a sort of madness that comes from the gods and that this divinely endowed energy is the root of all love, hate, creativity, joy, and sorrow. Rolheiser suggests something similar. Each of us has this deep, driving desire, this longing for *more*.

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This energy is so powerful that it can, if we are not mindful, overpower us. Our fiery life force needs to be channeled to be life-giving, not life-consuming.

There are some general observations that can be made about what we do with our desire. A healthy spirituality is one that, in Rolheiser's eyes, does two things: it keeps us energized and it keeps us glued together. In other words, a healthy spirituality gives us zest and hope; it allows us to experience life as beautiful and worth living. It works against the cynicism, despair, and bitterness that can paralyze us. A healthy spirituality is also integrative; it gives us a sense of coherence and order, a sense of who we are, where we are going, and how life is full of meaning.

The task is to balance these two sometimes-conflicting dynamics: the creative, chaotic dynamic that energizes us must be balanced with the ordered, disciplined dynamic of our life. Too much chaos and you die of dissipation; too much order and you die of suffocation. A healthy spirituality is discovered in balance between the two.

Rolheiser offers us the examples of three women who have been our contemporaries to illustrate his point. Each of these had a different relationship to the creative longing at the root of her being. The three may surprise you. They are Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the simple yet powerful religious sister who laid her life down for those who were poor, founder of the Missionaries of Charity; Janis Joplin, the rock and blues singer of the sixties; and Princess Diana, the late mother of Princes William and Harry of England. Each woman had her own very powerful share of fiery desire. But each directed that desire differently. It was disciplined either in life-giving or in life-consuming ways, or in an uneasy combination of the two. It is easy for us to associate Mother Teresa with a vibrant spirituality. She helped the dying poor. But she was also a woman who had disciplined and channeled her powerful desire into a life that was integrated

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and rooted in a vision larger than her own self-interest. She was able to found a worldwide network of houses for the dying precisely because of her ability to integrate all her deep, fiery energy into the work to which she felt God had called her.

Few would compare Mother Teresa with rock icon, Janis Joplin. Yet both were women with exceptional fire, creativity, and rare energy. Janis Joplin's energy went out in many directions, not all of them life giving. Her rare talent of songwriting was a gift, but frenetic activity, dissipation, and uncontrolled sexual activity led to her death, from a drug overdose, at the age of twenty-seven. Instead of being an integrating force in her life, Joplin's vital desires were undisciplined and eventually consumed her.

Princess Diana's life falls between these other two. Like Joplin, she wanted to taste all the sensation that life has to offer. Fame, wealth, love, and excitement: she wanted it all. Yet she also was driven by a deep desire to care for those whose lives were shattered by poverty and bodies maimed by landmines. Sometimes she was able to focus on these life-giving longings; at other times her other desires held her in sway. Perhaps we are more like Princess Diana than like Mother Teresa or Janis Joplin. At times we may swing between what seem like conflicting desires.

So what does this have to do with spirituality? Spirituality, Rolheiser suggests, is *what we do with our desire*. It concerns the way we channel that deep, raging fire that is at the core of our lives. We all have such longing at the core of our beings. The problem is we do not know always what to do with it. Much of the anguish of human existence is caused by human failure, failure to appropriately identify and discipline that desire. Following are a few considerations that can shed some light on how to focus the fire within.

First, sometimes people think that to be spiritual we have to be otherworldly, to avoid human contact for fear of sully-

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ourselves, or to be always doing “religious” activities. Rolheiser suggests otherwise. He reminds us that the opposite of being spiritual is to have no energy, to have lost all sense of the zest for life. Walling ourselves off from life is not the point of spirituality. Second, sometimes people think there is one spiritual path that everyone must follow. They look to their pious neighbors or an admired priest, teacher, nun, or holy person and think they must be exactly like them. No one can live another’s life. Each person is different and the way that each man or woman directs the deep desire raging within will depend on his or her own circumstances, history, and gifts.

Augustine of Hippo, our companion from the tradition for this session, is a case in point. Augustine was a man of great, vital energy, and during much of his early life he was buffeted about by those energies. He was competitive, driven to succeed in his profession, and had intense and complex relationships with a number of women. He was, however, also aware that he desperately needed some deeper direction, and so the spiritual quest became the driving motivation of his life.

For several years he became a “seeker” among the Manichees, a dualistic sect popular at the time. (The Manichees divided the world between good and evil and held that matter was inherently evil and the mind was inherently good.) He studied Neoplatonic philosophy. Finally, after dismissing it out of hand for some time, he experienced a conversion to the Christian faith, a faith broad and rich enough to engage his intellectual and creative energies, yet one that also provided focus to those energies. Augustine discovered that at the root of his restlessness was a longing for God.



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In the next session, we will consider some of the cultural challenges to becoming intentional about our spirituality. Following Augustine's lead, we will see later (especially in Sessions 3 and 4) how a specifically Christian spirituality can help us direct our desire to give life to others and to ourselves in healthy ways.

Sharing Our Faith

- ✚ This session invites us to think about defining spirituality as the way in which we channel our energy and fire. What strikes me in this definition? For what am I longing?
- ✚ Rolheiser describes a healthy spirituality as one that balances order and creative chaos. Which is needed in my life right now—a little more structure or a little more zest?
- ✚ Share stories together of people you know personally who seem to have directed their vital energies in life-giving ways. What is it about their spirituality that I admire? How can I better direct my vital energies in life-giving ways?

Living the Good News

Choose how you feel the Word of God and your sharing challenge you to action for the week ahead. The best actions are always the ones that emerge from the specific contexts of your own lives and sharing. These suggested actions are just that, suggestions. If they capture your imagination and seem like the right action for your group or yourself, then proceed with one of them. If they do not, devise more appropriate individual and/or group actions.

-  A quote about God from St. Augustine reads, "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Keep a daily or weekly journal

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and record the instances when your own restlessness is apparent. What form does this restlessness usually take? Note how you tend to deal with or direct that restlessness. At the end of the week, bring this prayer to God asking for guidance about how you might more satisfyingly find “rest” in your restlessness.



If you are a person who lacks discipline, commit yourself to a time each day in which you “give God space.”

Consider lighting a candle each morning and saying a brief prayer for the day ahead; spend fifteen minutes reading Scripture and ponder its message; commit to going to bed (or getting up) at a reasonable hour so you will be more productive; or commit to doing a daily kind deed for someone. You may also want to “give God space” by enjoying ten minutes of daily delight: Lie on your back while enjoying beautiful music; walk in a garden or buy a bouquet and breathe in the scent of the flowers; play a game; sing a song; skip; dance.



Ask a few people outside the group, “What is spirituality?” Listen to and reflect upon their answers. Share with them your insights from this session.

Given where I am in my own life and as a response to the Word of God and our sharing, I feel called to

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Closing Prayer

Share together prayers of intercession or praise.

Then pray together the following prayer:

God of love, Father of mercy,
help us to be attentive
to the deepest love currents in our lives.
Guide our restless hearts
and help us use our life energies
for the glory of your name.
Amen.

Looking Ahead

*Prepare for your next session by prayerfully reading and studying
Session 2.*

Informal Gathering



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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Robert J. Wicks, *Living a Gentle, Passionate Life*, Paulist Press

St. Augustine, *The Confessions*

Mike Aquilina, *The Way of the Fathers: Praying with the Early Christians*, Our Sunday Visitor

Mary E. Penrose, *Refreshing Water from Ancient Wells: The Wisdom of Women Mystics*, Paulist Press

Benedict J. Groeschel, C.F.R., and Kevin Perrotta., *The Journey Toward God: In the Footsteps of the Great Spiritual Writers—Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox*,
Servant Publications

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops approved in 2004 and published in 2006 the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, which received the recognition of the Holy See. This *Catechism* is an adaptation of the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, first published in 1994, with modifications included in the 1997 edition.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which contains a rich summary of the principal elements of the faith, was meant to encourage and assist in the writing of new local catechisms. The *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* takes into account our U.S. situation, culture, saints, and holy leaders, while carefully preserving the unity of faith and fidelity to Catholic doctrine. Where applicable, references are included for both. You can then use what the *Catechisms* offer in your sharing.

Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Paragraphs 1, 355-368, 1700-1709, 1720-1724,
2683-2684