



Spirituality and Discipline

JOSEPH A. SITTLER

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

On a certain occasion when bishop Anders Nygren was doing a series of lectures at the University of Chicago, he made a statement which evokes reflection. He said that when we seek to understand a certain phenomenon in history, we ought to ask two questions about it. The first one, of course, is, “What does it mean by happening?,” and the second is, “What’s the significance of the fact that it happened when it did?”

These questions can be raised concerning an event which has taken place specifically in theological education, but also more diffusely within the whole Christian community. That is the rise of interest in what has come to be called spirituality.

What’s the meaning of the fact that within the last 15 or 20 years there have been requests from students and faculty in every institution I know of, that is concerned with theological studies—requests which have become almost clamant—that there be courses, lectures, workshops, and bibliographies on spirituality?

The rise of certain demands or events in history is sometimes mysterious. But the rise of this demand among our students is not mysterious at all. It can be accounted for somewhat as follows.

(1) The change in the culture’s requirement of the ordained one and those trained for religious service.

(2) The change within the mind of the church itself as to where the locus and the focal point of the life of the ministry is.

(3) A change whereby general leadership of a community seems in large part to have diminished the requirement for learning, contemplation, and a profound and broad reflective life on the part of the ordained one and all those who deal with religious issues.

This has become so marked that many articles have been written attesting to it, and their titles are fixed in my memory: “The Maceration of the Ministry,” “The Evisceration of the Ministry,” “The Annihilation of Reflection,” and “The Diminution of the Learned Life.” All of these titles of fairly recent essays point

to a single fact: The exercise of ministry in its several vocations has undergone a diminishment of the importance of the reflective life, sound learning, the critical intelligence, and inwardness.

So it is no wonder that there is among theological students the rise of a felt need to give time to reflection upon the nature, the sources, and the disciplines appropriate to the maintenance of spirituality.

I. FORMS OF SPIRITUALITY

When one speaks of spirituality, one generally invests it with a pejorative ascription of subjectivity based on perceptions of Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. But we will not find it possible to deal usefully with what the word “spirituality” points to if we equate it simply with a deepening of subjectivity. That’s a particularly Lutheran temptation, and we should avoid it.

I want to correct that understanding by comments which have an almost heroic brevity and condensation and point to certain types of spirituality which have been manifested within the long history of the Christian community in order to clear the deck for what I want to say about discipline.

There is an Eastern Orthodox spirituality. That is a spirituality whose vocabulary, conceptual apparatus, and aids to the contemplative life are primarily transcendent and heavenly. In the architecture of the Eastern church, the great dome has the blue of heaven against the gold of eternity, and in the middle there is the great icon of Christ the *Pantokrator*. The dome of the church in which the people worship is thus a kind of material icon which conveys to those present that which is characteristic of Eastern spirituality: the transformation, even the deification, of life.

Roman Catholic spirituality—to make an almost indecently broad statement—is in all its many forms characterized by a kind of discipline formation, an almost calculated series of ways of reading, thinking, and attention to piety in which it is held that one can be formed and led into a more spiritual orientation in thought, devotion, and prayer. And in large part, it all works that way indeed, as the spirituality of centuries of Roman Catholic thought and devotion demonstrates.

Somewhat closer to our own experience is a spirituality for which I can find no name, but it is neither of these. It is a spirituality which creates a kind of counterpoint between the objective data which evoke reflection on the one hand, and the theater of inwardness on the other, in which reflection makes more profound and immediate the objective data. And rather than speak abstractly about this, one can point to an illustration from the English hymnic tradition.

Take for instance the beautiful hymn of Isaac Watts, “When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died.” In the third stanza there are the words: “See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down; Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?”

What is going on in that truly catholic hymn? Here the life that we call subjective does not arise from within subjectivity. The subjective life is the theater

for its exercise, but the exciting and evocative data are objective: “When I survey the wondrous cross.” The spirituality is not created by the surveyor, but by the surveyed. And concentration is upon what is surveyed—the wondrous cross—which is not of our doing. Out of that, the surveyor is moved into a deeper inwardness. So what we mean by spirituality, particularly in the Christian tradition of the West, is a kind of spiritual organization of the total self around the gift of God’s Spirit, which Spirit itself comes forth from our encounter with the objective data—the persons and events of the divine redemption.

Here is a kind of spirituality which can protect us from either a frigid objectivism or a too

tepid subjectivism. If we then want to develop that spirituality, we want indeed a good and necessary thing.

But then we must take the next step. If one is to reflect upon how it might be that we get the gift that Paul refers to in his phrase, “maintain the spiritual glow,” and to do so in terms appropriate to our own tradition in western christendom, our spirituality must be focused on the Word of God. If we describe ourselves most comprehensively as a Christian community whose focal point, theological structure, hymnic tradition, and liturgical structure are centered on the Word of God, then our spirituality—to be congruent with our liturgy, devotional life, theological structures, and biblical study—must have its centeredness in the understanding of the Word of God.

II. THE DYNAMICS OF A SPIRITUALITY OF THE WORD OF GOD

I want here to say something very simple, but I think very important. One does not move from the desire for a maintenance and a deepening of spirituality, when defined as I have tried to define it, by trying to perform a kind of cerebral. bypass. Spirituality is an organic reality in which an ever more centered self spins and swings around the centrality of God’s Spirit so that God’s Spirit is always in a conversation with our spirit. Spirituality is that deepening conversation of the human spirit with the constitutive Spirit of God, in which the Word of God is the central object of reflection and study. And therefore, unlike some invitations presently being ventilated about modes of deepening spirituality, in our tradition we must understand that ours is a spirituality of the Word. This is a form of spirituality in which an ever richer spiritual life is given just assessment and right place, because the reflection upon the Word of God is always a contrapuntal reflection, in which that upon which I reflect and that circumstance out of which my reflection is called are always lived in a vivacious and living conversation. And because that is true, and in order that it may be maintained and deepened, a clear, responsible, cerebral, and life-long discipline must characterize our lives. By that discipline, I mean something again not at all mysterious. I owe it to my ordination if I am an ordained one. I owe it to my deepening understanding of the Christian faith in whatever form of public ministry in the church I enter. I owe it to a responsible taking up of that vocation that I exercise a never-ceasing care for listening and understanding more deeply what the Word of God is saying.

I want to be very concrete about this. We shall take it for granted that we already know what tools are necessary, what operations are required, and what

kind of attention is to be given if we are properly to exercise a disciplined study of the Word of God, and I shall not elaborate upon that at all. But I want to make a concrete illustration of what I mean.

It may be a surprise to some when I admit that in many years as a parish pastor and all my life as a teacher—but never ceasing thereby to be a preacher—I have found a direct and almost mathematical correlation between attention to study and the vivacity and richness of my spiritual life with the Word of God. I have found that historical, archeological, critical, and linguistic studies of the Scriptures have always gone side by side with the most illuminating moments as both preacher and theologian. The canard that historical-critical studies constitute somehow an attack upon the Word of God is so patently false that it must be called by its proper name. I love

the statement of Friedrich Schleiermacher when he said, “My moments of deepest insight have never been separated from my moments of clearest understanding.” I’ll give two illustrations, both from my own experience, and I’m using them not because they are normative, but because they are familiar.

Some time ago I was asked by a group of churches in the Chicago metropolitan area to speak at an afternoon meeting in which lay and clerical representatives were gathered to plan a program for the World Hunger Appeal. I reflected upon how I might address this meeting and provide a vision of the urgency required by the very existence of hundreds of thousands of hungry people in the world. I wondered how I might get at it. And there came back something from my own knowledge and study which perfectly illustrates that clarity of understanding is sometimes not very dramatic but always a necessary way to the deepening of spirituality.

Thinking of what I might say, I recalled a book I had read forty years before by Søren Kierkegaard called *Works of Love*. And there in a remarkable piece of characteristic relentless analysis, he takes apart that statement of Jesus, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another” (John 13:34). He asks the question, “How can Jesus command that we love, when everyone knows that it is exactly the fundamental nature of love that it cannot be commanded?” Love emerges; it is not ordered into being. Love comes into existence; it is not there by order. But our Lord is not known for making ridiculous or obscure statements. What could he have meant by saying, “Little children, I give you a new commandment that you love one another”? Our Lord certainly knew that love cannot be commanded, and yet he commanded it.

By reflection upon that verse—and by reflection surrounded and contextually enriched by the whole New Testament language about love—I began to see something, and what I saw was as follows. If I see a poster of a sick child holding out an empty rice bowl and appealing for my wealth, it is no problem to reach for resources that I have to help in the feeding of that hungry child. But what confronts us in the present World Hunger Appeal is something massive, involving millions of people. And a certain law comes to play out its force: that the ardency with which love may be evoked is reduced in relation to the numbers that evoke it. My love is evoked instantaneously and spontaneously by a child or a few. But when I know that there are millions and millions who are hungry, the very gargantuan size of the problem tends to diminish the vehemence with

which I may respond to that problem. When a problem is too big, we tend to dismiss it as simply impossible. I’m confident that this is true.

There is a beautiful poem by the poet Richard Wilbur. Apparently he wrote the poem having heard a preacher thunder out about the dangers to the ecological structure of the world from modern technology, pollution, waste, and so forth. And he was strangely unmoved by the generalities the preacher was making. He went home and wrote the little poem, which he calls “Advice to a Prophet.”* He writes,

When you come, as you soon must, to the streets of our city,
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,
Not proclaiming our fall but begging us

In God's name to have self-pity,

Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range,
The long numbers that rocket the mind;
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,
Unable to fear what is too strange.

Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the race.
How should we dream of this place without us?—
The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,
A stone look on the stone's face?

Speak of the world's own change. Though we cannot conceive
Of an undreamt thing, we know to our cost
How the dreamt cloud crumbles, the vines are blackened by frost,
How the view alters. We could believe,

If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will slip
Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy,
The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,
The jack-pine lose its knuckled grip

On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn
As Xanthus once, its gliding trout
Stunned in a twinkling.

The force of this poetic image is in its absolute concreteness. The poet does not speak of the care of the earth in general; he speaks of the loosened pine, the stunned trout, and the burning river.

When Jesus commanded us to love, he did not mean simply that we must like one another. He was not depending upon what people today call that "chemistry" that occurs between people in romantic love, connubial love, or the lasting love of friendship. Our instant understanding of love usually means that we love the lovable. Love is evoked by love. As G. K. Chesterton once said, "One reason I love my wife is that she has the uncanny capacity to reflect me back to myself at six times my normal size." So love begets love. But the way that Jesus uses the word makes it capable of command, because love—what he must have meant there—was love of a different kind. This kind becomes my second illustration.

*Richard Wilbur, *The Poems of Richard Wilbur* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963) 6.

In the midst of the civil rights and student revolts in the 1960s, I was teaching, and I recall something very strange that happened in the early fervor of our recovery of decency toward the black community. We started to give them academic help, admitting them to our universities and giving them financial help, and for about a year and a half the black students were very grateful

for this. And then something dawned on them, and they began to withdraw from that early easy fraternity we were enjoying with the black community, and they pulled away by themselves and formed black caucuses. I talked to one of my black colleagues about it. He said, "It's not difficult to understand. For awhile we were made a little bit drunk by the fact that you had decided to be friends with us. You decided to love us, to acknowledge that here we are. Suddenly it dawned upon us, we black people, that you have no right to elect to acknowledge us. You think that you are being big all of a sudden. Now you are going to love us. We've been here as long as you have. So take your love, and take it away. All we want is your justice."

There is something very important there. To love my neighbor does not fundamentally mean that I like that person. It means that I acknowledge God's children to be present in persons who are unlike myself.

III. DISCIPLINED, EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALITY

Now when we seek therefore to develop a spirituality of the Word of God, we do not get that by the kind of preaching that simply takes a curious and puzzling text like that given above and pours a theological slash of generality over it and says of that text what we say of every other text in which the word "love" occurs. Disciplined spirituality requires that we fight the text—that we back it into a corner and make it deliver what the immaculate and original particularity of that particular in that place means. When we do that, spirituality is given theo-discipline. There may be other ways, but I do not know of any other way. When we preach to our people concerning the World Hunger Appeal, we have a way of saying with Christian truth and urgency that our Lord commands us to acknowledge the creatures who are hungry. He doesn't presuppose that we know them or even that we like them or that we think this or that about them. That is not our business. But our Lord says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another."

Now this understanding of spirituality in several steps sets up a life-long contrapuntal engagement between the most profound and deepest articulations of the human reality and that attack upon us by the Spirit of God. In that engagement spirit will be confused, minds will be troubled, difficulties will emerge, surds must be fought through, and the problems of evil must be fought over and over and over again. But by God's grace and by the power of his Word, that which is disassociated from the banal and the obvious is always spiritually reorganized at a different level. And that operation constitutes what one might call a truly evangelical spirituality.