

Spiritualities for Oceania

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DEFINITIONS OR DESCRIPTIONS OF SPIRITUALITY ABOUND, and usually offer a particular insight into what is a diverse and complex reality. Fr Martimort, for instance, offering an analysis of a particular spirituality, suggests four elements: the deepening of a doctrinal point of view towards which one is drawn by the Spirit; the effort to focus that insight and live it around a particular Christian virtue; the tendency to concretize it in particular observances and practices; and finally a community dimension whereby those who share the insight come together to support each other in living it out.¹ The second definition comes from Sandra Schneiders: 'Spirituality is the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms, not of isolation or self absorption, but of self transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives'.²

These two descriptions offer some insights into spirituality. Both suggest that in its concrete embodiment, a particular insight or value becomes a focus of integration for life. Without such a focal point, spirituality can become a loose collection of unconnected activities, a list of practices, a chain of observances, which do not help the person grow spiritually. Spirituality needs to be deeply rooted, and the more one matures in it the more one needs deep roots to support it. The focus on an insight or value gives such a depth, and provides a point of integration that ensures that the spirituality is expressed in a practical and meaningful way. Spirituality is always meant to be lived – it cannot remain theoretical. However, without that theological insight or value, it can become a practice that is not rooted firmly in the mystery of God. When it is expressed in life it becomes a witness to that unique aspect of the mystery which it represents, and enriches the community's appreciation of the mystery.

Particular insights or values can be seen as doorways through which we enter the mystery of God. Each doorway is distinctive, and different people are drawn to it by the Holy Spirit. The doorway is a point of entry, not the whole mystery, and it is important that we do not become over-preoccupied with the point of entry and not embrace the fullness of the mystery itself.

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This article reflects on some of the key themes which emerged for the Church in Oceania from the recent Synod. For me, an important memory of the Synod came in the third week when the participants worked in small groups. The theme of spirituality was at first received with enthusiasm. It seemed such an obvious topic, but it failed to find its way into the final set of propositions to be presented to the Pope. This incident showed that the multiplicity of themes discussed at the Synod could not be expressed in terms of one spirituality. Rather, what is demanded for Oceania is a multiplicity of spiritualities to capture and embody the Synod's many themes and insights.

Church as 'communio'

Church as 'communio' was an important theological theme within the Synod. The Church is a mystery of communion: a people made one within the unity of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Through Jesus, the divine Trinity and his disciples are brought together in a deep spiritual bond. Through baptism, we enter into this communion, which is the source and context of our personal and communal Christian life: the framework within which the Christian journey unfolds. A spirituality of communion fosters relationships of mutual love that bring people together. The more it is modelled and lived, the more it becomes part of our faith culture. One of the challenges for the churches of Oceania is to foster this communion, and to live and proclaim it in an individual and communal way.

A genuine communion with our churches can foster a lasting solidarity and peace among the nations in which we live. It fosters an openness and acceptance of others that is necessary if communities are to live in peace. The indigenous people of Oceania have a strong sense of community in their culture. However, modern influences are undermining it: strong forces of individualism, violence, rejection of authority, traditional conflicts and disputes, all are threatening the network of relationships that are essential to their culture. A spirituality of communion can reinforce the traditional emphasis and give new meaning to its expression. A Christian community which is conscious of, and respectful of, its own relationships, will be able to pass on this awareness to the society and culture in which it lives.

A further challenge to a spirituality centred on communion can be the various new ecclesial movements that have arisen within the churches of Oceania. These groups have helped some people, offering them an opportunity to receive deeper formation and to grow in their

personal journey to God. They clearly offer an opportunity for renewal. However, it can be difficult to relate to such groups if they become élitist and disrupt the unity of the local community. Tension and divisiveness can seriously affect the harmony of the Christian community. In this context, the call to live in communion is particularly challenging.

A particular urgency among Synod members was for more meaningful dialogue with other Christian churches. They called for an irrevocable commitment to a unity that goes beyond a mere friendly liaison to a dialogue which can lead to deep personal and institutional conversion. There is no doubt that such a commitment is among the priorities of churches of Oceania. In some parts of Oceania the Reformation was never a significant event, and the people move easily to ecumenical co-operation. There have been significant meetings of Christian leaders, involvement in spiritual ecumenism and some significant dialogue. Attitudes of recognition and mutual respect have been achieved.

However, effective dialogue varies according to the church with which one engages. There is clearly more collaboration with some churches than there is with others. The challenge is to extend that collaboration so that effective dialogue is being carried out with all the churches. Another challenge is to engage more deeply in discussions about the theological issues which make unity more difficult. So often, ecumenism works well in other areas, but fails to engage effectively in this form of discussion. Unity cannot be achieved until we address these issues, and that makes their resolution all the more urgent.

Another challenge is to relate to the various Christian evangelical movements which are very active throughout Oceania. These often overpower people with attractive resources and money and misrepresent the teachings of other churches. There is often lacking that respect which enables co-operation and dialogue to take place, and which forms the real context of ecumenism. In this context, the task is difficult, but the difficulty of the task should not daunt us. The challenge is to find ways of relating to such movements: common moral or doctrinal ground, agreed values, or some common practices. A spirituality which is shaped around the desire for Christian unity will rise to the occasion.

Evangelization: the word and the cultures of Oceania

Evangelization is an essential dimension of the Church's mission. Pope Paul VI, in *Evangelii nuntiandii* 4, taught that the axis of evangelization is faithfulness to the message and faithfulness to the people to whom we preach it. It is a process in which we bring together, with authenticity and integrity, the Word that we have received and the society and culture in which we live. This process takes place in the personal and communal life of believers. Personally, we are not only called to be holy persons, but holy persons for today. Communally, it is not just something that the community does, it is something that it *is*; and by being it, it does it.

Evangelization is an ongoing process. The immutability of the Word stands in contrast to the great diversity of cultures and societies to which it must be preached, and to the myriad ways in which it can be authentically embodied. This is a process in which past and present meet, to the mutual enrichment of each. Seen in this way, contemporary Christian life is like being at the conflux of two rivers, where the waters meet in great turmoil and upheaval: it is there, in that genuine interaction between tradition and contemporary experience, that an authentic and relevant Christian life is to be formed. In this way, Jesus is born in the particular culture. The future of the churches of Oceania depends on their proclamation of Jesus in a way that resonates with the contemporary experience of their local communities.

The gospel is to be directed to the society in which it is preached. In the more developed countries of the region, especially Australia and New Zealand, it is a society in which religion has moved to the margins, and become private and individualistic. These societies are particularly affected by the current change in philosophical movements which affect modern society. In other places in Oceania, in countries still influenced by traditional cultures, the scene is different. Many of these countries are coming to a new realization of their identity, which is finding expression in the political, social and religious aspects of their culture. Some of these churches are rejecting the inculturation of the faith preached to them historically, because it embodies the culture of the evangelizing church rather than their own. In all countries, the changing nature of life within the universal Church is making local evangelization more difficult.

To begin, the churches of Oceania must recognize the urgency of the situation and accept the challenge. We exist to evangelize. Many of the churches of the Pacific lack finance and personnel, particularly trained

evangelizers. However, alongside this is the fact that all believers are responsible for evangelization, and every believer needs to receive some education for that mission. The task is to find the language: the key words, symbols and images that will enable us to communicate with the contemporary societies. It is not enough to graft the faith on to the culture: it needs to be fostered so that it can grow out of the culture itself. Only then will it be truly indigenous, and it must be indigenous if it is to have meaning and relevance to the world in which we live.

Social justice: ecological responsibility

The Synod affirmed that commitment to social justice and peace is an integral part of the mission of the Church, rooted in the Christian emphasis on the dignity of the human person and the rights associated with that dignity. This is a personal commitment, to be modelled in the lives of Christian people, both individually and as a community. They called for a solidarity among the Christian churches and all people of good will in responding to the social justice issues of Oceania. There was a special concern that we must resist the influences of economic rationalism, materialism, liberalism, liberal capitalism and secularism and the prevailing forces that present economic and material principles as the best arbiter of human needs, aspirations and planning.

Commitment to ecological responsibility is intrinsically linked to the struggle for justice. The Synod participants affirmed the goodness of creation and emphasized respect and reverence for it as the first revelation of God, the initial sacrament in which the divine and human come together. It is an integral part of our human existence, because there is an interconnectedness and interdependence among all created things that reflects the essential interconnectedness and interdependence of the persons of the Trinity. Care of and concern for the environment is the responsibility of every believer. This care for the environment is a significant point of reference where the indigenous peoples of the Pacific and the Church meet.

The environment of Oceania is under threat, by both natural and human forces. Natural forces such as hurricanes, volcanoes, earthquakes, floods, droughts, intense rain periods, storms, and the dreaded tsunami, a seismic sea wave, take their toll on the environment. Oceania is also faced with climate changes that lead to rising sea levels, which infiltrate the soil and poison crops, bringing about coastal erosion that causes the destruction of culturally and spiritually important

sites, such as cemeteries and shrines, and threatens the very existence of some island nations.

As well as these natural disasters human forces are at work. Problems of waste and sewage disposal are fouling scarce water resources, destroying coral reefs, and affecting fish resources. The exploitation of diminishing natural resources by international companies is also affecting the environment and attitudes of self-interest and consumerism aid and abet such exploitation. This attack on the environment not only causes social and economic problems, but undermines the spiritual bond which indigenous people have with creation. The peoples of Oceania have a sense of the spiritual in creation and an empathy with nature. Their spiritualities are a natural expression of the sacred in creation. The violation of creation attacks the very heart of their spirituality.

A spirituality focused on creation can help to re-establish a sense of the divine presence in nature. It can blossom within cultures where there is a natural tendency to find the divine in nature. It makes people's closeness to the environment of sea and land a point of entry into the Christian mystery, and helps all Christians to rediscover the meaning of their belief in God as Creator. Such a spirituality fosters a love and respect for the environment and awakens us to our responsibility to care for creation. This sense of the divine in nature is particularly apparent in the relationship of indigenous people to the land. Land rights are a significant issue throughout Oceania. Spiritualities focused on the land can be especially meaningful.

A concrete approach to such a spirituality was expressed in a meeting of aboriginal Christian leaders in Australia.³ They speak of the pain that the violation of the land has caused, and the sadness of the Creator spirit that the deep spiritual bonds with the land have been broken. They present Jesus as the liberator of the land, and are able to see him in this context as an aboriginal Australian. Such an approach enables them to appreciate Jesus as having kinship with their aboriginal culture. This identification of Jesus with the land offers an important entry point to the Christian mystery for all indigenous peoples, and helps Christians in their search to find key words, symbols, images and concepts that can help the Church to connect with indigenous peoples.

For indigenous people, it is important that Jesus be seen as being born in the indigenous cultures, rather than being transplanted into them. An aboriginal pastor asserts that until Christ is born in Australia, among his people, the Goorie people, the Christian gospel cannot take deep root. The question Jesus put to Peter, 'Who do you say that I am?'

is addressed to the aboriginal context and must be answered by the aboriginal people. It cannot be answered for them by western society. It is the experience of Christ being born in aboriginal soil that makes him part of the culture. This is not done simply by teaching, but rather by the living of a spirituality that wells up out of the local people.⁴

Spiritualities which grow out of people's lives

One of my most striking memories of the Synod is the frequent references to the many people who had contributed significantly to the proclamation and living of the gospel in Oceania. The Synod was about people. Faith and community only exist in people and can only be expressed in their lives. Their contribution is founded not just on what they do, but on what they are, how they integrate into their life the mystery of the gospel. People are conditioned by their personality, their society and culture, their geography, their roles within the Church, and many other factors. No one spirituality can be imposed on all. Integration of the gospel into the life of each person is an individual process, which results in a unique expression of the Christian mystery. Spiritualities are to be fostered and elicited, not imposed. They need to grow out of people's lives.

Marriage and the family are cornerstones of Christian life. The churches of Oceania are feeling the impact of the breakdown of marriage and family life, and the tragic results for both children and parents. Traditionally, marriage and family have received support from the culture, but now, as cultural attitudes change, that support is no longer as strong. Cultures themselves are in a process of change. Some of the traditional aspects of the culture, such as attitudes to women, are no longer seen to be acceptable, and the nature and roles of family members are no longer clear. Societies no longer offer models of long commitments and permanence, so that marriage seems too difficult for many. The loss of the extended family has also weakened the traditional support structure which surrounded marriage. Inroads made by individualism and materialism have also contributed to changing attitudes to marriage and family.

There is a need for marriage and family spiritualities. Those who live out such spiritualities are providing the models of commitment that are desperately needed. They can proclaim the family values in their lives, and show how happiness and fulfilment can be achieved in married life. Both the Church and society depend heavily on the quality of family life to provide stability and harmony in their life. The bringing together

of the human experience of marriage and the Mystery of Christ portrays marriage as a sacrament of generous self-giving and unconditional love. It becomes the symbol of the love between Christ and the Church.

The need of indigenous peoples

The Synod participants made frequent reference to the situation of the indigenous peoples of Oceania. Throughout Oceania, the remnants of historical injustices remain and the wounds inflicted by them are still deep. Remnants of colonialism endure in the social, political and ecclesial life of some indigenous societies. Indigenous peoples are often helpless before the power of international organizations and multinational companies. They lack the economic or political power to address their issues and change their lives, even to stand up for their own rights. They often do not have the freedom to apply the funding resources they receive in the way they consider best.

In some places they have become an ethnic minority in their own country, and feel disenfranchised because of a lack of respect for their identity and development. Throughout the Pacific, they feel deeply the loss of their land to which they are bound by a unique spiritual bond and which represents the source and stability of life. Even the social problems they share with other parts of the world are experienced more intensely by indigenous people: urbanization, poverty, unemployment, overpopulation, malnutrition, illiteracy, lack of educational and health opportunities. At times the corruption of their own politicians and civil servants is a barrier to an economic, social and political reform that would ease their lot.

How important it is to bring the paschal mystery to this situation. There are many people in Oceania who have recognized the needs of indigenous people as a 'sign of the times' and who have dedicated their Christian lives to working for them. An honest acknowledgement of past injustices and mistakes, an apology for their suffering and misery, and a commitment to confront the issues that concern them are essential elements of their spirituality. They work to bring about that reconciliation which is an indispensable condition for an enduring resolution of their issues. The repentance and forgiveness which are part of this reconciliation do not in any way undermine the continued working to rectify the injustices of the past. The encouragement of indigenous liturgies can foster a spirituality which focuses on the needs of indigenous people and helps them to appreciate their role within the Church.

The future for Christianity in Oceania

The implementation of the issues raised by the Synod may seem almost beyond the resources of the churches of Oceania. If we were to see it solely in terms of finding the resources, implementing programmes and thus solving the issues, the situation would look bleak. However, if we see it in terms of integrating these issues into the lives of believers, of presenting them as essential to gospel living, of proclaiming them as part of the mission of the Church, then the situation looks far more promising. Then the power of the gospel is brought into play. Many of the issues of Oceania need to be resolved by governments engaging in good planning, decision-making, and use of resources. However, the development of appropriate spiritualities can transform cultural attitudes and provide a context within which government action can take place and be more effective.

A multiplicity of spiritualities, centred on contemporary issues, will ensure that the mystery of Christ will penetrate the contemporary scene. Spirituality is about embodying in life the realities of the Christian mystery; a variety of spiritualities is necessary to make the embodiment complete. Each spiritual embodiment is like a piece of a jigsaw which contributes to the whole picture, but which in itself is incomplete and partial, even though necessary. Each is like an instrument in an orchestra, making an essential contribution to something greater than it could ever be itself. Each is like a single part of our ecosystem contributing to the health of the whole, but alone unable to sustain life. Excessive individualism and isolation are the enemies of authentic spirituality and will not contribute to the life and mission of the Church in Oceania.

No one person, no one generation, nor any historical period can exhaust the riches of the Christian mystery. Each new generation and age reflects its richness and complexity in a new way. The challenge is to find new embodiments, new wineskins. This can be done by fostering spiritualities around the needs, aspirations and ministries of contemporary people. Such spiritualities are not just passing fads, but real authentic embodiments of the Christian mystery for today. They emerge from a creative dialogue between our tradition and our contemporary experience, and will be a meaningful and significant dialogue with the people of today and a constructive contribution to the resolution of today's issues.

Such an outcome is achievable. It brings together the gospel and the issues of today. In this union we can recognize the power of God at

work, and we can make our contribution to it with trust and confidence that God will bring to fruition what has been begun. The Synod proclaimed a message of hope for the future. Such a hope is well founded on the power of the gospel which, through the lived faith of believers, is able to transform the societies and cultures of Oceania.

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NOTES

1 Fr Martimort, *Bulletin de l'Union Apostolique* (September-October 1945), quoted in Eugene Masure, *The diocesan priest: a study in the theology and spirituality of the priesthood* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1957), p 131.

2 Sandra Schneiders, 'Spirituality in the academy', *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), p 684.

3 Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit theology: towards an Australian aboriginal theology* (Melbourne: Harper Collins, 1997), pp 55-65.

4 Harry Walker, 'Goorie Jesus' in Anne Patel-Gray, *Aboriginal spirituality, past, present, future* (Melbourne: Harper Collins, 1996), pp 107-112.