Across the United States, families gather for annual reunions. These are times to connect, greet new members, tell stories, and participate in familiar rituals like picnics, banquets, and worship services. Grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins travel long distances to attend and in the midst of their busy lives family members celebrate and affirm their shared living. Food, laughter, and tears are abundant. Those who participate in these family rituals that include storytelling, play, and meals return home hopefully transformed and inspired to proclaim the good news of the family and insure the ongoing care for its members.

Telling stories! Participating in ritual! Sharing meals! Does this sound familiar? Catholic Christians experience the same each Sunday when we participate in eucharistic celebration. As part of the Catholic family, we listen to the story of our faith we participate in our rituals singing, praying, kneeling, standing, sending; we partake of the bread broken and wine poured out, all with the promise that our participation in this eucharistic celebration is transformative. We are sent, hopefully transformed to go forth and be good news to one another. Even in the midst of the busyness of our lives we are called to serve one another as disciples of Jesus Christ. How does our spirituality shape and form our response as laity called to ministry and service in the Church?

Spirituality and the Life of the Laity

There are multiple definitions of spirituality. Philip Sheldrake describes spirituality as a lived experience that must be personal and communal:

Each person is introduced into a particular social and inculturated spirituality, which presents Christian ideals and approaches to those ideals

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in a unique way. . . . This second level often revolves around the formulation of teaching, or the development of symbols, rituals, artistic and other expression or guidance about the lived reality or experience and how this is to be intensified. (933)

Beloved educator and religious sister Thea Bowman proposes:

Spirituality is conscious contact with the Spirit that is God, who is above us, who transcends us and inspires us. It is conscious contact with that spirit that is self, with the inner self where memory, imagination, intellect, feelings and the body are caught up in the search for humanity. Spirituality is our faith that is lived out in the community. This spirituality permeates all that we do, as well as the persons/community that we are. Spirituality is at once God-awareness, self-awareness and other-awareness. (84)

If we take these definitions in the context of laity, then spirituality encompasses the life and experience of lay men and women in the Church as they journey toward a deeper relationship with God. This journey has been shaped in recent years by a series of events that have impacted lay life.

On September 11, 2001, life in the United States changed with the attacks of the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. At the time, I was director of high school retreats at a center in the midwest and was responsible for a group of Catholic high school juniors. This experience of sharing with these young women the news of what happened and of journeying with them in the midst of such overwhelming sorrow and loss of life reflects Bowman’s “conscious contact with the Spirit that is God.” The contrast between the solidarity necessitated by that moment and the recent years of finger pointing and vitriol among various groups of peoples with differing views is striking.

The economic crisis that marks the beginning of this decade fosters a sense of disconnect and anxiety among lay men and women who struggle to maintain jobs and/or raise families. The cost of education has skyrocketed obstructing the ability to repay student loans. Unemployment and under-employment cause adult children to move back in with their parents.

Consciously aware of these disruptions in life, The Oprah Winfrey Show spent an entire year focused on “living your best life.” For Oprah, this means focusing on wholeness and the importance of living well in relationship to others. This is not a new concept. As Christians we come together each Sunday to be renewed in our faith, to be reminded that we are all a part of the Body of Christ, that our differences should not separate us. Through shared story, prayer and Eucharist we hope to be transformed once again to be able to go out to be disciples, to love and serve one another in living out the mission of our Church, by “living our best life” with a conscious awareness that even through disruptions we are in relationship with each other.

Vatican II revolutionized our concept of spirituality with its call to universal holiness. This ended what Aurelie Hagstrom describes as Catholic lay people living as passive sheep as we entered an age of embracing and assuming our full share in the mission of Christ that was ours by reason of baptism (Hagstrom, 20). In the 1983 Code of Canon Law the lay faithful were defined as those who have been baptized and have become a part of Christ’s priestly, prophetic, and royal office they are called to “exercise the mission God entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world in accord with
the condition proper to each one (c. 204). The Vatican II document, Apostolicam Actuositatem (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity) (AA), states that the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist nourish the laity for the mission of the church which is rooted in charity and that each member has as duty to participate in the church’s mission in the world and to contribute to its inner life and organization (AA 2 and 3). Hagstrom reminds us that the laity’s relationship to the world is one of living in the midst of the world and its concerns, thus giving their mission a special character. God calls the laity to “exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven, with the ardor of the spirit of Christ” (AA 2). With this in mind, three aspects of lay spirituality suggest a rootedness in mission.

Telling Our Stories
Story shapes who we are and what we do; in the acts of listening, telling, and retelling our stories we are enriched and transformed. Through the sharing of the biblical story and the stories of our holy ancestors our faith is transmitted. Stories, whether human or divine, mythic or parabolic, order experience, construct meaning, and build community (Anderson and Foley, 3). Stories teach us profound lessons about ourselves and our world. They connect us to life’s mysteries and to each other. They heal and restore us (Simpkinson, 25). As members of parishes, as Christians attending Mass on Sunday, we hear the stories of our faith and share our own stories with one another in various venues perhaps before or after Mass. This coming together and sharing our stories can be a source of strength, a means of combatting disconnectedness and isolation, and a way of traditioning generations into faith and discipleship.

Prayer
As a young child, I recited the classic children’s bedtime prayer every night, “Now I lay me down to sleep. . . .” Then my mother taught me the Lord’s Prayer and soon a growing familiarity with this prayer and other formats, like the rosary, expanded my repertoire. When I learned that I could pray in my own words, my prayers evolved into conversations with God. These conversations developed into a relationship with God that helped to inform my actions and choices. As life became busier I found that I had less time to pray, I was less attentive at Mass and began to experience restlessness and anxiety. I suspect I am not alone in this feeling.

As laity, we struggle to find time for prayer let alone opportunities to practice the many spiritual traditions within our church that can nourish our lives. In this internet age, prayer for busy Christians has entered a new realm. Websites like Sacred Space.org, sponsored by the Irish Jesuits, allow those who need a few moments of solitude to pray at their office desks or between their infant’s naptimes. Other sites like the online ministries offered by the Collaborative Ministry Office at Creighton University include such opportunities as a web supported thirty day retreat that accompanies laity across the globe in “the movements of the Spiritual Exercises” without leaving behind their daily lives.

Sharing a Meal: Eucharist
Our church continues to remind us that Eucharist is the source and summit of our Christian life. Lumen Gentium (42) specifically singles out Eucharist and participation in the liturgy as fundamental aspects of lay spirituality. Hagstrom shows how the healing graces of the Eucharist and the spiritual dynamism of the liturgy nourish the faithful in their relationships to God and others. This is fundamental in living out the mission of the Church in the exercise of the lay apostolate in the world. Lately I have developed the practice of coming to church
earlier and sitting quietly before Mass to prepare myself to better receive Eucharist. These few minutes focus me on the communal aspect of Eucharist, attending to community and communion at the heart of service and mission. Eucharist nourishes us to live in a world where we are called to address the many issues that confront our society—hunger, homelessness, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and economic injustice, to name but a few.

Living Our Best Life

The greatest challenge for the spirituality of the laity is one of integration. As Hagstrom insists, the life of faith must be integrated with real life. Amid the daily busyness the challenge becomes making the time to be attentive to the Spirit of the Lord in story, prayer, and Eucharist. Ultimately the spirituality of laity for mission is one of balance, a cultivation of “God-awareness, self-awareness and other awareness” (Bowman, 84).

References


