SPIRITUALITY OF ST. MADELEINE SOPHIE AND THE EDUCATIONAL MISSION OF THE SOCIETY OF THE SACRED HEART

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I would like to begin with some general thoughts about spirituality as we understand it today, then something about St. Madeleine Sophie’s spirituality as I am coming to understand it, and then how I see her spirituality continuing to give direction and a distinctive spirit to the Society of the Sacred Heart and its educational mission.

Spirituality has become something of an “in” word. Today we read article after article about the renewed interest in spirituality as distinct from formal institutional religion and church membership. A recent issue of Time magazine explored the relationship between spirituality and healing. We see courses and workshops offered on Creation Spirituality, New Age Spirituality, Native American Spirituality, Feminist Spirituality, Masculine Spirituality, Spirituality at Mid-Life, Spirituality of the Golden Years. And what can account for the popularity of “Touched by an Angel?” Yet spirituality is a somewhat fuzzy term. There is something otherworldly about it that makes it hard to pin down.

Actually, the term can be understood in several ways. In a purely philosophic sense, we can make a distinction between the material and the spiritual and recognize the human capacity to transcend the self through knowledge and love of another. In a religious sense this human capacity for self-transcendence reaches its highest actualization in a relationship between an individual and a higher power, and this relationship is lived out in some form of personal commitment to a way of life. When we become more specific and speak about Christian spirituality, we understand this relationship with God as a gift of the Holy Spirit, lived out in and through Christ within the believing community.

When we talk about spirituality, we are talking about the inner life of the human person, the perceptions, attitudes, and values through which I interpret my life experiences, and interpretation which then shapes the way I respond to concrete circumstances, to persons and to events. Each of us has a spirituality; it is the lens through which we see meaning and purpose in life, the ground on which we each one of us stands and faces outward to the world and inward to the self.

Who am I, what do I most deeply desire, what gives my life value and meaning? Now that I have made it professionally, now that the mortgage is paid, now that the children are grown, now that I am beginning to think about retirement, is this all there is? We do not find answers to those questions in theological debates of catechisms or papal documents. These answers come from our hearts; commonly from an encounter with mystery, the mystery of ourselves and the mystery who is God, unceasingly calling us through the Spirit, to open ourselves to newness and freedom and fullness of life.

A passage from a book entitled The Art of Passing-Over by Francis Doff captures for me the meaning and the transforming power of spirituality in our life.

A friend of mine once shared an experience with me which she said changed her whole life. As a little gift, she studied the flute with one of the foremost flutists in the country. At one of her lessons, she and her teacher were playing a duet together. All of a sudden the teacher stopped and said, “You are listening only to yourself. You are afraid that you will make a mistake. You are worrying about how you sound and about what I think. I
want you to listen to me... Now, let’s try it again.” Together, student and teacher played through the whole duet without a single interruption. When they had finished playing, the teacher turned to the little girl and with eyes filled with tears said, “For the rest of your life, remember how that felt.”

Spirituality is the way the human heart tunes in, listens to, and moves with God’s ongoing revelation and self-communication as it is playing in all the changing circumstances of human life and in the concrete events of human history. When we are tuned in, when we are listening to God, we bow it we remember how that feels, and our lives do change.

How does the Spirit seem to be calling us now in our time? What has changed? What is changing in the response made by the human heart, the human family, and the Christian community?

To answer that, I have to go back to one of the best kept secrets of the twentieth century, the documents of the Second Vatican Council. There, more than thirty years ago, the Church, reclaimed and rearticulated the truth deeply rooted in Scripture, that all people are called to holiness; by the grace of baptism all have been divinized. Religious life and priesthood were not some “higher states” while married life and single life were for those who did not quite have what it takes. “All the faithful of Christ,” the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church states. “We are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. By this holiness a more human way of life is promoted even in this earthly way of life. In the various types and duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God.”

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern World affirmed the value of this world and of human activity in this world. It encouraged the Church to read the signs of the times and to find God present and acting in the here and now, in political, social and economic life. The Church no longer viewed “the sacred” as a sphere divided from “the secular.” I think that these two documents introduced themes that have become key elements in contemporary spirituality.

Contemporary spirituality rejects dualistic and hierarchical ways of thinking and speaking. We are not split-level beings, nor are we disembodied spirits; the way to God leads to wholeness, to the integration of humanness and holiness. God draws us in the totality of our being; we respond to God in and with and through the totality of our being.

Closely related to the emphasis today on wholeness is the recognition that to be human, to be fully alive, is to be fundamentally, radically, relational. We are one with an interdependent world, one with an interconnected universe. From this follows a yearning and searching for experiences of community, for a sense of inclusion and participation, for a deepened sense of mutual responsibility and a growing awareness of the spiritual and moral significance of social, political, and economic structures and processes.

We can find these themes expressed in rather unlikely sources.

In an article entitled, “Can We Ever Go Back,” in the Wall Street Journal sometime last summer, the author reviewed many of the social problems of American society today: crime, violence, child neglect and abuse, the breakdown of the family structures, corruption in political and economic life. He concluded his cataloguing with the
following statement: “If the source of America’s social disintegration is to be pinpointed so that it might be remedied, honesty compels us to identify the essence of America’s social discontent today as selfishness.” He went on to assert that there are “two things that would solve all of our so-called social problems, neither of which can be legislated by liberals or conservatives. These are self-denial and love.”

I recall the cover story for an issue of “Time” magazine last summer. Entitled “Twentieth Century Blues,” the article explored the theory that modern life really is not what we human beings were designed for. It somehow does not fit our genetic makeup. What we are suffering from is mismatch. The story claims that “There is a kinder, gentler side of human nature than the technological society that we have created forces us to repress.”

We pursue the myth of the more: that I have almost enough, I need just a little bit more, a few more sixty-hour weeks will put me over the top. With a better car, a bigger house, I will be contented forever. “This relentless pursuit of the more keeps us from living our truth, from knowing our neighbors, loving our kin, in general from cultivating the warm, relational side of human nature. Selfishness is making us sick. It smothers our innate human capacity for trusting relationships.”

Is that not why we are here? Are we not doing what we are doing because we experience the need and we believe in the possibility of transforming society; because we want to give our energy to creating a world where love and community and justice and compassion are lived realities, not mere rhetoric? We are here because we believe that the spirituality of St. Madeleine Sophie Barat has something to contribute to the shaping of the world of the twenty-first century just as it has had in the nineteenth and twentieth.

Who was this woman? What accounts for her influence over two centuries? What might she have to say to us now? Can we find in her life of prayer, in the relationship with Jesus, help to strengthen and deepen our own?

We have very little direct knowledge about her life of prayer, about what went on between her and her God. She left us no journals, no retreat notes, no poetry or art or music expressive of her relationship with God.

We do have the letters she wrote, 14,000 of them, during her sixty-five years as Superior General. We also have the Constitutions of 1815 and the conferences she gave throughout the years.

In reading these, we come to know a woman passionately in love with Jesus, her Lord. When she spoke as she so often did of “the Heart of Jesus” she was not speaking of His physical, bodily organ; she was speaking of His whole person, His love, His desires, His attitudes, His feelings, His relationships. She came to know Him by heart as it were. His Heart became her lens through which he looked at the needs of her world. She saw in the Heart of Jesus the symbol of God’s love lavishly poured out, God’s own spirit freely given. To communicate the reality of that love to others and to lead them to experience it themselves became the driving force of her life.

Some may be able to remember the late sixties and the seventies when we tended to teach religion with Argus posters and pop music. One particularly popular poster bore a quotation from St. Irenaeus, a second century Doctor of the Church that read: “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” Only in recent years have I discovered that there
is more to the quotation. “The glory of God is the human person fully alive and the life of the human person is the vision of God.” A contemporary definition states, “Glory does not convey simply the static majesty and splendor of God but is a way of speaking about how God dynamically communicates God’s very life to humanity and to the world.”

Both the ancient and modern statement say to me that giving glory to God has something to do with a mutual exchange, with a reciprocal relationship. God eternally engages in an extravagant, unconditional act of self-giving. To the extent that we open ourselves to let God’s love flood our hearts without imposing our drive to control the agenda, without thinking that we have to earn this love or even worse that we deserve some credit for it, then do we reveal God’s love breaking through in our time, in our world then do we become fully alive, then do we become God’s glory.

I think St. Madeleine Sophie understood that well. For her, to give glory to God, to be fully alive, meant nothing more and nothing less than to be as Jesus was, to do as Jesus did. In Him we learn what it means to be most fully and authentically human. We become that when we enter into an ever-deepening knowledge of and union with the thoughts, desires, and choices of His Heart, when we allow the fullness of His being and the fullness of our being to gift one another, totally, freely.

She would want us to remember that the purpose of the Society of the Sacred Heart was not to teach, not to administer schools or colleges, not to give retreats or engage in social services, but to show forth the love of God revealed in the Heart of Jesus. For her, to give glory to God., to be fully human and fully alive, meant to experience an intimate union with Jesus, to let His spirit form and reform our hearts in the attitudes, desires, and passions with which He fulfilled the mission given Him by the One whom He called Father.

St. Madeleine Sophie would also want us to remember that such a life of union and conformity with the Heart of Jesus is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. It is not of my doing; it is pure gift. Her name for the life of prayer was “interior spirit” which she described as “the ceaselessly renewed recollection of the presence of Him for whom we act. an intimate union of our soul with God... immediate dependence upon the grace of God, upon the touch of the Holy Spirit.”

Growth in interior spirit leads to the realization that union with God is ours now, fullness of life is ours now, not in some misty after-life; not as dessert if we eat our vegetables, not as a reward for our exercise of willpower. We are never going to be loved by God more than we are at this moment. Our capacity to recognize that love, to respond to it, and take delight in it may increase, but God’s love for us is steadfast. God’s love is with us in all our days and all our ways.

And I think she would emphasize with us the importance, the sacredness of living in the present moment. When we stop to think about it, we often live in the past... wishing we had done something differently or reliving our moments of success. And how often we live in the future, with either anticipation or anxiety... maybe things will be better once I get a promotion, or I do not know what I would ever do if such and such a thing happens to me. And we are right. We do not know now how we might respond to an unknown future. St. Madeleine Sophie tells us: “God does not ask of us the perfection of tomorrow or even of tonight, but only of the present moment in which we are acting.” Here and
now, in the concrete circumstances of life at this moment, you and Tin our uniqueness. in
our humanness are God’s glory; we are the manifestation of God’s love to our world
today.

St. Madeleine Sophie embraced the tension of walking along the way that is both/and, a
life lived in union with God in the midst of the nuts and bolts of daily life. She embraced
the mystery of paradox; the mystery of seemingly contradictory truths that lie at the heart
of Christianity, the mystery of Jesus, God made man, giving life through death I think she
would tell us not to try to resolve the tension, but to welcome it. “To give ourselves
generously to God; to live in perfect, absolute dependence upon grace. Our only desire
must be to be precisely and solely what God wants us to be, and that involves nothing
less than an entire surrender of ourselves and our interests into God’s hands. We have
only to let God act upon us and correspond faithfully to His action.”