

Position Paper

Spirituality Committee of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

Introduction

The Spirituality Committee of the Bishops Conference was established in 2002 to be of service to the Bishops in support of their promotion and provision of spirituality within their dioceses. In the past seven years members of the committee have regularly met in different parts of the country in order to reflect, research, and discuss a wide number of topics in the area of Spirituality at a general level and with specific reference to Catholic spirituality. For the past four years a much appreciated Annual Gathering of diocesan representatives has provided us with clear insights into the hopes and expectations of those involved in this ministry throughout the country. From the reflections of this diverse group several key facts have emerged which we would like to bring to your attention:

- The word 'spirituality' itself - while increasingly used in a positive sense in wider society - has not been so obviously welcomed by all within the church and therefore, integrated into the vocabulary of the local church. This may be because it is difficult to define spirituality with the accuracy one would like and also because it was assumed in other terminology.
- A disconnection is evident between the spiritual search of many people - both within the Church and outside - and what is currently provided in many of our parishes.
- The contemporary thirst for a healthy spirituality presents a great opportunity for the Church.

Context

In the minds of many, the word 'religion' is associated with the depressing externals of rules, dogmas and institutions, together with a series of undesirable attitudes such as intolerance, control and hypocrisy. By contrast, the word 'spirituality' evokes in the same people the recognition of an inner life, peace, gentleness, sincerity and unity. While we may feel that this is a false distinction, it is one that is commonly made and is part of our current predicament.

The word 'spirituality' like many important words is difficult to define for no single description seems to do it justice. It means many different things to different people and yet there is little awareness today of an authentic Catholic understanding of spirituality.

How can our Church, reclaim for both her own members and for others, a position in which she is looked to for wisdom, understanding and experience of the spiritual dimension to life? How can she offer, in new and attractive ways, the riches in her care that are considered by other Christian Traditions to be part of the unique Spiritual Heritage of the Catholic Church.

Convictions

What our experience tells us, as a committee, is that (notwithstanding the contribution of the Religious) spirituality should be central, rather than peripheral, to diocesan planning and resourcing. There are many reasons for this but they may be summarised as follows:

- **Spirituality is common to human experience** - people yearn for God and have before them the possibility of a spiritual journey. Spirituality is intrinsic to the

human condition yet many today have no authentic frame of reference in which to make sense of it.

- **It is where Jesus is really encountered** - spirituality is about the real me seeking to engage with the real God. The energy behind a living faith, it is both life-transforming and integrating. Rooted in the Scriptures, spirituality is about personal, intentional encounter with our Living Lord and Saviour.
- **Spirituality is central to the process of evangelisation** - sharing a common language with many in contemporary society; it provides a locus for witnessing to the Gospel and is a potent antidote to secularism and materialism.
- **It is a source of energy for community and change** - a deepening of spirituality is the gateway to deeper commitment and involvement. Central to the call to holiness, it enriches and empowers, providing a sacred underpinning of our common life.
- **It is fostered and rooted in good liturgical celebrations** - spirituality is fed by good liturgical practice and in turn deepens participation in the liturgy.
- **It is the common ground of Ecumenism** - a shared Christian experience despite doctrinal difference which points a way forward for the ecumenical journey.

It will be sought elsewhere if not provided within Church - there is a need to reclaim this territory so that the Church can be seen as a source of wisdom and understanding. People need a spirituality that is experienced and lived both at a personal level and within the context of the Christian community.

It is our conviction that there are rich spiritual traditions within the Church which are largely hidden and unknown to the majority. Yet these resources open up both a meaning and purpose for life and have much to offer contemporary society. Sadly, many of the clergy feel unprepared for what could be their significant contribution and many of the faithful do not have the basic skills required for fostering a spirituality conducive to deepening their relationship with God.

Recommendations

That our Catholic Bishops:

- Commission a teaching document on the promotion of prayer and spirituality within the Catholic Church in England and Wales, highlighting the markers or signs of what constitutes a 'healthy' spirituality.
- Become acquainted with, encourage and affirm those working already in this field within their own diocese.
- Appoint a Diocesan Facilitator/Coordinator/Networker of Spirituality for their diocese.
- Promote the study of Spirituality at all levels: academic, priestly and ministerial formation and catechesis.

The Spirituality Committee
October - 2009

Bishops' Conference Resolution — November 2009

The Bishops' Conference welcomes the Position Paper from the Spirituality Committee and asks that the Committee develop the proposal for a teaching document on the promotion of prayer and spirituality within the Church in England and Wales, highlighting the markers or signs of a 'healthy' spirituality within the Catholic tradition.