

## SEMINAR ON SPIRITUALITY

The 1986 CTSA spirituality seminar was the second discussion in a three year program built around the theme of North American Spirituality. The 1985 seminar dealt with methodology in the study of North American Spirituality and with the subject of discernment in the works of Jonathan Edwards. This year, seminar participants focused on two works—*Community and Growth* by Jean Vanier and *The Long Loneliness* by Dorothy Day—as a means of discerning their contributions to North American Spirituality.

In an effort to maximize time for discussion, members at the 1985 meeting agreed to have only one short presentation. Participants were encouraged to submit a one-page reflection on each of the volumes to be discussed, and these were to serve as the primary basis for discussion. In addition, the seminar was begun with discussion in which groups of three or four persons identified major themes and issues of concern in North American Spirituality. Participants were asked to use their own experience—personal, familial, communal, ecclesial, pedagogical—as a basis for identifying pressing issues in spirituality in the North American context. Seminar participants were then asked to note correlations between our present experiences in spirituality and the spiritual paths of Vanier and Day.

Michael Downey of Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles offered a succinct yet substantial summary of several key points from his extensive research on Jean Vanier. (Harper & Row has just issued Dr. Downey's book on Vanier—*A Blessed Weakness*.) Downey includes Vanier in what he calls the "heart tradition" of spirituality—a tradition that Vanier uses to ground a spirituality centered on communion and justice. Vanier's anthropology emphasizes the affective core of the human person, an emphasis that allows him to include the handicapped in the fullness of the spiritual life. For Vanier, the human person is constituted at the most fundamental level by what he calls the "heart."

Downey traces this emphasis in Vanier to three sources: (1) the history of the term "heart" in the Christian tradition; (2) the scholastic notion of *voluntas ut natura*; and (3) the Thomistic doctrine of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Downey also drew attention to the connections between Vanier's present understanding of spirituality and his dissertation, *Le Bonheur: Principe et fin de la morale aristotelicienne*, in which Vanier linked Aristotle's notions of virtue and human nature, giving particular emphasis to the triad of friendship, justice and contemplation. Vanier sees a correlation between the deep needs or aspirations of the human person, which are at root affective, and the virtues which, because of the Aristotelian influence, he exalts. Justice is related to the human need for life, which Vanier sometimes refers to in terms of the need for freedom. Contemplation is related to the need for light or the need to know God in the experience of vulnerability and dependency. Friendship corresponds to the most important need for love. Vanier

speaks of it in terms of heart, care, woundedness, healing and support. Vanier's spirituality of compassion and openness to the wounded and weak provides a grounding for friendships between persons of vastly different intellectual abilities.

In sum, Vanier's spirituality of the heart is in continuity with classical Thomistic spiritual themes, according to Downey. Vanier's notion of heart expresses the unitive quality of the human person prior to any distinction of acts and intentions. It refers to the affective core of the human person. This notion of the heart allows Vanier to include the mentally handicapped and little child in his description of the human person who is called and able to attain communion with God in love. Finally, Downey sees a correlation between Vanier's spirituality and Thomas' treatment of the beatitudes—the locus or "higher synthesis" where wisdom as contemplation of the truth, justice as pursuit of the good for the many, and heart as the consciousness of love, come together.

Vanier uses the term "heart" to describe the most basic and fundamentally important dimension of the human subject because he sees the person as an affective being, open to attraction, to be acted upon by another, and to be drawn to communion. Knowledge, understanding and deliberation are given a direction by the affect when developed properly. Affectivity, purified by the Holy Spirit, becomes the basis for contemplation and the active life that is characterized by an openness to the weak, the handicapped, and to one's own vulnerability.

A wide-ranging discussion followed. Some sought clarification of specific points in Vanier's system and of its relationship to his own life and to his earlier ideas. Several persons saw connections with Lonergan's work, and the group explored ways in which the intellect/affect might be discussed and related to one another in an articulation of the spiritual journey. Vanier's call to a spirituality that specifically includes suffering and vulnerable persons was seen as a welcome and necessary dimension to North American Spirituality.

On Friday, discussion turned to the spirituality of Dorothy Day. On both days, conversation was enhanced because many of the participants had had first hand experience with Vanier and/or Day and related personal anecdotes that made both figures seem very real. Perhaps because both figures belong to the late twentieth century, the dialogue was characterized by a noticeable immediacy and intensity.

The group noted several aspects of Dorothy Day's spirituality: (1) her intense personality that was reflected in everything she did, both before and after her conversion; (2) her sensitivity to beauty and the ways one might learn from this in a more ecologically conscious spirituality; (3) her prophetic voice in peace and justice issues; (4) her sense of humor and unflagging optimism in the midst of the long loneliness; (5) her inclusive sense of community.

A good deal of time was spent addressing the paradox of the conservative/radical strains evident in Dorothy Day's life (and also to a lesser extent in Vanier). Does a radical life-style in community with the poor and handicapped demand a firm and steady anchor in matters of church and piety? Are persons of such extraordinary grace better able to keep seemingly opposing forces in a balanced tension? What elements of the spiritual life can be transferred from these more narrowly defined communities to other, more broadly based communities? Is it possible that Vanier and Day are just as eclectic about their positions on various

issues as the rest of us? It was noted that a contemporary spirituality needs both to preserve the tradition and to take radical stances in the face of the pressing needs of society. Of course, the specific ways in which this will be done will be determined by the particular situations and personalities involved.

There was a natural flow in the conversation from issues in Dorothy Day's spirituality to the questions of what, exactly, characterizes the North American experience, what are the particular needs in North American Spirituality, and what might the seminar pursue at the 1987 meeting? It was agreed that it is not easy to "characterize" the North American experience, but that an expectation of diversity and a democratic way of living were central and influence the ways in which we understand spirituality.

Issues in American Spirituality that might be discussed in the future came pouring out in great number. I list them here in shorthand form: (1) church-state relations; (2) noise and contemplation; (3) change and stability; (4) the fundamentalist turn; (5) liberal-conservative tensions-polarization in the churches; (6) ecological concerns—creation centered spirituality; (7) individualism and community; (8) spirituality of justice; (9) pluralism; (10) liturgy vs. personal devotions; (11) classical texts, stories, images in North American experience; (12) sacred-secular tension; (13) spirituality of work, of leisure; (14) influence of the women's movement on spirituality; (15) themes of liberation; (16) ethnic and minority concerns in spirituality—Blacks, Americans, Canadians, Hispanics, European traditions, etc.

Time constrictions forced the group to a realistic choice of topic for 1986. Members agreed to read *Habits of the Heart* (Robert Bellah, et al.) and to address these issues: Is American individualism an asset/liability for spirituality? How does the text encourage the identification/discovery of religious symbols in a specifically North American context? How do we see the relationship between biblical/traditional symbols and others that may be operative in our experience and structures of religious meaning?

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