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WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE YOGIS

James Farris

In 1998 I was living near San Jose, California. My wife asked me to accompany her one Sunday to the Center for Spiritual Enlightenment, an interfaith community she discovered in San Jose. Little did I know that this would be a life-changing encounter.

We came into a beautiful church that seats about 250 people, with a full-grown tree growing near the sanctuary, planted in the ground – the church had been built around it! Behind the altar and pulpit were wonderful illuminated metal symbols of the major religions of the world. The service reminded me of the format of a mainline Protestant church, with hymns, readings, prayers, a sermon and a final blessing. The readings were from the scriptures of the world religions. After the readings, a Sanskrit chant was followed by ten minutes of meditative silence. Then the senior pastor preached a sermon that went straight to my heart. Her name is Ellen Grace O'Brian, and she is a gifted leader.

Reverend O'Brian is a yogi, in a lineage of yogis that trace their heritage to Paramahansa Yogananda and beyond. I once asked her how she could maintain an interfaith center without diluting its identity to the point of no meaningful teaching. (I had seen this happen in other interfaith centers). Reverend Ellen responded by saying, "It takes intense discipline." She went on to explain that the ministers and staff of the Center meet daily for mediation and prayer in the yoga tradition, and adhere to that tradition through classes – the seminary training is long. Yoga has a

definite cosmology, philosophical system, spiritual practice and devotional life. The staff at CSE are well acquainted with all these elements and teach them to the members of the CSE congregation. This strength of identity as practicing yogis allows the Center to continue its interfaith ministry without abandoning a strong sense of the central practice of “Sanatana Dharma”, the “Eternal Way” of yogi practice and thought.

The Center for Spiritual Enlightenment anchors its ministry in the Sunday services, but around this core is a constellation of devotional services, educational classes, counseling, reading groups, *hatha* yoga classes, retreats and even group pilgrimages to holy sites of the world. Foundational to these offerings is a class on “The Eternal Way,” which is a three-month course in yoga philosophy and spirituality that culminates in a devotional experience where participants commit themselves to the spiritual life of The Eternal Way as lived in the CSE community. The Center could not function without the services of dozens of ministers and staff teachers, as well as supportive volunteers. This is the ministry of an entire community. The center even follows a liturgical year, in which various feasts from the major world religions are celebrated. This includes Christmas and Easter (with a yogi flavor of their meaning), feasts for Judaism and Islam, and Hindu feasts, as well as Buddha’s birthday.

I began this article by saying that CSE taught me a life-changing lesson. It returned me to a daily meditative practice and moved me to further study the great teachings of India and major schools of Buddhism – without abandoning my Christian faith and its Catholic tradition.

I look back to that experience, which continued for about a year, as I reflect on the needs of Catholic parishes in the 21st century – specifically parishes of my own affiliation, the Ecumenical Catholic Communion. In my childhood, parishes were generally about the work of preparing children for First Communion and Confirmation, marriages and funerals, baptisms, May crownings, confessions, Advent and Lent, Christmas and Easter, and weekly novenas to the Blessed Mother. Occasionally a priest would offer an inquiry class for adults seeking more knowledge of the Catholic faith. Parishes had geographical boundaries, and Catholics were asked to support the parish in which they lived. These boundaries reflect an ancient European practice of laying out entire countries in terms of parishes, as described by an Oxford professor:

“The ideal of a parish was a territorial unit which could offer literally pastoral care for a universally Christian population; its area should be that a priest could walk to its boundaries in an hour or two at most...and now that has ceased to be the case”¹

I had written in other articles that Catholic parishes should move from a 20th century self-understanding to something that would equip it more for the mission of 21st century America. This is not a new idea. Such a structure is found in the tradition of the Catholic shrine. Shrines are everywhere in the world. In Europe, Lourdes, Fatima and Santiago de Compostela are the great names that come to mind when we think of shrines. These shrines offer the life of a parish, but are also a center for spiritual encounter and spiritual development.

I am familiar with the Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation, in Carey, Ohio, near Toledo. Here the Franciscan Fathers offer Sunday and daily Mass, as well as most of the ministries of a Catholic parish. The shrine draws pilgrims from many parishes in Ohio, and other states of the North Central region. Parishes often organize a week-end of spiritual renewal at the shrine in which members will attend talks, pray the rosary, walk the outdoor Stations of the Cross (about a mile long, around the perimeter of the shrine property), go to confession, stop in the main basilica or one of the chapels to pray and light a candle, etc. They may eat at the large cafeteria and also stop at the gift shop. My grandmother told me that, when she was a young woman, many people would gather for a barbecue in the evening, then sleep in the main basilica so that they could alternate between sleep and prayer for the entire night.

Perhaps parishes need to examine their self-concept for the mission of the 21st century: to move from understanding itself mainly as a place for sacramental services to seeing the parish as a center for spiritual development. Certainly the parish would continue its Sunday worship and sacramental ministry as the center of a constellation of ministries. The Sunday experience and sacraments point to even further spiritual depth. Offerings during the week (such as rosary, morning and evening prayer, Eucharistic devotion and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, meditation and prayer, Taizé services, reading groups, bible studies, classes in the spiritual life and pastoral counseling/spiritual direction) are not added “extras,” but integral to the central mission of spiritual transformation. At the

¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2009), p. 369.

center of these offerings might be a longer foundational class introducing parishioners to the spiritual life. The ministries of justice and compassion (outreach to the poor, the sick, marginalized populations, etc.) also require leadership and training for members.

Such a program requires the pastor to understand his/her role as leader of a spiritual center, and requires a team of deacons, catechists, youth ministers, teachers, leaders and administrative support for its efforts. The members of this team need education and some kind of certification for their work, as well as the resources of the diocese (which would organize all parishes for this purpose). Like a shrine, the parish embracing this model understands that its work and mission is not simply the effort at increasing Sunday attendance, but the entire mission of life in Christ – the path of spiritual growth - where every member of the parish is essentially part of its mission and development – those far away and those near, those coming every Sunday and those who come periodically. Their communication is supported by newsletters, on-line weekly commentary, books and pamphlets, days of prayer, retreats, etc.

The “shrine” is open to all as a place of devotion and spiritual encounter, a place of healing and growth. In this model everyone is in ministry, from ordained clergy to teachers, outreach workers, newsletter columnists, spiritual directors and social service coordinators.

In this model, special feasts are celebrated to gather members from near and far to celebrate the events of the life of Jesus and the saints – including the saints of our own lives. The special feasts celebrate life in Christ – as individuals and as a community of faith. Examples of these events can be seen in the parishes of the Ecumenical Catholic Communion. Saint Matthew Parish, in Orange, California has an All Souls celebration that draws people yearly from hundreds of miles away to the special celebrations of remembering deceased family members and friends. On the feast of Corpus Christi, Holy Family Parish, in Las Cruces, New Mexico, draws families and for the day-long event of Children’s Communion Sunday – celebrated with banners, processions and a final picnic. People who come to these events may live hundreds of miles from the parish, but consider themselves members because the pastor and staff are seen as spiritual teachers who guide the life of faith of the community and its individuals.

Such change will become ever more necessary if the parish is to survive in the 21st century. In a time of increasing technology and more alienation from any

sense of community, the parish can offer a sense of belonging – a spiritual family, a spiritual practice of prayer and devotion, and spiritual directors that are a light in the hazy sea of decisions and challenges of modern life.

The great theologian of Vatican II, Father Karl Rahner, wrote, “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all.” The call of this era is the return to a mystical Christianity based upon the experience of Christ in the Church, in each human heart, and in the wisdom of the Gospel. This is realized in a parish structure that purposely directs all its efforts toward the enlightenment described in Ephesians 5:14, “Awaken sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will enlighten you.” In a time that many religious groups offer enlightenment – to be filled with the light of truth – Christianity can turn to its own sources and mystical streams to find the experience of Christ and the Gospel. We are about “putting on the mind of Christ” and realizing that we are “one bread, one body.” To take this seriously is to move our own faith communities to the ancient experience of *mystagogy* – the interpretation of the experience of Christ – as the central effort of the parish. The experience itself is central to mystagogy. The doctrine of the Church is the authentic description and guide of the experience. The experience of Christ comes in the sacraments, the Word proclaimed and studied, the communion with others and in the human heart. To dwell in that experience is to find salvation. Here we move Incarnation beyond the feast of Christmas, and Resurrection beyond the feast of Easter. Here we realize the words of Saint Paul, “I live, yet not I, but Christ in me.” (Galatians 2:20)

If the faith community is to be a shrine – emphasizing spiritual practice and spiritual direction, but centering on devotion and worship – then the ministers of the faith community must be not only devoted liturgical ministers, but also spiritual advisors. In the ancient Church, the bishops were elected because the people saw holiness and wisdom in them. Clergy have always been spiritual advisors when at their best. The Church must now return to the vision of its early love – purified by God, and the world as God’s instrument: “...I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart.” (Hosea 2:13) It is this mystical vision and life that will fire the imagination of the next generation – to call them again to Christ.