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A Newsletter on Spirituality for Church Leaders

January 2008

The Goal

What Is Spiritual Maturity?

Most of us say we want spiritual maturity. We pastors want the people in our congregations to form and deepen a relationship with Christ. We spiritual directors want our directees to respond to the Spirit's loving initiatives. We all yearn for growth in our own relationship with God.

But what is spiritual maturity?

I offer an answer rooted in the Christian tradition: complete spiritual maturity occurs when there is no longer any tension between God's will and our will. We want what God wants. Our purpose and methods follow the path of God's method and purpose. We love as God loves.

Union

The Christian mystical tradition speaks of spiritual maturity as "union with God." We're wise to hear what the mystics say about spiritual maturity because they've thought longer and harder about the trajectory of spiritual growth than most of the rest of us have.

We sometimes dismiss mystics as slightly loony folk who live in monasteries walled off from the real world. Not so. Many pre-eminent Christian mystics have lived in the thick of the world's need. Both Teresa of Avila (1515-1584) and her colleague, John of the Cross (1542-1591), are among the most

insightful mystics in church history—and yet both were tireless reformers, administrators, spiritual directors, and compassionate caregivers. Teresa also pestered the king of Spain when she thought of ways that he could help her work.

The most famous mystic of the late 20th century was Mother

Teresa—and the very fact that we usually don't think of her as a mystic, but as a radical Christian who served the poor in Calcutta, illustrates the point.

In other words, mystics balance prayer and work. They specialize in the question of how to live in union with God while living in the ordinary world—which is why mystics are excellent people to consult when we want to know about growth into spiritual maturity.

Teresa of Avila describes union as the ability to continually see all three persons of the Trinity, which leads to joyful service (*The Interior Castle*, VII.1.6-8). John of the Cross exults over an "intimate embrace" with God (*Living Flame of Love*, 4:14) that allowed him to show remarkable love for Diego Evangelista, an enemy who was trying to ruin John's reputation (Letter 26).



Friendship

Since the language of union is rare today, we need alternate language. So I nominate "friendship": spiritual maturity happens as we and God become better friends.

The Bible has some remarkable language of friendship. Abraham and Moses are called friends of God (Ex. 33:11, Is. 41:8). Jesus says he will abide in us

as we abide in him (Jn. 15:4,9). Paul describes us as a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16).

As spiritual maturity develops, God becomes more of a constant companion throughout the day. Our minds resemble the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5-11). Our praying may no longer use as many words, instead becoming love joining with love, one gentle flame meeting another, leaving us quiet, peaceful, and serene. This motivates us for selfless service to others in the world.

Friendship with God comes in degrees. John of the Cross suggests these degrees are infinite—so that even after a deep friendship is formed in us, we can still explore further facets of God and self. Our maturing relationship with God is therefore inexhaustible.

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Coming in the
March issue . . .

How to find
a spiritual director

The Reality

And How Are We Doing?

We church leaders tend to assume—or at least hope—that as people get involved in church life, they'll grow spiritually. We congratulate ourselves when people attend worship, participate in Christian education, join a committee, and work in the neighborhood food pantry. The more involved someone is, the more likely we are to assume that their spiritual life is fine.

But is that true? Does participating in the life of the congregation actually lead to spiritual maturity?

Willow Creek

I ask because for the last several years I've had my doubts. And newly emerging research from the Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago suggests that spiritual maturity may not be happening in the way we wish. I rarely look to Willow Creek for inspiration on congregational life, yet their research on this question intrigues me.

So far they've surveyed 20,000 people in 31 congregations, including their own; and in 2008, they plan to survey people in 500 congregations. (Willow Creek does everything big!)

Though preliminary, their findings are troubling: they discovered no correlation between involvement in the normal activities of congregational life and growth in spiritual maturity. People with high levels of participation in church life are not necessarily becoming more mature Christians.

That's the overall finding—and the details are even more inter-

esting. In the churches they surveyed, the normal activities of church life are fostering growth in people at the early to middle stages of spiritual maturity—but *not* in the most mature people.

Indeed, some of the most mature Christians are actually thinking of leaving the church. Why?

Because little to nothing in church life is helping them to deepen their life in God. In other words, the people most in love with God may also be the ones most tempted to leave.

Another detail suggests a way forward. The most mature, centered-in-Christ people are finding the greatest intimacy with God in personal spiritual practices which they do on their own outside the formal events of congregational life. These include practices such as spiritual friendship, prayer, Bible reading, solitude, self-examination, and simplicity (www.revealnow.com).

Willow Creek is responding to these findings by helping its members develop a "personal spiritual growth plan" intended to foster maturity in Christ. I don't know if Willow Creek's personal spiritual growth plan is the best response, or how well these findings apply to other congregations.

A Hunch (or Two)

But for several years I've suspected that most congregations, including the ones I've served, are oriented mostly toward people at the beginning and middle stages

of the Christian journey. I further suspect that our congregations are doing relatively little for people who are the closest to God.

In two decades of ministry, I've known quite a few Christians,

both lay and ordained, who at some point in adulthood seem to have stopped growing spiritually. They reach a moderate level of friendship

with God and then halt there for whatever set of reasons.

What role might congregational life play in this stagnation? Is our church life helping or hindering people from moving toward deeper friendship with God?

I wonder if one source of the problem could be the way we've done Christian education. Much adult education focuses on teaching knowledge rather than forming lovers of God. We impart information instead of doing spiritual practices which put us in touch with God's light and love.

I doubt that mere knowledge can align our wills with God's will and thereby deepen our friendship with God. We also need spiritual practices that open new pathways to communion with God.

What would happen if we offered adult classes in lectio divina, centering prayer, and meditating with art? Or classes that explore the art of lament, examen of consciousness, or prayer with bodily movement? Would our spiritual maturity deepen? Perhaps. In any case, I'm curious about what truly makes us friendlier with God.

