Culture
Spirituality



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by James Dearie

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The media Catholics use to consume spiritually enriching content is changing, as well as the way they find it. That means the material people consume is far more diverse, and the roles of gatekeepers are diminishing. The future of the church's spirituality is exciting, say those in Catholic publishing and spiritual direction.

"Catholic people have favorite authors that they've been reading for 20, 30, 40 years," Michael Leach, publisher emeritus at Orbis Books, told NCR, noting that there was a generational divide.

Many older Catholics "get their spiritual nourishment from those familiar faces. People in Generation X, it's a different story. They were born after Vatican II and have a totally different experience of church and spirituality," he said, adding that many get their spiritual reading from bestselling authors or other popular figures, who are often not Catholic, as the institutional church declines.

Younger Catholics also find other sources of spiritual insight as well, including in popular media.

"Movies have always been a source of spirituality," Leach said, adding that films as varied as the often dark and contemplative work of Ingmar Bergman or "The Big Lebowski," a slacker comedy, have been a source of enlightenment for some.

As the publishing world has been turned on its head with the advent of social media, Leach, who also edits NCR's Soul Seeing column, said he suspects that more and more Catholics are turning to each other, via word of mouth or social media, for spiritual guides.

Barbara Wheeling-Bride, editor at popular Catholic site Busted Halo agrees.

"People find us via word of mouth, a lot of people spread Busted Halo through parishes," Wheeling-Bride said, adding that the biggest change for the website in the last few years has been the expansion of social media engagement. "I think people are really drawn to hearing other people's stories of faith, and those seem to be the ones that resonate," she said.

Busted Halo features several podcasts and videos aimed at explaining the faith, which "are always popular," Wheeling-Bride said. Many find the podcasts and videos through searching for answers to their questions about Catholicism online.

"Content that's related to the sacraments, prayer, and big liturgical seasons like Advent and Lent are what people are looking for," she said.

Busted Halo began as a ministry of the Paulist Fathers in 2001, primarily focused on reaching out to young people through presentations and retreats. With the rise of the internet, retreats and public engagement — once among the most prominent ways of engaging Catholics looking to grow in their spiritual lives — gave way to sites like Busted Halo, which are finding not only more ways to reach people, but also a wider audience.

"We have teenagers who are introduced to us through our videos, specifically our Sacrament 101 videos ... [and others] all the way up into the 60s and 70s and beyond, who find us on the web [or] listen to us on the radio show" that Busted Halo produces for SiriusXM, Wheeling-Bride said.

Another trend is the increasing diversity of traditions people incorporate into their spiritual lives. While prayer, parish membership, and devotional reading remain a part of many Catholics' faith journey as they have for centuries, other practices, including those borrowed from Eastern traditions and mindfulness meditation are increasingly popular, and can be integrated with new technology.

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"I find folks turning to apps, like [Jesuit Fr.] James Martin's Examen," Tami Schmitz, associate director of pastoral care at the University of Notre Dame Office of Campus Ministry, told NCR. "I find many looking toward meditation apps, like Calm," as well as podcasts, she said, adding that "time is of the essence" when making spiritual content.

Apps offering short devotionals or daily Scripture readings are on the rise, "but would [many young Catholics today] go away for a weekend retreat? I'm not so sure," she said.

Among young people, "the common thing, generationally, is carving out space for God, the longing for the quiet, meditation, the contemplative," Schmitz said.

Still, Schmitz said she worries about younger Catholics missing out on the other things the church has to offer, and a deeper relationship with Jesus. "When I talk to

students, they really love adoration, because it's time with Jesus, but it's also the quiet, contemplative time," she said.

As getting away from the stress and fast pace of modern student life has become a spiritual issue, the office of campus ministry has instituted Need to Talk, hours during which students can drop in to speak one-on-one with a campus minister, or set up a time to do so that fits their schedules. The program has proven quite popular, and Schmitz said that gives her hope for the future of the church, even as it has been bruised with recent scandals and declining membership.

"If the students come, they will always hunger to be their best selves, to find out who they are," she said, "and if we can give them a space, such as Need to Talk or spiritual direction to help accompany them, I'm really hopeful for the church ... [and that young people will] come to know all the blessings that the faith community has to offer them."

Leach also said he has great hope for the future of the church.

"While there's a whole paradigm shift going on at once in church and world and literature ... I think the whole thing is okay," Leach said. "The Holy Spirit has a way of coming to us before we reach all the way out to the Holy Spirit."

[James Dearie is an NCR Bertelsen intern. His email address is jdearie@ncronline.org .]

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