

## Empirical spirituality

Rich Heffern | Feb. 16, 2010 NCR Today

The suggestion that we might be able to directly experience divine mystery in the midst of our lives, both in our enthusiasms and struggles, that in fact our daily living is the central arena where the encounter with the divine takes place (spirituality) -- these notions were largely unavailable to most of us until recently. We were, in effect, cut off from our most fundamental spiritual nourishment and from the mystical experience that is at the root of all religion.

In Christianity, for example, the accounts of Jesus' birth are telling us, among other things, that the Great Mystery does not visit only the elite, the professional religious, that the divine is found in the most unexpected and unlikely places.

In the Catholic tradition Fr. Andrew Greeley has pointed out that the sacraments -- those bulwarks of our faith -- exist for the purpose of celebrating and hallowing the grace and spirit that have already entered our lives. We encounter divine mystery primarily in our daily living. The sacraments are there to single out and validate those encounters with grace and mystery and enable the whole community to bless and honor them.

The sacrament of baptism, for example, celebrates the miracle and extraordinary gift of a birth that has already happened. The sacrament of marriage consecrates and validates in the eyes of the community a sacred union, a spirit-filled and graced relationship that has already developed between two people. The sacrament does not make holy the relationship; the relationship already is holy, because all of life is holy. Greeley calls this interaction between our life and our worship "empirical liturgy." He suggests that it is having this dynamic wrong way around that causes our worship to be so often bloodless, dull and uninspired.

The Judeo-Christian scripture is a record of one person after another listening to his or her own experience, deciding that experience was God's way to communicate, and then finding validation, counsel, and support in their spiritual traditions. This is what happened to Moses, Abraham, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others in the Old Testament. In the New Testament Paul took his own life to the radical gospel message of Jesus and wove together a whole new theology for early Christianity. Francis of Assisi resonated inside when he heard a passage from the Gospel that confirmed his heart's desire, that supported key movements of his life that he had experienced over and over.

All of these figures in our religious past began with their own life experiences and then took their encounters with grace and mystery to the community and the tradition for critique and support. There is always the possibility we can take wrong turns or travel down to dead ends in our interpretation of our life experiences. We need our spiritual traditions for guidance and help but we also need to listen carefully to our own living.