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To be fully human: Rolheiser gets to the essentials

by John L. Allen Jr.



Fr. Ron Rolheiser (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

ANAHEIM, CALIF. -- If one were to ask a central casting office in Hollywood to find someone to play a bigtime spiritual guru with his own media empire, the choice probably wouldn't look much like Oblate Fr. Ron Rolheiser. Short, bespectacled, and decidedly non-flamboyant, Rolheiser comes off more like a high school teacher with a wry sense of humor than a Catholic version of Joel Osteen, Tony Robbins or Deepak Chopra.

Yet without theatrics or any real self-promotion, the 62-year-old Rolheiser has become one of the most popular writers and speakers on Catholic spirituality in the English-speaking world. His signature book, *The Holy Longing*, has sold more than 200,000 copies in hardback, his weekly column is syndicated in more than 60 newspapers in various countries, and Rolheiser is in perpetual demand to give workshops, retreats, and days of recollection all over the world.

Rolheiser draws on disparate sources such as the Bible, St. John of the Cross and John Updike to weave together a distinctively Catholic approach to life in the early 21st century. It's a style that obviously resonates with a wide cross section of folks.

“He reminds us of what it means to be fully human, and how to live lives of reconciliation and grace,” said Kerry Robinson, executive director of the National Leadership Roundtable for Church Management.

Robinson said that what she takes away from reading Rolheiser is “a mature, adult faith.”

At his best, Rolheiser is that rare thinker who can appeal both to those who have doctorates in systematic theology, and to thoroughly secularized 20-somethings who probably think that Rahner and von Balthasar are the names of German techno bands. While Rolheiser is often praised for his balance, the truth is that he’s less a moderate in church politics than he is beyond them. He’s not concerned with the power of the pope or who gets to be a bishop, but with core human experiences such as loneliness, fear and restlessness, and how the spiritual resources of the Catholic tradition can help postmodern women and men cope.

Here’s a typical Rolheiser story: Arthur Pingolt, a layman and former investment banker who went on to become president of the Oblate Missionary Partnership, says that not long ago he gave a copy of Rolheiser’s *Against an Infinite Horizon* to a fairly traditional elderly friend in his 80s, who liked it so much he bought a copy for his pastor. At the same time Pingolt sent the book to his daughter, a sophomore at the highly secular Arizona State University. Two weeks later, she reported that she found herself re-reading sections during tough times to give her consolation and wisdom.

Few Catholic authors have that kind of cradle-to-grave appeal, across the widest possible spectrum of political and theological outlooks and life experiences.

Rolheiser sat down for an interview with *NCR* during the annual Religious Education Congress in Anaheim, sponsored by the Los Angeles archdiocese. Every year his sessions are a magnet for overflow crowds. This year, Rolheiser’s topics were typically beguiling: “The Philanthropy of the Heart” and “Living Inside Overabundance.”

The Canadian prairie

Rolheiser was born on the prairies of rural Saskatchewan, in central Canada, into a tenaciously Catholic family of middle-class German immigrants. The faith was pervasive in the Rolheiser clan; one of his brothers, Wendelin, now 73, is also an Oblate priest, currently serving as a missionary among Canada’s indigenous people in the north.

Looking back, Rolheiser says the Catholicism of his youth, decidedly stamped by the ethos of the church before the Second Vatican Council, was “conservative, but healthy.”

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“We had First Friday Mass, and I memorized all three Baltimore catechisms. I still know most of them by heart,” Rolheiser said. “I grew up in a conservative Catholicism that anchored me, and still does.”

The young Rolheiser was educated by Ursuline nuns, who, under a unique arrangement in rural Canada at the time, were able to teach in the area’s public schools. Their learning and culture were an early lure for Rolheiser to religious life.

“They were far and away the best teachers,” Rolheiser said. “These nuns were like a beacon of light -- they were coming with master’s degrees, they knew literature and art and so on.”

Rolheiser also got to know the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. At the time, the Oblates were staffing his local parish. Entering the order seemed a natural progression for Rolheiser, even if he never attended their junior seminary because by the time it was his turn, his parents had already exhausted their resources sending two older brothers to the school.

Rolheiser did his undergraduate work in theology at Newman Theological College in Edmonton, Canada, and the University of San Francisco in the early 1970s, and followed up with a master's and a doctorate from the University of Louvain in Belgium in the early 1980s. He spent most of his career teaching theology in Edmonton, with a stint as provincial superior for Central Canada from 1991 to 1997 and in general administration in Rome from 1998 to 2004.

In 2005, Rolheiser became president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, a position he still holds. For someone as consumed by ideas as Rolheiser, taking on a demanding administrative assignment wasn't necessarily his first choice, but he said that it's part of the deal in religious life.

"I wouldn't be doing this job if it weren't for our own community," he said. "I'm like a stay-at-home wife. ... I'd like to have my career going on a different track, but right now the family needs me."

Balancing the various demands he faces, Rolheiser said, requires "a massive discipline in your life" -- a discipline, he said, he's conscious that he can't keep up forever. At most, Rolheiser said, he thinks he can log five more years as the seminary's president, with a sabbatical somewhere in between.

Running wires together

To date, Rolheiser has published seven books, with an eighth, on the Eucharist, slated for release from Doubleday in June. The working title is *Our One Great Act of Fidelity*, based on an old insight from the English Catholic writer Ronald Knox: Christians throughout history have ignored much of what Jesus asked them to do, such as forgiving their enemies and turning the other cheek. There's really just one request the church has consistently managed to honor, Knox said: "Do this in memory of me."

Rolheiser says the ideas for his books flow from three basic sources: the faith of his youth, his wide reading, and his own life experience. In terms of his reading, Rolheiser said the trick is to range over widely divergent material, to see what improbable connections they might spark.

"Sometimes your best ideas come from running different wires together," he said.

"Right now, for example, I'm reading Charles Taylor on secularity. That's sort of my heavy reading. I'm reading Ruth Burrows on prayer, and I'm reading a Barbara Kingsolver novel. The point is that I'm not keeping them in separate categories. ... I try to put them together, to see what they might have to say to each other."

At least in commercial terms, Rolheiser's most successful book is *The Holy Longing*, published by Doubleday in 1999. After opening with a basic meditation on human desire and restlessness, Rolheiser lays out a few "nonnegotiable essentials" of Christian spirituality, and then applies them to core themes such as the church, the Easter mystery, justice and peace, and sexuality.

For the record, those "nonnegotiable essentials" are:

- Private prayer and private morality;

- Social justice;
- Mellowness of heart and spirit;
- Community as a constituent element of true worship.

Rolheiser argued that an overemphasis on one or more of those four essentials will produce a "fractured spirituality."

Prior to *The Holy Longing*, Rolheiser's previous titles had sold in the range of 10,000-15,000 copies, which is not bad for a Catholic niche book, but hardly enough to dent mass-market best-seller lists. *The Holy Longing*, however, became a phenomenon, and catapulted Rolheiser into the A-list of contemporary Catholic authors.

Rolheiser credits Eric Major, who at the time was the religion editor at Doubleday, with the basic idea.

"We had a beer in a pub in England," Rolheiser recalled, "and he said, 'Don't write an academic book. Write a book that as a parent I can give to my adult children who aren't practicing, to explain to them how I understand Christianity and why I still go to church, and which I can read on days when I'm not so sure.'"

Jesuit Fr. James Martin, himself a noted writer on Catholic spirituality, called the chapter on sexuality in *The Holy Longing* "the best short treatment I've ever read on the topic."

"I can't count the number of times I've recommended that book, or that chapter, to people, or the number of times they've thanked me for doing so," Martin said.

Rolheiser said that he thinks the secret to the success of *The Holy Longing* is that it offers a basic guide to today's sprawling wilderness of spiritual resources.

"We live in a culture, and a religious culture, of over-rich plurality," he said. "We're rich in everything except clarity."

"You walk into a religious bookstore today and it's like walking into Tower Records in London," he said. "You're just overwhelmed. You've got a thousand albums, and they've all got attractive covers, so you need a guide to what's good. That's the way a lot of people would see spirituality. I'm a Christian, I'm a Roman Catholic -- what are the essentials?"

The Holy Longing, Rolheiser said, was his attempt to serve up those essentials.

Three spiritual hungers

Piggybacking on the success of *The Holy Longing*, Rolheiser's other books began to find a larger audience, and requests to speak in venues across the Catholic world started to roll in. A decade and a half later, Rolheiser may have spoken on the essentials of Catholic spirituality to more people, in a wider variety of settings, than almost anyone else in the English-speaking Catholic universe.

Among other things, that experience has given Rolheiser unique insight into the spiritual hungers currently percolating among thoughtful Catholics trying to make sense of a 21st-century world.

He highlights three core themes that seem to be bubbling today:

- A pervasive deficit of interiority;

- Individualism and isolation;
- The frightening pace of change.

On the first point, Rolheiser said, "We have an extremely busy, pressured, technologically and informationally driven culture. You walk around an airport and everybody's on their cell phone, everybody's on their iPod. Technology is making us the most communicative people ever, and the most efficient, but I think it's severely impacting our interiority."

The problem, he said, is the lack of time to cultivate an inner life.

"When do we think today?" he asked. "As Thomas Friedman said in *The World Is Flat*, some people call this "multitasking," but I call it being inattentive to more than one thing at a time. A lot of times today if you ask a person what's really deep on his mind, he hasn't thought about it for a long time."

On the topic of a spreading sense of isolation, Rolheiser said the individualism of Western culture is a great gift, but it also takes a toll.

"We're the freest people who ever walked this planet," he said, "but the price we pay is that our family structures are weak, our community structures are weak, and our ecclesial structures are becoming weak."

"All of that isolates people," Rolheiser said, "so there's a lot of deep down loneliness and fear: Who am I, who loves me, who even cares if I live or die?"

Rolheiser said that while there's a certain liberation in "naming" that reality, Christian spirituality has to do more than condemn hyper-individualism. It also has to offer an antidote.

"It's like an alcoholic," he said. "I know I have a problem, but what do I do with it?"

Finally, Rolheiser said, a growing swath of people today find living in a rapidly shifting "global village" to be less exhilarating than alarming.

"If you don't have deep roots, that can be pretty frightening," he said.

"People find themselves in a sea of unfamiliarity, a sea of newness, so things like Islam or immigration or whatever really begin to seem scary. There's a lot of fear predicated on an unconscious, and sometimes almost conscious, sense of "Where's it all going?"

"I see a lot of our civic politics, and a lot of our church politics sometimes, in that light," Rolheiser said. "Many of our attitudes sometimes are fear-based, driven by a root drive to find something to hang onto."

Getting underneath polarization

Rolheiser said while these forces are among the true sources of unrest today, often in Catholic circles there's some preliminary clutter that has to be cleared away before one can honestly grapple with them.

Most commonly, Rolheiser said, one has to "get underneath" the current climate of polarization and infighting in the church.

Whenever he speaks to Catholic groups, he said, "that polarization will be front and center, whether it's spoken or unspoken. The tribes are there, and they're sizing you up, they're sizing each other up.

"What that tends to mean is that the ecclesial questions become central," Rolheiser said. "They're not

necessarily our deep longing questions at all. They're about who has power, who should be ordained, how's the pope handling the sexual abuse crisis, and so on.?

Rolheiser said he learned his approach to "getting underneath" those surface concerns from Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Catholic spiritual writer.

"His premise was that what's most deeply personal and private is also most universal. He'd name this kind of deeply private, guarded experience, often chaotic experience, lonely experience, and even sinful experience, and people would say, "This guy's nailed it. This is how I'm feeling.?"

Rolheiser said that he tries to do the same thing -- to name the elemental human experience lurking beneath someone's ostensible worries and complaints.

"You have to say, "Look, you're worried about politics, you're worried about your mortgage, you're upset about who's going to be ordained, and you think your pastor's too liberal or conservative. That isn't your real issue,?" Rolheiser said.

"Underneath, here's a frightened, lonely person, who has these extraordinary qualities but who's also frustrated about them," he said. "All that other stuff has its relative place, but that's not really it. Let's talk about what's really going on.?"

Do that, Rolheiser said, and much of the left/right polarization fades away, as people make connection at the level of their deepest concerns -- their "holy longings.?"

The good news, Rolheiser said, is that the Catholic spiritual tradition contains a unique set of resources for channeling those longings in healthy directions.

"The early church fathers used to say this, and it's still a great line: "God wrote two books. God wrote the Bible, and God wrote nature. You have to learn how to read both,?" Rolheiser said.

"One of the reasons I'm a Catholic is that I think we have the richest intellectual tradition," he said. "We've got 1,700, 1,800, years of working at that second book.?"

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THE 10 MAJOR FAITH AND ECCLESIAL STRUGGLES OF OUR AGE

Several years ago, the superior of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Rome asked Fr. Ronald Rolheiser to compile a list of the major spiritual questions bubbling in the Catholic world, based on his experience as a writer and speaker. At NCR's request, Rolheiser recently took another look at that list, bringing it up to date in light of what he's seen and heard in the intervening period.

The following is the "Top 10" list Rolheiser put together in late April.

1. The struggle with the atheism of our everyday consciousness, i.e., the struggle to have a vital sense of God within secularity, which, for good and for bad, is the most powerful narcotic ever perpetrated on this planet; to be a mystic rather than an unbeliever.
2. The struggle to live in torn, divided and highly polarized communities, as wounded persons ourselves, and carry that tension without resentment, to be healers and peacemakers rather than simply responding in kind.

3. The struggle to live, love and forgive beyond the infectious ideologies that we daily inhale, i.e., the struggle for true sincerity, to genuinely know and follow our own hearts and minds beyond what is prescribed to us by the right and the left, to be neither liberal nor conservative but rather men and women of true compassion.
4. The struggle to carry our sexuality without frigidity and without irresponsibility, i.e., the struggle for a healthy sexuality, to be both chaste and passionate.
5. The struggle for interiority and prayer inside of a culture that constitutes a virtual conspiracy against depth and serenity -- to keep our eyes set against an infinite horizon.
6. The struggle to cope with personal grandiosity, ambition and pathological restlessness, inside of a culture that daily overstimulates them -- to live inside the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable and to accept that in this life there is no finished symphony.
7. The struggle to not be motivated by paranoia, fear, narrowness and overprotectionism in the face of terrorism and overpowering complexity, to not let the need for clarity and security trump compassion and truth.
8. The struggle with moral loneliness inside a religious, cultural, political and moral diaspora, to find a soul mate who sleeps with us at our deepest level.
9. The struggle to link faith to justice, ecology, and gender -- to get a letter of reference from the poor.
10. The struggle for community and church, the struggle to find the healthy line between individuality and community, spirituality and ecclesiology, to be both mature and committed, spiritual and ecclesial.

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