

Antidotes to spiritual sicknesses

Heidi Schlumpf | Jul. 27, 2012

7 KEYS TO SPIRITUAL WELLNESS: ENRICHING YOUR FAITH BY STRENGTHENING THE HEALTH OF YOUR SOUL

By Joe Paprocki

Published by Loyola Press, \$12.95

As a former editor and headline writer, I know well the appeal of "10 ways" to do this or "5 tips" to do that. So when I saw that Joe Paprocki's new book offered "7 Keys to Spiritual Wellness," I figured it was just his publisher's way of trying to sell books. (Nothing wrong with that!)

As I began to read the book, I wondered if it had been modeled on Stephen R. Covey's business bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, which was smart enough to enumerate its tips for attaining personal and professional success.

By Key #3 or #4, however, I had figured out that Paprocki was modeling his book on a much older, even more tried-and-true "seven habits" list than Covey's -- the seven deadly sins and corresponding virtues.

But instead of scolding about sloth or harping about humility, Paprocki packages the church's traditional prescription for holiness as the spiritual cure to what ails Americans in the 21st century -- and he does it in a down-to-earth, non-preachy way. I do believe this is the only Catholic book I've ever read that includes the word *horny* (see discussion of "cold shower spirituality" below). He quotes scripture but also "Seinfeld"; cites popes and Pink Floyd; and refers to theological greats like Hans Urs von Balthasar but also to popular authors, including Covey.

Paprocki's approach is not dogmatic, but that doesn't mean it's "spirituality lite." In fact, his main thesis is that today's culture is flabby, lazy and sick -- and in need of more than just a low-carb diet and some cardio classes (though some of his real-world examples do involve a 5K). While people often see the need to address their physical wellness, they may miss the need for antidotes to the spiritual sicknesses of selfishness and materialism, he argues.

Paprocki's "keys" are solidly countercultural. In fact, the first instructs the reader to realize "it's not all about you."

"While it's true that we all need a healthy self-esteem, one of the greatest obstacles to spiritual wellness is self-esteem that has been overfed," Paprocki writes. "We have an obesity problem in our society, and it's not limited to physical weight. Our egos are becoming alarmingly obese."

The antidote to overfed self-esteem (the deadly sin of pride) is to see ourselves as we really are, to be authentic (the virtue of humility), he says.

Paprocki practices what he preaches. Although well-known in catechetical circles (he taught for years, served as

a director of religious education and in the Chicago archdiocesan Office for Catechesis) and the author of half a dozen books with sales approaching 200,000, you may have never heard of him -- or may confuse him with his brother, Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill.

Bishop Paprocki may get more press as part of the team investigating the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, but I predict that his brother Joe's star will rise equally high -- and not for being a watchdog of doctrine. Now the national consultant for faith formation at Loyola Press, Joe Paprocki has become a popular speaker at national conferences, where his ability to highlight treasures from the attic of Catholicism resonates with both liberal and traditional Catholics.

In *7 Keys*, he laments that Christianity is often seen as offering only an antiquated code of ethics that promotes what Paprocki calls "cold shower spirituality" -- "an approach that tells us to "just say no" without giving us anything to say "yes" to."

Paprocki gives seekers seven things to say yes to (with handy questions to prompt introspection):

- Seeing yourself as you really are. (Who is your court jester -- someone who loves you but who can tell you when you're full of @#%&?)
- Actively seeking the good of others. (What do you have that cannot be taken away?)
- Thinking before acting. (Is that your final answer?)
- Holding on loosely. (What's your security blanket?)
- Recognizing and setting limits. (What scratches your itch?)
- Seeking beauty. (Where is your dream vacation spot?)
- Unleashing your imagination. (What gives you heartburn -- the good kind that makes your heart burn with passion?)

Despite the controversies in the church -- perhaps even because of them -- the very real message that Catholicism offers a relevant spiritual path needs to be heard now more than ever.

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