

Ongoing Formation 5/2019

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**There are three different kinds of spirituality. We need them all**  
**Fr Ronald Rolheiser**

*Where should we be casting our eyes? Upward, downward, or just on the road that we're walking? Well, there are different kinds of spiritualities: spiritualities of the Ascent, Spiritualities of the Descent and Spiritualities of Maintenance, and each is important.*

Spiritualities of the Ascent are spiritualities that invite us to strive always for what's higher, for what's more noble, for what stretches us and takes us (figuratively) upward beyond the moral and spiritual ruts within which we habitually find ourselves. They tell us that we can be more, that we can transcend the ordinary and break through the old ceilings that have until now constituted our horizon. They tell us that if we stretch ourselves enough we will be able to walk on water, be great saints, be enflamed with the Spirit and experience already the deep joys of God's Kingdom. These spiritualities tell us that sanctity lies in the ascent and that we should be habitually stretching ourselves towards higher goals.

These spiritualities have a secular counterpart, and that is what we often hear from academics who are forever challenging those graduating to dream big dreams, to reach for the stars.

There's a lot to be said for this kind of invitation. Much of the Gospels is exactly that kind of a challenge: keep your eyes trained upward; think with your big mind; feel with your big heart; imagine yourself as God's child and mirror that greatness; let Jesus's teachings stretch you; let Jesus's spirit fill you; and let high ideals enlarge you.

But the Gospels also invite us to a Spirituality of the Descent. They tell us to make friends with the desert, the Cross, with ashes, with self-renunciation, with humiliation, with our shadow, and with death itself. They tell us that we grow not just by moving upward but also by descending downward. We grow too by letting the desert work us over, by renouncing cherished dreams and accepting the Cross, by letting the humiliations that befall us deepen our character, by having the courage to face our own deep chaos, and by making peace with our mortality. These spiritualities tell us that sometimes our task, spiritual and psychological, is not to raise our eyes to the heavens, but to look down upon the earth, to sit in the ashes of loneliness and humiliation, to stare down the restless desert inside us and to make peace with our human limits and our mortality.

There aren't a lot of secular counterparts to this spirituality (though you do see this in what's best in psychology and anthropology). The challenge of the descent is not one you will often hear from a teacher.

But there is yet another genre of spiritualities, a very important kind, namely, Spiritualities of Maintenance. These spiritualities invite us to proper self-care, to factor in that the journey of discipleship is a marathon, not a sprint, and so to take heed of our limits. We aren't all spiritual athletes. Tiredness, depression, loneliness and fragile health (mental or physical) can, if we are not careful with ourselves, break us.

These spiritualities invite us to be cautious about both an over-enthusiastic ascent and a naïve descent. They tell us that dullness, boredom and ennui will meet us along the road, and we should have a glass of wine when necessary and let our weariness dictate that on a given night it might be healthier for us spiritually to watch a mindless sitcom or a sporting event than spend that time watching a religious programme.

They also tell us to respect the fact that, given our mental fragility at times, there are descents that we should stay away from. They don't deny that we need to push ourselves to new heights and that we need to have the courage, at times, to face the chaos and desert inside us; but they caution that we must also take into account what we can handle at a given time in our lives and what we can't handle just then.

Good spiritualities don't put you on a universal conveyor belt, the same road for everyone, but take into account what you need to do to maintain your energy and sanity on a marathon journey.

Spiritualities of Maintenance have a secular counterpart, and we can learn things here from our culture's stress on maintaining one's physical health through proper exercise, diet and health habits. Sometimes in our culture this becomes one-sided and obsessive, but it is still something for spiritualities to learn from: namely, that the task in life isn't just to grow and courageously face your shadow and mortality. Sometimes, many times, the more urgent task is simply to stay healthy, sane and buoyant.

Different spiritualities stress one or the other of these: the ascent, the descent, or (less commonly) maintenance, but a good spirituality will stress all three. Train your eyes upward, don't forget to look downward, and keep your feet planted firmly on the ground.

Fr Ronald Rolheiser

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## **A eucharistic prayer over an awakening world**

### **Fr Ronald Rolheiser**

On the Feast of the Transfiguration in 1923, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin found himself alone at sunrise in the Ordos desert in China, watching the sun spread its orange and red light across the horizon. He was deeply moved, humanly and religiously. What he most wanted to do in response was to celebrate mass, to somehow consecrate the whole world to God. But he had no altar, no bread, and no wine. So he resolved to make the world itself his altar and what was happening in the world the bread and the wine for his mass. Here, in paraphrase, is the prayer he prayed over the world, awakening to the sun that morning in China.

*O God, since I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar, I will raise myself beyond these symbols and make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer to you all the labors and sufferings of the world.*

*As the rising sun moves as a sheet of fire across the horizon the earth wakes, trembles, and begins its daily tasks. I will place on my paten, O God, the harvest to be won by this renewal of labor. Into my chalice I will pour all the sap which is to be pressed out this day from the earth's fruits. My paten and my chalice are the depths of a soul laid widely open to all the forces which in a moment will rise up from every corner of the earth and converge upon the Spirit.*

*Grant me, Lord, to remember and make mystically present all those whom the light is now awakening to this new day. As I call these to mind, I remember first those who have shared life with me: family, community, friends, and colleagues. And I remember as well, more vaguely but all-inclusively, the whole of humanity, living and dead, and, not least, the physical earth itself, as I stand before you, O God, as a piece of this earth, as that place where the earth opens and closes to you.*

*And so, O God, over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day, I say again the words: "This is my body." And over every death-force which waits in readiness to corrode, to wither, to cut down, I speak again your words which express the supreme mystery of faith: "This is my blood." On my paten, I hold all who will live this day in vitality, the young, the*

*strong, the healthy, the joy-filled; and in my chalice, I hold all that will be crushed and broken today as that vitality draws its life. I offer you on this all-embracing altar everything that is in our world, everything that is rising and everything that is dying, and ask you to bless it.*

*And our communion with you will not be complete, will not be Christian, if, together with the gains which this new day brings, we do not also accept, in our own name and in the name of the world, those processes, hidden or manifest, of enfeeblement, of aging, and of death, which unceasingly consume the universe, to its salvation or its condemnation. Lord, God, we deliver ourselves up with abandon to those fearful forces of dissolution which, we blindly believe, will this cause our narrow egos to be replaced by your divine presence. We gather into a single prayer both our delight in what we have and our thirst for what we lack.*

*Lord, lock us into the deepest depths of your heart; and then, holding us there, burn us, purify us, set us on fire, sublimate us, till we become utterly what you would have us to be, through the annihilation of all selfishness inside us. Amen.*

For Teilhard this, of course, was not to be confused with the celebration of the Eucharist in a church, rather he saw it as a “prolongation” or “extension” of the Eucharist, where the Body and Blood of Christ becomes incarnate in a wider bread and wine, namely, in the entire physical world which manifests the mystery of God’s flesh shining through all that is.

Teilhard was an ordained, Roman Catholic, priest, covenanted by his ordination to say mass for the world, to place bread on a paten and wine in a chalice and offer them to God for the world. We too, all of us Christians, by our baptism, are made priests and, like Teilhard, are covenanted to say mass for the world, that is, to offer up on our own metaphorical patens and chalices, bread and wine for the world, in whatever form this might take on a given day. There are many ways of doing this, but you might want to try this: Some morning as the sun is lighting-up the horizon, let its red and golden fire enflame your heart and your empathy so as to make you stretch out your hands and pray Teilhard’s Eucharistic prayer over an awakening world.

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