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The Spiritual Journey

Objectives

Participants will reflect on and voice their own perceptions of the spiritual journey, examine the current understanding of spirituality, recognize the spiritual journey as intricately linked with the human journey, and work with a model through which they can become more aware of the presence of God in their own lives.

Materials Needed

Handouts 1, 2, 3; small table, candle, plant or flower, crucifix, Bible

Notes to the Facilitator

In recent years, people within the church have experienced tremendous changes in their understanding of life, growth, and holiness. We have read sacred Scripture with open minds and listening hearts and have been challenged and called to new awareness. We have broadened our understanding of who the church is and how decisions are made. This has led to a new appreciation of our identity and empowerment as the people of God. We have individually and collectively come to a sense of increased responsibility for the quality of our own lives and the lives of all members of the global community. We have entered into dialogue with the social sciences and found the relationship mutually enriching. We are beginning to participate in a new evangelization that includes all whose faith is weak or nonexistent. We have discovered a new call to discipleship. Finally, through an understanding of the process of inculturation, we have arrived at a new appreciation of ethnic and cultural diversity and the celebration of the gifts of all persons without regard to gender, race, or religious tradition.

This session examines the spiritual journey in which everyone is engaged. The interconnectedness of the spiritual journey and the human process of growth and development will be strongly emphasized in the pages that follow. We are inheritors of a tradition which, since the time of the Reformation, tended to isolate spirituality from the rest of life. In today's church, the people of God are called to integrate life experience and the Gospel message. This is a call to discipleship: to follow the teachings and examples of Jesus to bring about a world in which God's self-revelation and invitation to growth and relationship is experienced.

In your preparation for this session, it would be helpful to consider examples in your own life through which you might further illustrate various points of this session, especially the Experiencing-Processing-Integrating Model. Your willingness to share a bit of your own life journey will be a strong encouragement for others to do likewise.

Resources

Printed Materials

- Bausch, William J. *A Storyteller's Approach to the Spiritual Journey*. Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1999.
- Rahner, Karl. *Prayers for a Lifetime*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995.
- Richard, Lucien. *Living the Hospitality of God*. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2000.
- Rupp, Joyce. *Inviting God in Scriptural Reflections and Prayers Throughout the Year*. Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 2001.
- Svoboda, Melannie. *Traits of a Healthy Spirituality*. Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1996.

Welcoming

It is vital that all participants in this session feel welcomed, comfortable, and accepted. The introductory activity is designed to help people share their names, interests, concerns, and the joys and sorrows of their everyday lives. The opening prayer from the lectionary readings of the week encourages participants to share their spiritual lives at a deeper level. An accepting and comfortable atmosphere results in a sense of belonging and welcoming. Arrange chairs in circles, offer refreshments upon arrival, learn names, and be sure everyone who comes knows how glad you are to have them there.

Introductory Activity

Ask participants to introduce themselves and share with the group one personal characteristic, talent, or gift for which they are grateful. Allow them a few moments of silence to collect their thoughts and then introduce your thoughts first. Invite others to follow.

Lectionary Prayer

Now that participants have met one another and are beginning to be comfortable with each other, the opening prayer brings them into a deeper sense of community. Refer to the Lectionary Prayer section on page xvii for suggestions concerning the opening prayer and a methodology for prayerful reflection using the Sunday readings for the week.

Procedure

Personal Reflection and Small Group Response

1. Introduce this session's theme by reminding participants that the purpose of their gathering is to reflect on and discuss the meaning of spirituality and discipleship and the implications of them for their lives.
2. Distribute **Handout 1**.

Ask participants to spend a few minutes silently reflecting on and responding to the continuum and then gather in small groups to discuss how they responded and why. Stress that in this activity there are no right or wrong answers and that the job of each group member is to listen, not to attempt to convert the speaker to another opinion.

Allow twenty minutes for discussion and ask: As you listened to your group's responses and reasons, did you notice obvious areas of agreement or disagreement? Encourage participants to state these areas and briefly explain them. Do not attempt to comment on them or resolve areas of disagreement. Remind participants that the purpose of the activity was to help them get in touch with their personal beliefs.

Presentation

3. Present the following comments, using your own words.

The church prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) saw itself as timeless and not greatly influenced by historical factors. Consequently, sociology, culture, and psychology were seen as relatively unimportant in understanding the church's life or the lives of its individual members.

Great emphasis was placed on cognitive information, on that which could be grasped and known by the intellect. Catechisms provided a ready supply of answers which were often seen as absolute.

The church tended to be exclusive. Members had the truth and those outside the church were often viewed with suspicion and sometimes with hostility.

Finally, there was a tendency to compartmentalize and polarize realities. Church terminology included such words as *natural/supernatural*, *material/spiritual*, *church/world*, and *religious/secular*. The understanding was that these terms reflected realities that were mutually exclusive, someone or something was either natural or supernatural, material or spiritual, religious or secular. The emphasis was on either/or thinking, not on both/and.

The pre-Vatican II church provided an organized, stable, and protective environment. Emphasis was often placed on externals: on fidelity to rules and regulations, on ritualistic observance, on obedience to authority which was rarely disputed, and on passive participation in liturgy and sacraments. Relatively few people at that time questioned the system or saw reasons why things should not remain as they were indefinitely.

In 1962, Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council to invite the Roman Catholic Church to "open the windows" to the modern world. The council highlighted a process of change, growth, and maturing in which we are still involved today. Gradually, through the council and also through new understandings of the sacraments, liturgy, morality, Scripture, evangelization, ecumenism, catechetics, cultural pluralism, inculturation, and social teachings, we who are the church have moved into a clearer understanding of what we are called to be and do as the people of God.

We have come to understand the significance of sociological, cultural, and psychological factors for the church at large, for dioceses and parishes, and for the individual. We now increasingly celebrate, appreciate, and respect diversity.

We do not dismiss the conclusions of the past. We have come to realize, however, that Christian theology is a commentary on the Christian community's lived experience in every age of the risen Lord. Therefore, both communal and individual experience are to be viewed with deeper respect and sensitivity as the forum for God's activity. Through an appreciation of evangelization, inculturation, and an ecumenical spirit, we welcome and rejoice in the giftedness of all God's people. We respect and celebrate the rich traditions of Christianity and other world religions.

Finally, we have come to a holistic view, a recognition of the goodness and holiness of all creation. We understand that, to paraphrase St. Irenaeus, the glory of God is a man or woman fully alive. We begin to realize that holiness and growth to the fullness of human potential are one and the same thing and that this process involves the whole person in his or her whole life. We see that the spiritual journey is intricately one with the human journey and that the journey to God involves a wholehearted engagement in one's humanity and life. What's more, we are now more aware of a truth that the saints and mystics always understood, but had never been emphasized.

Personal Reflection

4. Distribute **Handout 2**. Invite participants to consider the questions and to quietly write their responses. Soft music can accompany this activity.

Presentation and Small Group Discussion

5. Write the words *experiencing life* on a chalkboard or newsprint.

Share the following information in your own words. Pause for discussion of the question.

From cradle to grave, each of us is subject to countless experiences over which we have little or no control but which have great influence on our lives (e.g., the families into which we are born, the nationality we are, the color of our hair, the fact that we have certain talents and gifts and do not have others). Some life experiences involve other people: falling in love, marriage, finding that perfect job, the birth of a healthy child, establishing and maintaining an enduring and loving friendship. Other life experiences are ones that are challenging and sometimes tragic: the death of a parent, friend, or child; a child born handicapped or later injured in

a tragic accident; the end of a marriage or important relationship; being fired from a job or the failure of an important project.

- ◆ What are some important life events that you and others have experienced? In groups of two or three, share your stories.

Persons are called to holiness through the events of their own lives, and every person's quality of response is conditioned by the willingness to deal honestly with these events. It has been said that each life is like a book which God and the individual person coauthor. If this is true, then it is essential that we live reflective lives and that we give quality time to understanding the events of our lives.

There are many ways in which we can reflect on our lives. The way on which we will focus right now is the Experiencing-Processing-Integrating Model. It describes a process for self-understanding, acceptance, and growth.

6. Write the words *processing the experience* on the board or newsprint. Present the following ideas in your own words. Pause for discussion of the questions.

While dealing with apparently positive life experiences can be relatively easy, change of any kind is often difficult to process. Dealing with negative or tragic life experiences can be more difficult. Frequently much time is required to assimilate the experience, respond to it, and begin the process of acceptance. It has been said that time is the great healer, but when time is accompanied by reflection, not only does one become resigned, but one grows in one's ability to accept and to find peace in the situation. Opportunities for reflection include conversations with others, prayer, diary/journal keeping, long meditative walks, carving out a time during the day to be alone with your thoughts, writing or e-mailing a trusted friend, and engaging in the creative arts.

The task required at this point is one which as fully as possible engages the whole person in dealing with whatever has happened. Painful as this process might be, what gradually occurs is that the person comes to own or internalize the experience. There is a realization that what was at first perceived as tragic, inconvenient, or merely negative has some positive aspects as well. There is peace, acceptance, and an ability to bring the now internalized experience into one's present and future life. Examples of processing life experiences could include the following:

- The couple whose youngest child is killed by a drunk driver. Over a period of several months they go for counseling, join a support group of parents who have

suffered similar tragedies, and learn to respect each other's needs to express their sorrow in whatever ways are necessary.

- The recently divorced man who participates in a program for the widowed, separated, and divorced. He decides to record his anger, sorrow, and pain in a daily journal and gradually notices a shift from obsession with the past to involvement in the present.
 - The older woman who has been told she has terminal cancer. She writes long letters describing her feelings to her younger sister, encourages her immediate family to talk about and participate in her dying, and even chooses the songs and readings for her funeral.
- ◆ What examples can you give of people allowing themselves the time and opportunities to sort out and deal with the experiences of their lives?
 - ◆ What happens when people refuse to accept and own these experiences?

7. Write *integrating the experience* on the board or newsprint.

Share the following comments. Pause for discussion of the questions.

When experiences are processed in a healthy way, they are integrated into one's whole way of being and can become gifts for others.

- Think of the recovering alcoholic who visits a junior high class to describe her own alcoholic illness and recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous.
 - Think of the woman who has survived a cancer operation and who helps to prepare others who are to undergo the same operation.
 - Think of the man who has so carefully prepared himself and others for his death that his funeral becomes a gifted celebration of his life, love, and courageous faith.
- ◆ What examples can you share of people whose life experiences have been integrated into their whole way of being and relating?

It is important to note that not only is there giftedness in terms of a specific experience that has become integrated. There is also giftedness in the fact that the process tends to open a person to opportunities for showing others sensitivity, care, and compassion.

Personal Reflection and Small Group Sharing

8. Distribute **Handout 3**. Invite participants to consider the questions and jot down their responses. Then, in groups of two or three, share their responses.

Closing Prayer

9. End the session with spontaneous prayers of intercession. The facilitator begins by inviting everyone to stand surrounding a small table on which is placed a lighted candle, a plant or flower, and a crucifix.

Pray, in these or other words:

God of all compassion and mercy, we know you are with us this day as we gather in your presence. We have experienced you in many ways: in glorious sunsets, in a child's smile, in kind and loving words, in music and art and dance. We have also experienced your presence at a wake service for a friend, lying in pain in a hospital bed, in fearful nights, in waiting to hear what we expect will be bad news. You are with us in our joys and in our sorrows. We ask you now to listen to us, your people, as we place our needs, fears, and joys in your hands.

For what might we pray today?

10. Invite participants to pray in whatever way is comfortable for them. Each petition is followed by "We pray to the Lord" and "Lord, hear our prayer."
11. Invite one of the participants to proclaim *Ephesians 3:14–21*. Introduce the passage by saying "A reading from the Letter to the Ephesians."

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Close the reading with "The Word of the Lord" and the response "Thanks be to God."

12. End with the Lord's Prayer, followed by inviting everyone to "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord," and to share a sign of God's peace with each other.

Surfacing Ideas

Session 1 Handout 1

Complete each of the statements below by deciding with which of the two conclusions you most agree. Show how much you agree with that conclusion by placing an X very close to your chosen response if you strongly agree with it or farther away if your agreement is less strong.

1. The call to become saints, to become holy, is given to every person only “special” people
2. Becoming holy involves rejecting life embracing life
3. The spiritual journey is more involved with self-control self-surrender
4. The primary activity of the spiritual journey is religious practice human growth
5. “Saints in the making” are all around me rarely encountered
6. Spiritual growth is about becoming aware becoming sinless
7. Spiritual growth involves grappling with the right questions knowing the right answers
8. In my own spiritual journey, the uniqueness of my personality, talents, weaknesses, and life are of little importance of primary importance
9. Growth in holiness is my work for God God’s work in me
10. In my own spiritual journey, religious practice has always been an aid at times has been an impediment
11. In my life, times of reflection and silence are to be avoided as much as possible are a definite need
12. As I reflect on the call to be holy, I feel scared confident

Growing in Life, Growing in Faith

In our lives, there are often many opportunities to grow and change, or to pull back and hold on to what is familiar. All of us, at one time or another, leap forward in faith. All of us, at one time or another, opt for comfort and security.

Look at the following questions and ponder them before writing a brief reflection.

1. How do you define *personal growth* as it applies to you?
2. What experiences in your life have led you to personal growth?
3. What, for you, are the characteristics you have developed that have led you to grow and mature in your personal life?
4. How do you define *spiritual growth*?
5. What experiences in your life have led you to spiritual growth?
6. What, for you, are the characteristics you have developed that have led you to grow and mature in your spiritual life?
7. What are the similarities or differences between the characteristics of personal growth and spiritual growth?

Session 1
Handout 2

Discipleship:
The Journey and
the Mission

9

Experiencing—Processing—Integrating

Session 1
Handout 3

In the space below describe an experience in your life that either has become or is becoming integrated. What happened? How did you work through what happened? How has this become integrated as a “gift” for yourself and others?