

# A Report on a Consultation on Spirituality



CONVENED BY  
THE NOTRE DAME INSTITUTE FOR CHURCH LIFE  
AND THE  
CENTER FOR SPIRITUALITY  
OF SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE

JANUARY 31 - FEBRUARY 1, 1999

**THE WINTER CONSULTATION ON SPIRITUALITY  
HOSTED BY THE NOTRE DAME INSTITUTE FOR CHURCH LIFE  
AND THE CENTER FOR SPIRITUALITY OF SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE**

The popular culture in North America serves as a barometer in indicating an odd and pervasive fascination of many people in what is loosely called "spirituality." This translates into interest in TV shows such as "Touched by an Angel" and "The X-Files," on the "lite" end of the spectrum, to the popularity of books by authors like Scott Peck, Thomas Moore, and Kathleen Norris on a somewhat deeper end. Religious art and music are notable in museum shows and concert performance as well as in book and CD sales in ways that exceed previous expectations. For example, the music of the Anonymous Four, compositions by Arvo Pärt and John Tavener, and the popularity of the chant recordings of the Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos all testify to a new openness to religious and spiritual traditions. Perhaps a younger generation that knew not these treasures are discovering them with surprised interest and fascination. In any case, the theme of spirituality is clearly notable.

Both the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame and the Center for Spirituality at Saint Mary's College recently found themselves in the situation of posing anew the question: Has our mission changed as the world changes around us? Conversations across our institutionally distinct frontiers led to the project of convening a consultation of experts to address how it is that spirituality is evolving in the culture and what we should be paying attention to. The January 31-February 1, 1999, consultation on spirituality was a joint initiative of Notre Dame's Institute and Saint Mary's Center.

A "consultation" is a special kind of forum that presumes that each participant comes as a peer with vision, experience and expertise that is enriching and distinctive. Our days together were thought of as a listening post in which each of us could learn from one another and compare notes. There were no prepared papers for the meeting. Instead, we engaged in a pre-consultation feedback process. By way of a simple questionnaire, we asked each participant to respond to the following questions:

(1) In your experience, are the U.S. Christian churches, in general, and the Roman Catholic Church, in particular, taking advantage of the heightened interest in spirituality in contemporary culture? What are the best positive examples of grass-roots Christian work with programs and education in spirituality?

(2) What are the most dynamic elements in our culture's current fascination with spirituality? What do we need to pay attention to in this area?

(3) Where might a spirituality center go with its programs: share your dreams with us. Note especially what a spirituality center in a context of higher education may contribute from its privileged resources to society and to the churches?

The participants responses to these questions were received and collated so that those attending the consultation could cross-check the interests and concerns of their peers. This gave us an eleven page single-spaced report that showed a great deal of common concern. (That report is available upon request; the participants, of course, had copies of it within the consultation's briefing papers.)

To focus the work of our limited time together, we articulated the following preliminary goals for the consultation:

- To identify the most dynamic/transformational elements in the current thirst for a deeper spirituality
- To identify the best programs and most promising approaches to spirituality in our curricula, formation programs, parishes, etc.
- To brainstorm about discovering what universities, colleges, parishes, seminaries, formation programs, etc., can do in order to best serve our culture's interest in spirituality
- To generate specific advice for the University of Notre Dame and Saint Mary's College, in partnership with other institutions, on what they can do to best serve the spiritual yearnings of the human heart on the eve of a new millennium.

Thanks to the warm hospitality of the Sisters of Holy Cross at Saint Mary's College, we began the consultation formally with the celebration of Eucharist in the Church of Loretto, followed by brunch and an opening session on the campus of Saint Mary's College. In the afternoon of Sunday, January 31, we transferred our activities to the McKenna Center for Continuing Education on the campus of the University of Notre Dame. In the pages that follow, we attempt to provide the development of the conversation that arose in our time together. With the expert assistance of Mr. John Reid, we undertook a careful process of recording both table conversation in our groups of six and plenary conversation in the group at large.

As things turned out, precise recommendations about program targets for the Institute and for the Center were less clear in the consultation discussions than even in the pre-consultation responses. However, the data and insights generated by the consultation are richly suggestive, as you will see. For that reason, Fr. Philibert and Dr. Egan will

provide a final action summary at the conclusion of this report to draw upon the recommendations and suggest ways in which an action plan might emerge.

For those of you who were participants in this consultation, this is a much appreciated chance for us to reiterate our gratitude for your contributions. For those who were not privy to our work, this is our opportunity to express our desire to reach out to partners in many areas of church and society to bring to birth the vision and hopes that are expressed below. May the generous investment of our experts bear much fruit.

Early in our process, we reflected on the pre-consultation responses of the participants and asked once again, “What are the most dynamic or transformative elements in the spirituality movements that we find in our culture today?” The following pages attempt to summarize the conversation and response sheets of the participants in the consultation.

Some summary categories seemed naturally to include the majority of responses. The summary can be described as follows:

1. An interest in stories and a concern for aesthetic and artistic expressions of life experience are becoming prominent in the area of spirituality.
2. Service learning is a path that proves to be life-enhancing for many today. As in Matthew 25, disciples of Jesus today are finding God in the poor.
3. God can be found within the ordinary.
4. The widespread interest in spirituality in our culture is linked to a persistent search for meaning and for a deeper purpose in life.
5. Many responses affirmed the importance of education in contemplative living or in spiritual insight.
6. Hunger for faithful and fulfilling relationships is strong in our society.
7. Other observations that resist grouping in the above sections:

### **STATEMENTS OF CONVICTION**

Following upon the process of identifying transformative elements, we asked each table groups of six to draft some statements of conviction that represent the interests and sharing of those at the table. The hope was to articulate some emerging ideas about the concerns of the consultation. Here are those statements:

**1. Catholic Spirituality.** Catholic spirituality is mediated and nourished by a shared worldview and culture. Formerly, a strong, uniform, authoritarian socialization process led to a widely shared universe among Catholics. This Catholic symbolic universe is the world that imagination constructs out of the story of God’s

people and the stories of the people who interact with that story. To be integrated into this symbolic universe as normative for life is to experience conversion.

**2. Spirituality and Conversion.** The call to conversion is most often a response to the example or invitation of believers who embody living Christian faith. Conversion happens when there is dissonance between who I am and what I perceive as a better kind of living. A result of conversion is that I experience energizing meaning in my life: I am worth something, and I belong to God. This process calls us beyond ourselves to make our lives open to the Spirit's direction and to the needs of others.

*Note the concern to identify the centrality of conversion to the concerns of spirituality. In addition, the conversion described here is not one of agreeing to subscribe to texts, but an aesthetic and cultural awareness of newness related to a way of seeing the world in a Christian perspective.*

**3. Spiritual Companionship.** In the light of the Road to Emmaus story, spiritual companionship is a means for telling, listening to, and connecting personal stories with the story of the community of faith unfolding in the tradition.

*See the interest in linking spiritual direction or mentoring to its biblical roots as well as identifying its potential to enhance faith community.*

**4. Between Exile and Hope.** When cultures (worlds of meaning) break down, we move into a desert or exile where hope of the deepest kind may be (re-)born. This calls forth a narrative journey connecting woundedness and vulnerability to the possibility of hope and flourishing.

*Biblically we see that the poor and the wounded are the privileged clients of the Kingdom of God. Psychologically we observe that cognitive dissonance (which promotes human development) is experienced as a kind of dying to security before it opens out upon new steps into a more adequate cognitive and relational world.*

**5. Excellence in Education.** Whereas our institutions define excellence in terms of mastery, achievement and productivity, we are convinced that integrating spirituality requires defining excellence to include appreciation for brokenness and inadequacy as essential for spiritual development. Debates over Catholic character as well as decisions regarding time, space, and budget priorities should be measured against this redefinition.

After much discussion, we asked the group to summarize needs and opportunities that identify new directions for the churches, educational programs, and others working with the spirituality movement. Again, we use some organizing themes to group the many responses that were forthcoming from the participants.

1. A shift in perspective is needed from obsession with orthodoxy to hospitality of spirit, from competition to compassion, and from protecting power to providing for the powerless.

2. Faith sharing, communities of common stories, processes of adult spiritual formation--all of these are ways of inviting searchers into intimacy with God through the hospitality of communities of hope and love.

3. Educational (and other institutional) initiatives can tap into the ferment of society's interest in and passion for spiritual growth: many different kinds of approaches have been suggested.

4. Some additional issues that escape the above divisions:

- Attend to the Eucharistic crisis (Sunday without priests, without Eucharist)
- Address justice issues *within* our Eucharistic celebrations, rather than seeing Eucharist as a preparation for healing an unjust world

## RESPONSES OF THE INSTITUTE AND THE CENTER

## PART FOUR

### **A. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NOTRE DAME INSTITUTE FOR CHURCH LIFE**

1. Retreats International (an ICL Center) will initiate in Summer and Fall of 1999 professional training and an internship program in spiritual direction and spiritual guidance.
2. ICL's Central Office and the Center for Social Concerns will collaborate with Notre Dame's Department of Theology to design and implement appropriate events to celebrate the millennial Jubilee in the year 2000.

3. The Institute for Church Life in collaboration with its Centers and with departments of the University will inaugurate professional formation in Catholic spirituality for ministry through STEP (Satellite Theological Education Program), its new distance learning program
4. ICL through its Central Office will collaborate with the National Federation of Priests' Councils in a recapitulation study of the Spirituality of the American Priest in observance of twenty five years since the initial NCCB-sponsored publication
5. The Center for Pastoral Liturgy will assure catechesis and formation for Eucharistic spirituality in its June Pastoral Liturgy Conference
6. ICL and its Centers will collaborate with the Center for Spirituality of Saint Mary's College in creating and hosting a colloquium on Spirituality for the New Millennium
7. ICL and the Center for Spirituality will jointly convene their respective staffs to review the consultation report and design appropriate responses to the challenges articulated here; further, ICL and CFS will submit this report and proposals for programs and collaboration to their respective administrative directors before the end of the current academic semester.

**B. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CENTER FOR SPIRITUALITY AT ST. MARY'S COLLEGE**

1. That the CFS continue its already successful programs like the annual Madeleva Lectures, its various endeavors like the noontime lectures in the fall and during Lent (endowed events).
2. That the CFS explore more ways to become a national meeting place for the articulation of a vibrant women's spirituality.
3. That the CFS explore ways of introducing young women to the Catholic spiritual heritage and to ways of making that spiritual heritage appropriate to their spiritual development.
4. That the CFS collaborate closely with the Institute for Church Life at Notre Dame University so that the respective resources of both institutions complement each other in broadening the vision of spirituality in North America and on their respective campuses. The CFS and the Institute should agree to the complementary scheduling of events.
5. That the CFS should continue its search for ways to integrate its spiritual programs with the intellectual, artistic and service undertakings of the staff, students, faculty and administration at the college.
6. That the CFS be in regular dialogue with other departments in the college's Division of Mission so that the CFS may collaborate closely with the efforts of this Division.

7. That the CFS exercise a role of spiritual leadership in the fostering of an effective spirituality for women in the local and national Church.
8. That the CFS find ways to serve the alumnae of the college in effective ways and that the alumnae be recruited as supporters of its endeavors.
9. That the CFS seek further endowment funds so that it can operate without raising the cost of tuition at the college.
10. That the CFS find a full-time female director with adequate credentials and significant experience so that she may be an effective spokeswoman across the campus and as a voice in the national conversation about women's spirituality.
11. That the CFS keep an ongoing dialogue with biblical, liturgical and theological developments in the church.
12. That the CFS maintain a dialogue with other ecumenical and interfaith endeavors in the field of spirituality locally and nationally.