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# Spirituality and Urban Parish Revitalization

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# Spirituality and Urban Parish Revitalization

The connections between spirituality and urban parish revitalization *as concepts* are almost as difficult to establish as the connections between the concepts of soul and body, and the reason is not far to seek. Both sets of concepts refer to realities which are not and cannot be truly separate. Soul and body are not separate, distinct "things", except in a fundamentally flawed theology, any more than prayer and action are separate. One may pray and not be involved in human life and the world, but that is not Christian prayer; one may expend a great deal of energy on good causes and important issues and not pray, but then one's involvement is not Christian action. It is not possible to revitalize an urban (or any other) parish without prayer and the discipline of Christian spirituality.

The definitions of Christian spirituality and urban parish revitalization, although they may be theoretically distinguished, and require various courses of action on various occasions, must ultimately point to the same reality. *Christian spirituality is the individual and corporate working out of the commitments made by the people of God in their baptismal covenant.* These commitments (BCP, pp. 304-5) do not involve creating a distinct religious "department" within our whole human life, but are commitments of the whole of life to faith in Christ and the Kingdom of God which he proclaimed. They involve a community grounded in Holy Scripture and united by the Eucharistic celebration of new life. They are commitments to prayer and study, to the active resistance of evil in the life of individuals and society, to repentance and the proclamation of the Good News of the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death. They are commitments to the service of other people, especially the poor and the oppressed, and to the life-long struggle for justice, peace, and human dignity. These are all *baptismal* commitments. Justice and peace, for the Christian and the Church, cannot be separated from prayer and worship. All Christians, not just urban activists, are committed in this way.

To return to definitions, *a revitalized urban parish is one in which the individual and corporate implications of the baptismal covenant of the people of God are being worked out.* And the process of revitalizing an urban parish is the process of beginning to work out these baptismal commitments. Both the process and the product can be usefully examined under the headings of teaching, worship, and mission. These categories correspond to the traditional headings of creed, cult, and community, and include all of the specific commitments made in the baptismal covenant.

1. **Teaching.** In the first three questions in the baptismal covenant, Christians are asked to believe in God the creator, in Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose again for the salvation of humankind, and in the Holy Spirit manifest in the holy Church. A vital parish can be built on the full and clear teaching of the historic, Biblical faith. But the implications of this Faith are made clear in other parts of the covenant. Faith in God, in Jesus, and the Spirit, involves commitment to justice, peace, and human dignity. It is essential to be clear that the Kingdom of God, which Jesus proclaimed, is a kingdom of justice and peace, and the service of the outcast and the poor is a mandate of the Gospel. Social action is not an option for some who are "into" that sort of thing, but the required response of the community of faith to God's redeeming love for all people. Right belief and right action are inseparable. The Letter of James makes this relationship plain:

If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:15-17)

Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God initiated a radical transformation of human relationships, both for individuals and for society. The teaching of the whole Catholic Faith must issue in radical political action. Less than the whole Faith means accommodation with injustice and the forces of war and oppression. A revitalized parish is one in which the whole Faith is taught with diligence and acted on with courage.

2. **Worship.** The urban parish is not revitalized solely by right teaching (indeed, many of our churches seem to get along without much teaching at all!) but also by right worship. The term *orthodox* after all refers to the right way to praise and glorify God. The local parish is not a "base of operations" for some priest's pet project but the flock of Christ, whose sustenance with the Word and Sacraments is the priest's chief task. The urban parish church must be first of all a center of worship. Only in the parish Eucharist will the congregation find the nourishment necessary for their tasks of mission to the poor, building their community together, and evangelization of the wider neighborhood. Worship becomes the center of all community activity, the center from which priest and people go out into the world to heal the sick, bind up the wounded, release the captives, and bring peace to a strife-torn community of nations.

The revitalization of the parish means making the church a place of prayer and the people a praying people. Prayer is the relationship of the people to their God. Its corporate expression is the Eucharist and its individual manifestation is every cry of every heart for peace and justice and hope and daily bread. That prayer and social action are not opposites but aspects of one Christian life should by now be a commonplace. Jurgen Moltmann expresses this point well when he says:

Meditation and liberating love for the various realms of life complement each other and lead us even more deeply into the community of Christ. The Christian lifestyle arises in the field of tension between the silence of contemplation and the struggle of love for the life and freedom of others. In this field of tensions there emerge fragments, breaks, and often inconsistencies, but they point beyond themselves. The new life is seldom experienced other than as "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair" (2 Cor. 4:8).

The church as a place of prayer has implications for diocesan and parish policy with regard to buildings. The urban church is a sacrament of the Kingdom, an outpost of the liberated zone of human freedom in a land of oppression and utilitarian disregard. Churches need to be open. The cult of the Church, both corporate and individual, — prayer, in other words, — is not an option for the Christian or the revitalized urban parish, any more than social action in the name of the Kingdom of God is an option. The cult is the connecting point, the sacramental means of communication between individual, community and God. Because it is such a focal point of communication, it is the source of all our power to work and serve in God's world.

3. **Community.** The teaching and the cult take place in a context, and that context is the Christian community, the local church, in the first place, and in the second place, the larger community of neighborhood, city, nation and world. Christian teaching builds a Christian community, precisely as another sort of ideology will create another kind of community. And Christian Eucharist and prayer builds a community which is characterized as "the people of God," in virtue of the people's relationship with God in worship.

It is important that the concept of community which the local church attempts to incarnate be firmly based on Christian anthropology. The Christian doctrine of "person-in-community" avoids the extremes (which are heresies) of individualism and collectivism. This doctrine stands over against the theoretical individualism of modern capitalist society, and the actual experience of individuals in America of submersion into a faceless mass. The churches, alone of traditional institutions, stand forth in society as a locus of community

values, which respects the individual but at the same time supplies the human need for *koinonia*, for fellowship with one another. This is what it means to say that the Church is the "body of Christ."

Building community in an urban parish church is a very different process from creating a secular urban commune or monastic society. In the urban parish, people live in family, neighborhood, and work relationships that are often quite separate from their church community. The revitalized urban parish can provide the focal point — which is the point of the intersection of God and the world in teaching, worship and community — for enabling the people of God to live out the implications of their baptismal covenant in the three areas of lay ministry: family, community (neighborhood), and work. Robert A. Gallagher's *Stay in the City* is an excellent model for the practical aspects of Christian community in Church and world. Gallagher also bases his conception of a revitalized urban parish on the essential unity of spirituality and parish revitalization.

Christian community is engaged community. It is the people of God engaged actively in their relationship with God, through Scripture, sacrament and prayer, and engaged in their work in family, neighborhood and workplace, in service to the poor and the oppressed which is the sign of the coming in of the Kingdom. Such community can only be built "by prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:29), but the life of such a community — the revitalized urban parish — is a life in which spirituality and Christian community and social action are bound as closely together as soul and body, the breath of life and the dust of the earth from which human beings are made.

# The Baptismal Covenant

*Celebrant* Do you believe in God the Father?

*People* I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

*Celebrant* Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?

*People* I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.  
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit  
and born of the Virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried.  
He descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again.  
He ascended into heaven,  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

*Celebrant* Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?

*People* I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

*Celebrant* Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and  
fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the  
prayers?

*People* I will, with God's help.

*Celebrant* Will you perservere in resisting evil, and, whenever  
you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

*People* I will, with God's help.

*Celebrant* Will you proclaim by word and example the Good  
News of God in Christ?

*People* I will, with God's help.

*Celebrant* Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving  
you neighbor as yourself?

*People* I will, with God's help.

*Celebrant* Will you strive for justice and peace among all  
people, and respect the dignity of every human  
being?

*People* I will, with God's help.

# A Rule of Life

Adopted by the Third National Assembly of the Episcopal Urban Caucus  
New York City, February 12, 1982

In our Baptismal Covenant, we, the members of the Episcopal Urban Caucus, like all Christians everywhere

—believe in God, and the reign of God on earth as in heaven, a kingdom of justice and peace;

—believe in Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God made flesh for our salvation, and the Good News which he proclaimed to the poor and the oppressed, the year of the Lord's jubilee;

—believe in the Holy Spirit and in the holy Church, God's power to reconcile and to liberate us as individuals and as community.

In response to God's creative, redeeming and sanctifying love for us, we commit ourselves to the mission of the Church with the poor. This mission is rooted in the gospel, and will only be sustained by the life of prayer. For mutual support and empowerment in the cause of God's kingdom, we accept for ourselves, as Christians and as members of the Episcopal Urban Caucus, the following Rule of Life:

1. To continue in the apostles' teaching — to commit ourselves to some form of regular study, centered in scripture, the Book of Common Prayer, and knowledge of the society in which we are called to ministry;

2. To continue in the fellowship — the discipline of community, openness and availability to one another, that recognizes and celebrates mutual dependence and strength in solidarity with the total human family;

3. To continue in the breaking of bread — and as we participate in each Eucharist, to carry its brokenness into the world that it may return to oneness.

4. To continue in the prayers — to seek and wait upon the Lord's plan for the holy city, upholding one another in prayer, praying for ourselves and praying for the city in which we dwell, within the terrible urgencies of hunger, loneliness, violence and lostness that come from our exile in a strange land;

5. To resist evil has cosmic and social as well as individual dimensions. One arena of our resistance is every form of action for social change. The other is summarized in the three classic ascetical practices of fasting, praying, and almsgiving. These are weapons in our struggle against "the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). We accept our bishops' call to fast one day each week as an assault upon these engines of destruction.

6. To repent and return to the Lord is likewise corporate as well as individual. We confess to God and to the Church because our sins harm not only ourselves but the whole Body. We are committed by our Baptism continually to return to the Lord and to our struggle for the liberation of all creation.

7. To proclaim the Gospel is integrally related to work and struggle. We cannot proclaim good news until we have shared the sufferings of the poor. Empowered by that sharing, we can proclaim by word and example the freedom and joy which is God's purpose for all people. We act in the world in Jesus' name. Our action is our proclamation.

8. To seek and serve Christ in all of our life means more than religious exercises. Our life in family, in the larger community, and in our work place, is the arena of service to Christ. We must oppose those forms of work that further human suffering, and act in solidarity with all who work for human liberation.

9. To struggle for justice and peace is always the task for Christians. Our struggle is a continuation of the struggle of Jesus — in the desert, in the Garden, on the cross. Our goal is his: the Kingdom of God, justice and dignity for every human being, and peace among all nations. If there is no justice, there can be no peace. We will strive to be peace-makers, and advocates for all oppressed people.

*Adopted 2/12/82*