

Pastor's Corner - 10 April 2011 - Stages of Spiritual Life

In the March 23rd issue of the Prairie Messenger Ron Rolheiser, OMI, wrote on how "our spiritual struggles change with the seasons of our lives." I invite us to reflect on it's relevance in our lives: "As a young man, Nikos Kazantzakis, famous Greek writer, contemplated becoming a monk and once spent a summer touring monasteries. Years later, writing on the experience, he recounts a marvelous conversation he had with an elderly monk, Rev. Makarios. At one point, he asked the old monk: "Do you still wrestle with the devil, Father Makarios?" The old priest sighed and replied: "Not any longer, my child. I have grown old now, and he has grown old with me. He doesn't have the strength I wrestle with God." "With God!" Kazantzakis exclaimed in astonishment. "And you hope to win?" "I hope to lose, my child," the old man replied, "my bones remain with me still, and they continue to resist." Among other things, this story highlights the fact that our spiritual struggles change as we age and go through life. The struggles of youth are not necessarily the struggles of mid-life and beyond. Maturity is developmental. Different things are asked of us as we move through life. This is also true for spirituality and discipleship.

How does our spiritual life change and demand new things from us as we grow? ... There are three fundamental stages to our spiritual lives ... The first level John of the Cross calls the dark night of the senses, which might aptly be called Essential Discipleship: this is the struggle to get our lives together. It begins at birth but becomes more our own individual struggle when we reach puberty and begin to be driven by powerful inner forces to separate ourselves from our families so as to create a life and a home of our own ... we struggle to find ourselves, to get our lives together, to create a new home for ourselves. This can take years, might never be achieved. For most everyone, some elements of this struggle will continue throughout their entire lifetime.

But, there comes a time when this is essentially achieved, when there is a sense of being at home again, when the major questions of life are no longer: Who am I? What will I do with my life? Who loves me? Who will marry me? Where should I live? What should I do? At some point, most of us find a place beyond these questions We have found our way home again.

We then enter the second level of discipleship which John of the Cross calls Proficiency and which we might call Generative Discipleship. In essence, this is the struggle to give our lives away. Our main concern ...how to give our lives away so as to make the world a better place. These are our generative years and they are meant to stretch from the time we land in a vocation, a career and a home, until our retirement years. Our questions are altruistic ones: How do I give myself over more generously and more purely? How do I remain faithful? How do I sustain myself in my commitments? How do I give my life away?

But those are not yet the ultimate questions. At some point, a still deeper question begins to arise in us, one which invites us to a third stage of discipleship. Henri Nouwen: the question becomes: "How can I now live so that when I die my death will be an optimal blessing to my family, the church and the world?" John of the Cross calls this stage the dark night of the spirit. We might call it Radical Discipleship because at this stage we are not so much struggling with how to give our lives away but with how to give our deaths away. Our question becomes: How do I live the last years of my life so that when I die my death will bless my loved ones just as my life once did? How do I live out my remaining years so that when I die "blood and water" will, metaphorically, flow from my dead body as they once flowed from Jesus' dead body?

Too little within our spiritualities challenges us to look at this last stage of life: How do we die for others? However, as Goethe puts it in a poem, The Holy Longing, life itself will eventually force us to contemplate whether or not we want to become "insane for the light."

Shalom, Fr. Rolf, OP

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Rolf" with a horizontal line underneath the name.