

**THE SPIRITUALITY
OF THE EDUCATOR TODAY
(1/2)**

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This was a talk given by the author, the President of CONACED (Catholic Schools of Colombia), to the members of the organization.

The themes are an adaptation of the FERE documents (Madrid, 1993): "Way of Hope" and "Builders of a New Society".

1. Preamble

It is not an easy task to speak about the "spirituality of the educator today". The meditation that I will attempt to make "out loud" is just the beginning of a reflection that I want to continue developing from a Thomistic point of view as part of a spirituality applied to the educator in "an educational context".

I will begin by stating **what is not spiritual** so that by contrast it will be evident what is the "essence and the task of the spiritual".

1. What is spiritual cannot be lumped together with what is moral because then we would reduce it to relational terms between persons and to the quality of "ethos" or the atmosphere created by these relationships.

2. What is spiritual is not what is founded on principles and values or relationships that are open and consistent, or based on mutual respect; neither does it consist in personal qualities which demonstrate the highest values, nor by religious attitudes that are shown.

What is possible is to accept that the reference point ought to be the distinction between what is material and what is spiritual: what is material is all that reality that is identified, contained and limited by physical reality; what is experiential is all that reality that seems to go beyond physical limitations, including even if it is controlled by it: feelings, an experience of love, kindness, beauty; a feeling of wonder, surprise or simply a sensation or an intuition that "life should be much more than what is here below".

Perhaps we might get a clue as to what is understood by "the spiritual" with a word used to describe extraordinary spiritual experiences, such as "ecstasy", which means "going out of oneself", "being transposed".

For St. Thomas "that which is spiritual" is the development of all those aspects of life that "**draw us out of ourselves**", when we appreciate beauty, goodness and truth.

The following example may serve to help us understand the Thomistic thesis better as it is applied to the world of education: as an educator I am surprised as I evaluate how my school deals with this appreciation of beauty, goodness, truth in the way that these concepts stand out in the ornamentation: the colors, figures, forms, the human body, messages, bulletin boards, discussions, attitudes, witness, etc., that express in an obvious way the concern for what is spiritual.

Another example: the commitment of an educational center for the field of music, theater, choral singing or orchestral interpretation, oral or poetic performance, a picture or architectural exposition, etc., these are moments in which the realm of the physical is overcome and the realities of the spiritual are deepened.

Moments such as these are sure milestones along the journey of spiritual growth. The opportunity to be entranced in an experience of sheer beauty, with regard to a creative type of activity, such as in music, the arts, literature, science or in theater shows, at a deep level, the capacity of a human being to transcend himself, to be attracted, to come to know what it is that surpasses physical living for the present moment in terms of feelings and gratification. Perhaps in experiences like these one can find the first sign of a vocation or a call and perhaps this may also be a key aspect of spiritual development.

As we have come to realize, "spirituality" is not possible to define nor is it linked to a particular type of devotion; Sami Hatem, FSC says that it is not a spiritual theory either.

Sandra Schneiders, in her book translated from English "Spirituality in the School" (1989) offers some clarity defining Christian spirituality "as the field whose objective is the Christian spiritual life as an experience".

McBrien is even more explicit when he describes "spirituality" as "our way of being Christian in response to God's call".

But in my view the French author Jean Marie Thouard, FSC, is the one who most spells out the meaning of the word "spirituality" when he states that "a spirituality is the profound, practical and existential attitude which is the consequence and the expression of the concept that mankind is formed by his religious existence. It is an active and habitual life decision to begin with objective intuitions and most consequential decisions" (Taken from the Dictionnaire de Spiritualité).

"Spirituality embraces all of life", says J.M. Thouard, "in its goals, aspirations and practices and in its decisions. It is the engine of freedom and of praying

in the most consequential decisions. By means of this all-encompassing character, one can say that spirituality is sufficient to define, guide and develop the commitment, for example, of the **educator**".

The spirituality of the Christian educator can be summed up in these three expressions:

1. A faith in which salvation is contemplated.
2. An educational ministry where that salvation is the primary commitment and
3. A type of praise where salvation is celebrated.

In the next two sections we will approach this synthesis of the spirituality of the educator: as seen from the eyes of faith and from the spiritual ministry as an educator.

2. What spiritual as seen with the eyes of faith

After having taken this position concerning the topic of spirituality, let us go one step further and approach "what is spiritual" as seen with the eyes of faith, because it is faith that will give us a more penetrating insight. The first and obvious reference brings up our belief in God. Such faith places us before the author of all beauty, all goodness and all truth. It urges us to respond to these things as a revelation of their author. From this base is our interest towards the created world, our respect towards others, our understanding of just how much our minds and hearts are enlightened to find in everything a new meaning and profundity. That faith is what enables us to speak of spirituality as a response to God.

The previous terms are those which are used by masters of the spiritual life such as St. Francis, St. Clare of Assisi, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. John Baptist de La Salle and others, for whom the spiritual life is always a way of knowing ourselves as we are in the presence of God; to understand that everything we have comes to us as a gift of God and that without God we are nothing and we have nothing. These saints, some founders of Catholic Christian schools, have given a deep spiritual content to members of communities who have founded and through their actions and writings, have left their mark on pedagogy with another type of spirituality.

For Saint John Baptist de La Salle his spirituality was centered in Faith and Zeal (service); for St. Ignatius Loyola, it was freedom of the heart; for St. Joseph Calasanz "if a child is formed in piety and letters, he will succeed in transforming society"; for St. John Bosco "preventive education: religion, reason, love, work".

For these and other founders of schools, their spirituality was centered in the understanding and acceptance that God come to meet us in every event, in each circumstance, in each person, in each child, in sickness, in health, in happiness, in work, in love, in good relationships as well as in difficult ones. The great spiritual challenge is for us to simply really recognize that God is coming to meet us and that we respond to this meeting with Him with an open heart.

Let us see in this marvelous text of how a founder of a Christian school such as a Lasallian one, make a perfect relationship between the educational task and the spiritual mission: "Since God in his mercy has given you such a ministry, do not falsify his word but gain glory before him by unveiling his truth to those whom you are charged to instruct. Let this be your whole effort in the instructions you give them, looking upon yourselves as the ministers of God and the dispensers of his mysteries". (Meditation 193.1).

In almost all schools there is the practice of greeting the entire school community and then listening to a short "reflection", "good morning", "instruction", "meditation", or as the students call it a "short sermon". That moment is, therefore, an essential part of their spiritual development. This is as true for this moment as it is on a higher level for the celebration of the Eucharist, Communion, Confirmation, the celebration of the Word, prayer, and also for a classroom lesson, recreation time, physical education class, a patriotic event or cultural event, etc. Why are we surprised to think that the task of maintaining order and discipline in a school can be an occasion for impeding the opportunities for spiritual development since order and discipline are in themselves essential although they are not identical to spiritual development, they are simply a necessary condition.

We are touching on very sensitive areas of our mission and therefore I would invite you to be very much aware of anything that might act contrary to our objective: the spirituality of the educator. But spirituality is not a pipe dream nor is it a reality that is beyond our reach; no, spirituality is a continuing state of the soul, the spirit, the heart, that has its basis for the educator within the school environment.

The creative atmosphere with this type of perspective in each office in the school, in each classroom, in all areas contributes to moral and spiritual formation that later will spread to other areas, to groups of friends, to the street, the city, society. We are now speaking of *Evangelization*, a special task of a spiritual life.

The educational vocation necessarily presupposes a joyful embodiment on the part of the educator in the culture, history and the social reality of the people he serves.

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