

Miscere colloquia: On the Authentic Renewal of Catholic Spirituality

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Introduction

THE CONGREGATION for the Doctrine of the Faith replied in 1989 to requests from the particular Churches to assess then-emerging forms of prayer, especially as these new forms affected the practice of meditation and contemplative prayer. The “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation” (*Orationis formas*) provided “sure criteria of a doctrinal and pastoral character” to help bishops instruct the faithful on the true nature of Christian prayer in accordance with the authentic Magisterium of the Church.¹ It considered proposals, advanced especially during the latter decades of the twentieth century, that called for supplementing the Christian tradition on prayer with a “new training in prayer,” and it also warned that those who promoted such “new training” consciously sought to incorporate elements that theretofore had been judged “foreign” to the Catholic heritage.² Specifically, *Orationis formas* addressed the use of “meditation methods . . . developed in other religions and cultures” that had begun to exercise a certain influence among the Christian people at the same time that “many traditional methods of meditation, especially Christian ones,” had become forgotten, neglected, or otherwise had fallen into desuetude.³

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II had signaled the central place that prayer holds in the life of those who are members

¹ “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation” (*Orationis formas*), no. 1.

² *Orationis formas*, no. 2.

³ *Orationis formas*, no. 2.

of the Church. In his first encyclical, the 1979 encyclical *Redeemer of Man* (*Redemptor hominis*), the Blessed wrote:

We feel not only the need but even a categorical imperative for great, intense and growing prayer by all the Church. Only prayer can prevent all these great succeeding tasks and difficulties from becoming a source of crisis and make them instead the occasion and, as it were, the foundation for ever more mature achievements on the People of God's march towards the Promised Land in this stage of history approaching the end of the second millennium. Accordingly, as I end this meditation with a warm and humble call to prayer, I wish the Church to devote herself to this prayer, together with Mary the Mother of Jesus (see Acts 1:14), as the apostles and disciples of the Lord did in the Upper Room in Jerusalem after His ascension (see Acts 1:13).⁴

The "succeeding tasks and difficulties" to which Blessed Pope John Paul II referred in 1979 are being accomplished providentially and met successfully in the succeeding pontificates. Special witnesses to the authentic renewal of prayer among the Christian people have occurred, for example, at the successive World Youth Days held in various countries and wherever the faithful have gathered in numbers to celebrate with their priests the sacraments of the Eucharist and of Penance, especially during the course of pilgrimages to the Marian shrines around the world.

As if to underscore the important place that prayer holds in the life of the Church, Blessed Pope John Paul II later took up the theme of prayer, emphasizing that "prayer develops that conversation with Christ which makes us his intimate friends: 'Abide in me and I in you' (Jn 15: 4)."⁵ The Blessed's reference to communication and friendship draws our attention to the dual realities that true prayer both embodies and perfects: active colloquy and abiding communion with God. Only Christ can establish this salvific *conversatio* with those whom he has consecrated in Baptism: "The new man, reborn and restored to his God by grace, says first of all, 'Father!' because he has now begun to be a son."⁶ The Church, in fact, teaches authoritatively that "prayer is fully revealed to us in the Word who became flesh and dwells among us."⁷ For this reason, the universal vocation to holiness can be realized and fulfilled only through a distinctive kind of exchange and communion that the Holy Spirit makes possible in

⁴ *Redemptor hominis*, no. 22.

⁵ *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (January 2001), no. 32.

⁶ St. Cyprian, *De Dominica oratione* 9 (PL 4:525A), as cited in the Catechism, CCC, no. 2782.

⁷ CCC, no. 2598.

the Body of Christ. Christian prayer flows from the supernatural life of the believer, and achieves an end that surpasses the good of the entire natural order.⁸ This is the case since all true prayer practiced in the Church remains ordered “to contemplation of the Father’s face.”⁹ Thus, Blessed Pope John Paul II, in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, emphasizes the “Trinitarian shape of Christian prayer,” and declares that this “shape” gives a distinctive form or character to every prayer worthy of the name Christian.¹⁰

The publication in 1993 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which embodies “a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion,” established an important reference point for all sound instruction about the nature, kinds, and purposes of Christian prayer.¹¹ Part Four of the *Catechism* is dedicated exclusively to what the Church believes and holds about prayer. It explains how the Christian mystery establishes “the basis for our prayer, the privileged expression of which is the ‘Our Father,’ and . . . represents the object of our supplication, our praise and our intercession.”¹² Just as Jesus Christ infuses every true prayer with its form, so also the one Savior of the world definitively and authoritatively instructs his people how to pray efficaciously unto salvation.¹³ “His prayer to his Father,” as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further reminds us, “is the theological path of our prayer to God.”¹⁴ When in the present economy of salvation,

⁸ This affirmation follows from what has been clarified, most recently, by the Magisterium in the “Declaration” *Dominus Iesus*, especially at no. 7: “For this reason, the distinction between *theological faith* and *belief* (“credulitas”) in the other religions, must be *firmly held*. If faith is the acceptance in grace of revealed truth, which ‘makes it possible to penetrate the mystery in a way that allows us to understand it coherently’ (*Fides et ratio*, no. 13), then belief (“credulitas”), in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the *human* treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration, which man in his search for truth has conceived and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute” (last emphasis added).

⁹ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 32.

¹⁰ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 32.

¹¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum*, no. 3.

¹² *Fidei Depositum*, no. 2.

¹³ CCC, no. 2607: “When Jesus prays he is already teaching us how to pray.”

¹⁴ CCC, no. 2607. The 1994 English version of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also retains the word “theological” when it describes the first three petitions of the “Our Father” as “more theological” (no. 2803). French spiritual authors sometimes distinguish between the terms “théologique” and “théologal.” The former term describes what pertains to theological study and learning, whereas the latter denotes what pertains to the divinized life and practice of the Christian believer. In the seventeenth century, the English poet John Donne in *Pseudo-martyr* would still write that the “Theologall vertues, Faith, Hope, and Charity, are infus’d from

however, this “theologal path” is absent or eclipsed, prayer and those exercises that are said to foster prayer fall short of achieving the *imitatio Christi*. Such simulacra of prayer, since they no longer embody the “Trinitarian shape,” become something other than *bona fide* means of continuing the great mystical tradition of the Church of both East and West. Although some exercises—for example, lessons in regulated breathing—may produce a certain therapeutic physical benefit, any exercise that is incapable of embodying and sustaining the “Trinitarian shape” of Christian life contributes nothing specific to the development of ecclesial communion, and therefore it should neither occupy a place within the mission of the Church nor engage the energies of persons when they serve, under any title, in her name.¹⁵

This essay follows upon what has been taught in *Orationis formas*, and it assumes whatever this document from the Holy See has already clarified, especially about erroneous ways of praying.¹⁶ At the same time, this essay addresses a broader and more diverse number of putatively spiritual and other exercises that, in the intervening years since the publication of *Orationis formas*, have become associated with the life of the Church, especially in some regions of the world. Specifically, the present essay aims to identify certain doctrinal difficulties associated with programs of spirituality that have become popular among Catholics, and to explain why sponsoring these and similar programs should not be confused with providing authentic spiritual and pastoral care.¹⁷ In many places, these non-traditional programs are offered at centers of spirituality and wellness that have sprung up during the post-conciliar period, especially on premises that once were used to house members of religious institutes of women or of men, such as novitiates, seminaries, and motherhouses.¹⁸ By

God” (190), but today the English word “theologal” is not widely employed. However, in order to emphasize the utter uniqueness of a human life that is infused with divine grace and shaped by the theological virtues and because of its employment in the *Catechism*, the word “theologal” is retained in several places here.

¹⁵ Certain activities or circumstances, for example, the choice of a favorable place (see CCC, no. 2691), can prepare and dispose us for true prayer. Also, the elimination of distractions, such as television and other incompatible noises, or the engagement in legitimate activities that are calculated to make the human person become less tense or anxious, can help prayer, though these preparations for prayer should not be confused with praying itself.

¹⁶ *Orationis formas*, nos. 3, 8–12.

¹⁷ Code of Canon Law (CIC) cc. 213 & 214.

¹⁸ It of course may be the case that the motive for introducing the non-traditional programs is well-intentioned, for example, to maintain properties in the care of the Church or to produce revenues to support sick and aging members of institutes of consecrated life.

recalling certain essential elements of authentic Christian spirituality and prayer, this essay is meant to help Catholics to evaluate the spiritual exercises that are carried on by persons and in institutions officially identified with the Church.

1. “*Cum Christo miscere colloquia . . .*”: The Theological Character of Christian Prayer

To exchange conversation with Christ ranks among the highest privileges granted to the person who has been baptized into his Body.¹⁹ The particular conversation which is prayer holds a special place within the graced structure of the Christian life and of the virtues that shape and sustain it. Saint Thomas Aquinas, for example, identifies the essential and principal acts of the virtue of religion as devotion and prayer.²⁰ Prayer belongs to the practice of religion inasmuch as this activity expresses in specific ways the honor and reverence that the human creature owes to God. In his human nature, and especially by his obedient self-offering in love on the Cross, Christ embodies the supremely religious man. Because he is the Head of the Body, his Church, the same interior dispositions that Christ possesses in his human nature establish the norm and measure for those of every human creature. Christ, the interior Master, teaches us, then, how to pray with devotion. It would be difficult to imagine the exercise of true religion in the absence of devotion and prayer. How else could the human person demonstrate loving submission of will to God, or practice a reasonable exchange of words with Him?²¹ These activities are considered actions internal to the human person because they require the conscious exercise of the rational powers of the soul, or, in the preferred metaphor of the Scriptures, of the human heart. It is, of course, the whole man who prays, but “if our heart is far from God, the words of prayer are in vain.”²²

¹⁹ The phrase “*cum Christo miscere colloquia*” is attributed to Saint John Chrysostom by Saint Thomas Aquinas in *Summa theologiae* II–II, q. 83, a. 2, ad 3: “Unde Chrysostomus dicit, ‘Considera quanta est tibi concessa felicitas, optare quanta gloria attributa, orationibus fabulari cum Deo, *cum Christo miscere colloquia*, quod velis, quod desideras, postulare’” (emphasis added). In his *Catena Aurea* on Luke 18:1, Aquinas employs the same excerpt, which may have come from a Latin catena of texts that contained excerpts from St. John Chrysostom’s *Commentary on Matthew*.

²⁰ Thus, Saint Thomas Aquinas, *ST* II–II, qq. 82 & 83, prologue.

²¹ Prayer is like “spoken reason.” In *ST* II–II, q. 83, a. 1, Aquinas records a saying from the *Exposition on the Psalter*, *Psalm* 38 (PL 70:285) by the sixth-century monk Cassiodorus: “Dicendum quod secundum Cassiodorum super illud, *Exaudi orationem meam*, oratio dicitur quasi *oris ratio*.”

²² CCC, no. 2562.

“Spiritual progress tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ.”²³ Saint Paul recognizes the immediacy that attaches to the practice of the Christian religion, even as he acknowledges that it requires sacramental mediations and personal mediators. Thus he warns the Corinthians: “So let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor 3:21). Prayer, as the prefaces of the Roman rite observe, unites angels and men with God.²⁴ More specifically for the human person, prayer develops a communion of life between the Persons of the Blessed Trinity and the Christian believer such that each member of the Church enjoys a proper relationship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christian prayer then constitutes the normal expression of the participated divine life that the baptized enjoy as a result of sacramental incorporation into the Church. Its wellsprings include the Word of God, the liturgy of the Church, and the virtues of faith, hope, and charity.²⁵ The reception of the Eucharist remains the privileged sacramental instrument of communion available to the Christian believer. As the encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* puts it, the Eucharist forms “the culmination of all the sacraments in perfecting our communion with God the Father by identification with his only-begotten Son through the working of the Holy Spirit.”²⁶

The Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacrifice of Christ form one single sacrifice.²⁷ The effective instrument of Christ’s sacrifice is his human will, which assents in love and obedience to the command given him by the Father.²⁸ The harmonious communion in Christ of his two wills, divine and human, establishes the ontological ground for the communion that prayer both realizes and strengthens in the Church.²⁹ The theological

²³ CCC, no. 2014.

²⁴ For example, the “Praefatio De Angelis” concludes: “Per quem multitudo Angelorum tuam celebrat maiestatem, quibus adorantes in exultatione coniungimur, una cum eis laudis voce clamantes . . .”

²⁵ See CCC, nos. 2653–60.

²⁶ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 34.

²⁷ See *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 12. Also, no. 16: “The Eucharistic Sacrifice is intrinsically directed to the inward union of the faithful with Christ through communion; we receive the very One who offered himself for us, we receive his body which he gave up for us on the Cross and his blood which he ‘poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’ (Mt 26:28).”

²⁸ See *ST* III, q. 47, a. 2, especially ad 3: “He fulfilled the precepts of charity out of obedience, and was obedient because of his love for the father who had given him the command.”

²⁹ See for instance what Aquinas says about Christ’s own need to pray in *ST* III, q. 21, a. 1. See also *Dominus Iesus*, no. 10.

tradition roots this harmony of wills in the beatific vision that the human mind of Christ enjoyed during his earthly life.³⁰ Because he knows intimately the loving purposes of the Father, Christ is able to accomplish the will of the Father. “The human mind of Christ,” so Saint Thomas Aquinas held, “constantly rises up to God for it constantly contemplates him as existing above it.”³¹ In the Christian pilgrim who lives by faith and not by vision, prayer raises mind and heart to God, and effects between God and man a supernatural friendship. It is given to Moses to adumbrate this aspect of the mystery of Christian prayer: “Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex 33:11).³² The Church further recognizes that “Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ.”³³ Accordingly, when God grants the gift of prayer to the believer who asks for it, this expression of the divine benevolence comes in the form of an unmerited covenantal grace, which like every “divine initiative in the work of grace precedes, prepares, and elicits the free response of man.”³⁴ Only Christ, in strict equivalence, merits for the members of the Church the grace of prayer, which like the Eucharist supplies a pledge of future glory. “Thy Kingdom come!”³⁵

Prayer cannot be taken for granted. “We have to learn to pray,” Blessed Pope John Paul II reminds us, “as it were learning this art ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master himself, like the first disciples: ‘Lord, teach us to pray!’ (Lk 11:1).”³⁶ Christian prayer then should not be confused with

³⁰ See *Mystici Corporis*, no. 75: “Now the only-begotten Son of God embraced us in His infinite knowledge and undying love even before the world began. And that He might give a visible and exceedingly beautiful expression to this love, He assumed our nature in hypostatic union: hence—as Maximus of Turin with a certain unaffected simplicity remarks—‘in Christ our own flesh loves us’ (Sermo XXIX: PL 57:594). But the knowledge and love of our Divine Redeemer, of which we were the object from the first moment of His Incarnation, exceed all the human intellect can hope to grasp. For hardly was He conceived in the womb of the Mother of God, when He began to enjoy the beatific vision, and in that vision all the members of His Mystical Body were continually and unceasingly present to Him, and He embraced them with His redeeming love.”

³¹ *ST* III, q. 21, a. 1, ad 3: “. . . intellectus Christi semper ascendit Deum, quia semper contemplatur ipsum ut supra se existentem.”

³² See *CCC*, no. 2576.

³³ *CCC*, no. 2564.

³⁴ *CCC*, no. 2022.

³⁵ *CCC*, no. 2632: “By prayer every baptized person works for the coming of the Kingdom.” But also see *ST* II–II, q. 83, a. 15, ad 2: “Quia vero homo non potest alii mereri vitam aeternam ex condigno . . . , ideo per consequens nec ea quae ad vitam aeternam pertinent, potest aliquando aliquis ex condigno alteri mereri.”

³⁶ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 34.

merely human activities that perfect mind or body. Nothing that the human person constructs or enacts alone is equal to Christian prayer. Because this holy conversation (*conversatio*) comes as a totally free gift, the Christian is instructed to petition God for it, even under the movement of an actual grace.³⁷ Indeed, the saints identify a humble steadfastness in beseeching the gift of prayer as a sign of one's predestination. No vocation in the Church flourishes absent in the one who pursues it a spirit of humility. The virtue of humility grounds the human creature's petition for the gift of prayer, as this virtue does the reception of every fruitfulness in the Christian life.³⁸ It is axiomatic for growth in the Christian spiritual life that one never outgrows the need for humility.³⁹ This necessary disposition in the believer is strengthened day to day by a holy perseverance, for as Saint Augustine wisely reminds us, "Man remains a beggar before God."⁴⁰

It is the human person's ultimate dependence on divine Wisdom for obtaining truth that warns against the vice of *curiositas*. The spiritual tradition recognizes in man a hankering to pursue whatever may capture one's attention. Dissipating curiosity indulges this penchant for the exciting and transitory things of life. As such, they are distractions, and distractions steer one's attention away from those perfective goods that lead man to God. Saint Augustine captures the delicacy of attention that is required to fix one's whole being on the true good, to avoid as much as possible being distracted by distractions. In the *Confessions* he reports: "I go no more to greyhound coursing; nevertheless in the open country if I happen to be passing when a hare starts up, the sight of the chase will happily distract me from some weighty thought; if thou dost not show me my weakness, and swiftly admonish me to rise from sight to thee and to scorn it and pass from it, I become trivial and dull."⁴¹ Abstracting from particular interpretations of what constitutes sinful curiosity and recognizing that the sin consists not in knowing a truth, which is essentially a good action, but in the appetitive disorder to pursue distractions, the fact remains that the spiritual heritage of the Fathers, Doctors, and saints of the Church acknowledges a penchant in man to become interested in

³⁷ See CCC, no. 2000: "actual graces . . . refer to God's interventions, whether at the beginning of conversion or in the course of the work of sanctification."

³⁸ See ST II-II, q. 161, a. 5, ad 4: "Et sic humilitas est quasi quaedam dispositio ad liberum accessum hominis in spiritualia et divina bona."

³⁹ In order to emphasize the relationship between humility and holiness, Gregory the Great, in his foundational work on Christian headship and pastorship, metaphorically puts humility at the very origins of Christian salvation: "the lesson found in our Redemption is the humility of God" (*Pastoralia*, Bk 3, 1 [PL 72, 78]).

⁴⁰ St. Augustine, *Sermo* 56, 6 (PL 38:381), cited in CCC, no. 2559.

⁴¹ *Confessiones* Bk 10, no. 35 (PL 32:803).

things that do not lead him to God.⁴² When this *curiositas* intrudes into the practice of prayer or shapes exercises that are described as spiritual, a special danger arises. The very instruments that are meant to restrain the vice become themselves infected by it. Instead of conversation with Christ, the person is left with the anticipations of prideful lust, and begins to search for union with an object other than God.

2. “And Wander into Myths” (2 Tim 4:4):

New Developments in the Non-Traditional Programs

Orationis formas signaled the danger of a syncretism that one could anticipate from the diffusion of eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world.⁴³ Within the context of mental prayer, syncretism would be defined as a form of meditation that failed to distinguish adequately between the human person’s aptitude for a certain kind of natural mysticism and a mystical experience of the depths of God that, by reason of its essential structure, is and remains supernatural in character. Authentic mystical experience, like any grace, constitutes a favor, a freely bestowed and entirely undeserved gift, that God grants to those who through Baptism and charity have been made partakers of the divine nature.⁴⁴ Even if one grants that the mystical experience is accompanied by certain expressions of human affectivity—that is to say, that a given experience produces sensible consolations of joy or sorrow, as when someone grasps the full dimension of human sinfulness in comparison with the ineffable goodness of God—such a supernatural experience of God can occur only in one who is established and abides in the theological life.⁴⁵ At the same time, the practice of what may be called a natural mysticism meets the same difficulties that the historical condition of the human person poses in coming to know God by the light of reason alone.⁴⁶ The distinction

⁴² See for example the balanced treatment that Aquinas gives to this vice in *ST* II–II, q. 167.

⁴³ *Orationis formas*, no. 12.

⁴⁴ See CCC, no. 1996.

⁴⁵ John of Saint Thomas introduces the expression “affectus transit in conditionem objecti,” which is to say that the experience of affectivity, indeed even of a certain emotion, must flow from and therefore find its identity in the theological virtue of charity. See *Les Dons du Saint-Esprit*, trans. R. Maritain, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 14 (Juvisy: Éditions du Cerf, 1930), 218–481, at 337. See also, John of Saint Thomas, *The Gifts of the Holy Ghost*, trans. Dominic Hughes, O.P. (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1951). For further reading, see Walter Farrell, O.P., and Dominic Hughes, O.P., *Swift Victory: Essays on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1955).

⁴⁶ See CCC, no. 37, which includes a citation from Pius XII, Encyclical Letter, *Humani Generis*, AAS (42) 1950: 561 (DS 3875) on the obstacles that natural

between natural mysticism and the elevated life of faith, hope, and charity that the Church designates the theological life can supply an initial, though foundational, criterion for discerning between legitimate instruments used to promote spiritual growth and wellness and inauthentic ones. The criterion may be expressed in this manner: Does the proposed instrument, whether it be a technique, an activity, or a practice, formally assist the believer to attain what the Church holds to be the final end of the Christian life, namely Christian beatitude, or does it immediately serve to accomplish some other objective?⁴⁷

As noted above, since the publication of *Orationis formas* there have developed in not a few places throughout the world, but especially in the countries of the West, a new complement of practices that purport either to serve as alternative prayer forms or to prepare individuals to engage in Christian prayer. Not infrequently, these putative spiritual exercises have found a home in Catholic settings; they may even be offered in connection with an outreach of the Church's pastoral ministry—for instance, at those centers for spirituality and wellness that sponsor non-traditional programs.⁴⁸ Some of these centers feature such programs as their standard offerings, instead of those that have become familiar to devout Christians, such as attending preached retreats or making the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius Loyola, whereas other centers offer both non-traditional programs as well as the familiar and approved ones.

The examples of non-traditional programs that one discovers operating under the auspices of the Catholic Church in various places remain many and varied. It would be neither possible nor useful, even, to provide a complete listing of them or a thorough description of each program. It is possible, however, to identify certain general categories in which the various programs may be grouped. Five such categories may be enumerated: (1) Many programs introduce practices that may be described as eastern, about which *Orationis formas* already had occasion to recall certain important distinctions; these programs include centering prayer, feng shui, Hindu spirituality, pranic healing, shiatsu, tai chi, transcenden-

reason faces in coming to know truth, especially about God: "For the truths that concern the relations between God and man wholly transcend the visible order of things, and, if they are translated into human action and influence it, they call for self-surrender and abnegation."

⁴⁷ For descriptions of what constitutes Christian beatitude and the several expressions that the New Testament uses to characterize the beatitude to which God calls man, see CCC, nos. 1720–24.

⁴⁸ The term "wellness" refers to a human state in which physical and psychological health are viewed as prerequisites for spiritual development, or it denotes more generally a broad sense of human well-being.

tal meditation, yoga, and Zen meditation.⁴⁹ (2) Other programs aim to promote so-called holistic remedies that purport to develop or enhance spiritual states through a direct treatment of the body; these programs, which should be judged by competent medical authorities with respect to their properly medicinal or therapeutic usefulness, include acupuncture, aromatherapy, focusing, massage, reflexology, reiki, and therapeutic touch. (3) Still other programs derive their inspiration from practices that are said to belong to the native or aboriginal peoples of regions later populated, for the most part, by Europeans, and to which a certain expression of romanticism ascribes *prima facie* a special value; these exercises include the dreamcatcher, drumming, dance, mandala, shamanism, and ritual observances of the vernal and autumnal equinox and the summer and winter solstice. (4) A special category also should be reserved for programs that advance a feminist outlook, such as goddess spirituality. (It should be noted, however, that elements of a non-Christian feminism, especially an *a priori* and uncritical rejection of what is described as “patriarchal” forms and influences in the Christian religion, can co-exist with certain of the programs that belong to other categories.) (5) There also exist various programs that aim to incorporate elements of “New Age” thinking and practices into Christian spirituality; these include Celtic spirituality, creation spirituality, the enneagram, guided imagery, and the labyrinth.⁵⁰ It should be recalled that, not infrequently, centers of spirituality and wellness also offer programs in traditional Catholic piety, for example, lectures on recognized mystical writers in the Carmelite or Dominican traditions, and thereby lend, whether wittingly or unwittingly, an air of legitimacy to the non-traditional programs.

Two general questions arise in connection with the ensemble of these practices: (1) Whether some of these practices, for instance, acupuncture and full-body massage, which admittedly may enjoy standing among persons of certain cultures, should be carried out by persons officially identified with the Church, including consecrated persons and lay ecclesial ministers, or should take place in certain venues, such as retreat houses, which are under the auspices of institutes of consecrated life or of dioceses; and (2) whether certain practices that are alleged to help spiritual development, for example, elements of goddess spirituality, such as

⁴⁹ *Orationis formas*, no. 12.

⁵⁰ For a general and provisional report on the compatibility of “New Age” practices with authentic Christian spirituality, see the 2003 study undertaken by both the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, “Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the ‘New Age.’”

devotion to Gaia, are in any way compatible with Christian doctrine and the ascetical traditions approved by the Church.⁵¹ The theologian's concern must be for the souls of others.⁵² It is not at all evident to what extent many of the programs currently available under Catholic auspices possess even genuinely religious significance. In fact, a large number of the non-traditional programs risk reducing Christian spirituality to engagement with a therapeutic technique and thus conflating the purpose of religion with that of physical or psychological well-being. Likewise, many of the programs give moment for pause when one is asked to identify clearly the nature of the causality at work in them, whether it is a work of supernatural grace or of human ingenuity.⁵³ For example, repeated emphasis within a Catholic setting on energy and energy flows, as in "tai chi," can easily create confusion about what should be attributed directly to divine intervention and what is the result of the human manipulation of natural powers. There also exists the additional danger that, precisely because these programs are conducted under the auspices of the Church, persons who may require specific kinds of medical or other professional attention will be wrongly persuaded of the usefulness of these non-traditional and putatively therapeutic programs and so impeded from receiving the attention they require.

The emergence of centers of spirituality and wellness coincides with a decline in the number of institutions of theological learning that teach authentic Catholic doctrine. This lamentable decline occurs more evidently in certain regions of the world than in others. An academic emphasis on comparative religious studies, which has become popular during recent decades, helps to explain the widely recognized fact that even many Catholic faculties no longer offer a sufficient number of courses in the authentic Catholic spiritualities of West or East. Paucity of sound instruction in Catholic theology may explain why many persons who facilitate the non-traditional programs under Catholic auspices, although they may be competent in the management of a particular professional or semi-professional program, lack the ability to reflect critically on what they are doing or to question the presuppositions of the program. It likewise poses

⁵¹ The nomenclature "lay ecclesial minister" applies to those persons whose work in the Church falls under the guidelines established in the 1997 Interdicasterial Instruction *De Mystero Ecclesiae*, "On certain questions regarding collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of priests."

⁵² For what pertains to ecclesiastical authorities, see *CIC* c. 387.

⁵³ For further discussion, see my "Sonship, Sacrifice, and Satisfaction: The Divine Friendship in Aquinas and the Renewal of Christian Anthropology," *Letter & Spirit* 3 (2007): 71–79.

an almost insurmountable difficulty for persons who are not well trained in theology and philosophy to identify and explain the proper relationships, if any exist, between a given program—especially when its contents derive from pre- and non-Christian sources—and the practice of theological faith, hope, and charity within the Church of the sacraments. When efforts to relate successfully a program to sound Catholic theology fail, the gravitational pull of a given exercise inclines toward the particulars of the program itself. One obvious difficulty that emerges in this circumstance is the temptation to overemphasize technique to the detriment of true spiritual growth.⁵⁴ The saints, by contrast, encourage a holy detachment with respect to following one or another method of prayer lest the soul grow accustomed to clinging to created means and so lose the freedom to embrace the Uncreated God. There seems to be a definite correlation between the depreciated state of theological education and the sudden prominence given to wellness and non-traditional spiritual programs among Catholics. We may be seeing a fresh illustration of that perennial temptation against which the New Testament itself warns: “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths” (2 Tim 4:3, 4).⁵⁵ In any case, the most serious danger of theologically unformed practitioners conducting secular programs under the aegis of the Catholic spiritual tradition is apparent. Instead of Christians evangelizing the culture, the culture, with all of its susceptibility to influences that are opposed to the truth of the Catholic faith, proceeds to deform Christians.

Secular feminism exercises a considerable influence on not a few of the recently inaugurated centers of spirituality and wellness, especially those that attract women visitors. Many of these centers reflect the strongly held feminist, holistic, and ecological orientations of those persons, including members of institutes of consecrated life for women, who often enjoy proprietary rights over these centers and who themselves frequently

⁵⁴ *Orationis formas* already warned against this danger: “Some physical exercises automatically produce a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth, which resemble spiritual well-being. To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life” (no. 28).

⁵⁵ The history of the Church recalls other moments when the failure to ensure sound pastoral practice and preaching of the Gospel with integrity coincided with the emergence of harmful spiritual ideologies, for example, the circumstances that Saint Dominic discovered in the Albigensian region of France when at the start of the thirteenth century he established his “Preaching of Jesus Christ” as a response to Catharism.

conduct or oversee the programs offered at them. Some of these persons say they are responding to the alienation women are said to feel as a result of the Church's alleged "patriarchal" attitude toward them; to support this allegation, they may point to what is viewed as the unjust exclusion of women from decision-making or leadership positions, especially, as they understand it, from the ordained priesthood. Others may cite some historical, even personal, injustice that is claimed to have occurred at the hands of a male authority figure. The Church rejects this unhealthy form of feminism as inimical to the new, Christian feminism that Blessed Pope John Paul II called for, and which alone is able to ensure the authentic and noble advancement of women's dignity and "genius."⁵⁶ It is worthwhile to observe that the programs that prove especially difficult to reconcile with the truth of the Catholic faith—for instance, "Encountering the Divine Feminine"—are the ones that are most influenced by secular feminist ideologies. Some of these feminist-inspired programs promote "goddess" spirituality, which easily prompts correlations with pagan worship. Other programs stipulate speaking about God only in feminine images, for example, "Lady Wisdom" and "Sophia," and scrupulously avoid using masculine pronouns for God as well as addressing God as "Father." It is difficult to imagine a quicker or more effective way to destroy the "Trinitarian shape of Christian prayer."⁵⁷ Centers where these sorts of practices occur are also those most likely to host so-called alternative liturgies encouraged by groups such as "Womenchurch." The trajectory of strongly secular feminism is completed when some of these centers sponsor overly sympathetic and morally questionable presentations of homosexuality, which may include programs such as "Gathering of Lesbian Nuns" and "Lesbian Religious Retreat."

The development of interreligious dialogue during the period after the Second Vatican Council is sometimes offered as a justification, and even as a motive, for undertaking the non-traditional programs, especially those

⁵⁶ See *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 31: "The Church gives thanks for all the manifestations of the feminine "genius" which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all the fruits of feminine holiness." On 22 May 2003, Pope John Paul II specifically urged some 150 representatives of the Italian Pro-Life Movement, which was celebrating its 25th anniversary, to "become promoters of a new feminism which rejects the temptation of imitating models of male domination in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation."

⁵⁷ *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, no. 32.

that trace their heritage—whether rightly or wrongly being a separate question—to non-Christian religious practices.⁵⁸ Appeal is sometimes made to an excerpt from *Nostra Aetate*, the “Declaration on the Church’s relation to non-Christian religions” which asserts that “the Catholic Church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions.”⁵⁹ The Council, however, was careful to contextualize its statement of regard for “those ways of acting and living and those precepts and teachings which . . . frequently reflect a ray of truth which enlightens everyone” by acknowledging that such ways, precepts, and teachings remain “often at variance with what the Church holds and expounds.”⁶⁰ In other words, the Council wished to emphasize that many practices of other religions do not conform (“*in multis discrepant*”) with the truths of divine and Catholic faith. Accordingly, the admission that truth can be found everywhere is neither intended to encourage, nor should it be read so as to invite, preoccupation on the part of Catholics with “a ray of truth” that may be discovered here and there.⁶¹ Instead, as the “Declaration” itself immediately stipulates, the proper occupation of the Church and of those who serve her remains “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2): “Yet, without ceasing the Church preaches, and is bound to preach, Christ who is ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (Jn 14:6), in whom men find the fulness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself.”⁶² It thus should be abundantly clear that the Second Vatican Council had no intention of encouraging the Church to devote herself to discovering, still less promoting, “a ray of truth” outside the sources of Christian revelation, especially when such would occur at the expense of withdrawing from the task of preaching Christ “in season and out of season” (2 Tim 4:2).

3. “To preach . . . the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8): Specific Guidelines to Correct Errors and Omissions

In addition to the general observations that have been made above, especially, the risk of giving theological scandal or the possibility of lending

⁵⁸ *Orationis formas* notes that “the majority of the *great religions* which have sought union with God in prayer have also pointed out ways to achieve it” (no. 16). Since prayer is practiced by members of other religions, it is evident that the human phenomenon of prayer may suitably serve as a topic in interreligious dialogue.

⁵⁹ *Nostra Aetate*, the “Declaration on the Church’s relation to non-Christian religions,” no. 2.

⁶⁰ *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.

⁶¹ For further development by the Magisterium of this principle found in *Nostra Aetate*, see John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Fides et Ratio*, no. 44, which discusses the difference between philosophical wisdom and theological wisdom.

⁶² *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.

credence to therapeutic exercises about which the Church possesses no direct competence, it seems useful to propose some specific guidelines to assist those who must exercise oversight over centers of spirituality and wellness as well as over other venues that offer programs of spiritual renewal or development. The divisions of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* suggest some categories under which these specific guidelines may be suitably organized, although what is set down here does not pretend to address every question of doctrine or pastoral practice that may arise in evaluating the non-traditional programs. These guidelines are meant principally to assist those charged to evaluate omissions (of usual Christian symbols and activities) at the centers of spirituality and wellness, especially those centers that continue to offer the non-traditional programs mentioned above, as well as other programs of a similar kind.

The creedal guideline. "Christian prayer is always determined by the structure of the Christian faith, in which the very truth of God and creature shines forth."⁶³ Therefore, the first guideline to be followed when assessing the pastoral usefulness of a given program of spirituality is to ask whether the exercise in all of its dimensions adequately ensures the integrity of the Catholic faith. Nothing that is expressed in the program, whether in the facilitator's verbal presentation or in the accompanying literature, should contain anything that contravenes what is held by Catholic and divine faith. Because of the central place that the mystery of the Blessed Trinity holds in the life of the Church, one area of specific inquiry should center on the way that the programs express the Church's Trinitarian faith.⁶⁴ No Catholic center of spirituality and wellness should allow anyone, whether host or guest, to alter the Church's confession of faith in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This prohibition includes the substitution of other appellations for the revealed names of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity. Furthermore, lest anything that is taught or done compromise what is set down in the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, especially concerning the Incarnation, passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, no program or element of a program should obscure or misrepresent the truth about the Trinitarian missions, namely, the visible mission of the Son and the invisible mission of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, which is the Body of Christ and the House of Salvation. Other measures to evaluate the authenticity of programs of spirituality include the following: the extent to which authentic Marian theology informs the exercises and environment; the place that invoking the intercession of the saints holds in the program; the way that the programs incorporate

⁶³ *Orationis formas*, no. 2.

⁶⁴ See CCC, no. 261.

pious remembrances of the dead, including, as the Church recommends, the offering of suffrages for the repose of their souls; and the emphasis that the program puts on Christian eschatology, especially a proper presentation of the Four Last Things. Furthermore, programs need to be evaluated on the way that they present what the Church holds by Catholic and divine faith about creation, specifically, the difference between God and the world and the distinction among creatures themselves, and about the work of divine conservation and providence. It likewise should be determined that the programs teach soundly about the nature of the human person, specifically concerning the unique, unrepeatable, and free nature of every human person and of every complete human action. These are the main, though by no means the only, areas of doctrinal concern that should form the basis for any evaluation of programs that purport to advance an authentic Catholic spirituality.

The sacramental guideline. “Prayer internalizes and assimilates the liturgy during and after its celebration.”⁶⁵ Catholic centers of spirituality should be distinguished by their fidelity to the daily celebration of the Holy Mass and by the ease of opportunities they afford for worship of the Eucharist outside of Mass. The observance of approved liturgical norms and a commitment to a dignified celebration of the Liturgy should especially characterize centers of spirituality where the Christian mystery as proclaimed by the Church forms the animating center of their activities. Whatever approaches irregularity and abuse, no matter under what pretext such departures from what is prescribed may be justified, should be corrected. Centers of Catholic spirituality should, during the time of their exercises, also provide for a sufficient number of confessors so that retreatants, exercitants, and other participants who wish to seek the Sacrament of Penance are able to do so without encountering grave inconvenience or the potential embarrassment that making a specific request may occasion. The availability of the Sacrament of Penance and the encouragement to make this Sacrament an integral part of the spiritual program are important benchmarks by which to assess a center’s Catholic identity. In addition, proper instruction in the Catholic doctrine of the sacraments should inform all that transpires in programs of spirituality, especially what the Church teaches about the saving efficacy of Baptism and the special character of Confirmation. When centers of spirituality cater to the elderly and infirm, it may be opportune to provide instruction on, and, in accordance with ecclesiastical norms, even opportunity for, the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Matrimony and Holy Orders should be

⁶⁵ CCC, no. 2655.

spoken about in accordance with what the Church teaches about these sacraments and the ecclesial vocations that they consecrate. Vigilance is required to ensure that the administration and undertaking of spiritual programs by those who are not ordained creates no confusion about what remains proper to the sacred ministry of priests.⁶⁶ Loving devotion to the Virgin Mother of God, expressed above all in the Rosary, should enjoy a prominent place in the spiritual exercises of every Catholic center of spirituality or retreat, as should the promotion of the appropriate use of approved sacramentals, such as holy water, crucifixes, medals, scapulars. The sacramental guideline also requires the enforcement of the appropriate policies with respect to persons in special ecclesial circumstances, such as laicized priests who are restricted from participation in the Church's public mission and persons in irregular marriages.

The moral guideline. "Prayer is the life of the new heart."⁶⁷ It is impossible for any person who desires to grow in Christian prayer and spiritual perfection to ignore the commandments or to let his "heart remain presumptuous."⁶⁸ In order to seek God through prayer, a person must acknowledge the baptismal promise to reject sin, Satan, and his empty promises. This rejection requires with respect to prayer "an ascetical struggle and a purification from one's own sins and errors, since Jesus has said that only 'the pure of heart shall see God' (Mt 5:8)."⁶⁹ Programs that promise spiritual renewal and growth without mentioning the need for conversion, or what is more seriously defective, that insinuate, either implicitly or explicitly, that an individual can bypass the need for conversion of life and still seek spiritual advancement, betray not only the authentic principles of the Christian life but also the integrity of the Gospel itself. In addition to this general observation on the right dispositions to enter into spiritual exercises, the moral guideline requires that the full truth about the Christian moral life inform all spiritual exercises that purport to be Catholic. It is difficult to envisage that any authentic program of spirituality and wellness could develop without some reference to the Beatitudes and the virtues of the Christian life, as these have been expounded authoritatively by recognized spiritual authors. Because of the influence of pre-Christian pagan practices on many of the non-traditional programs, specific inquiry should be made to determine whether these non-traditional programs include, either overtly or covertly,

⁶⁶ See especially, the 1997 Interdicasterial Instruction *De Mysteriorum Ecclesiae*.

⁶⁷ CCC, no. 2697.

⁶⁸ CCC, no. 2732.

⁶⁹ *Orationis formas*, no. 18.

forms of divination or practices of magic or sorcery.⁷⁰ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* warns expressly of some therapeutic measures that would entail sinning against the First Commandment: "Recourse to so-called traditional cures does not justify either the invocation of evil powers or the exploitation of another's credulity."⁷¹ Other areas that require special attention pertain to the virtues of chastity and purity: When married persons are regularly invited to certain programs, the Church's full teaching on marriage and family should be taught, and whatever may be defective or absent, especially concerning what is taught in the Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* and in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, corrected. Programs, whether they are organized specially for persons who experience same-sex attractions or not, require competent oversight to ensure that what has been clarified by the Church with respect to homosexual practices is respected and not compromised by a false sense of compassion or outreach.

The ecclesial guideline. "Even when it is lived out 'in secret' (see Mt 6:6), prayer is always prayer of the Church; it is a communion with the Holy Trinity."⁷² Like all institutes that enjoy an official relationship with the Church, centers of spirituality belong in some way to the particular church in which they are located. Nothing therefore that transpires within these centers stands outside of the duly defined competence of the local bishop. It belongs then to the local ordinary to ensure that the programs offered at centers of spirituality and wellness located within his diocese conform to sound Catholic principles. Those who operate or work in these programs are bound by charity to welcome the bishop or his representative, whose visits should afford the opportunity to strengthen the work of the center. In some places, the local ordinary may consider it opportune to sponsor certain kinds of exercises that would benefit the overall health or even the recreation of certain groups of peoples, including the elderly, youth, and married couples. When the Church sponsors these kinds of activities, it should be made clear that such activities constitute one of the charitable works of the Church and are not ordered directly to the spiritual growth of those who may partake of them. The Church scrupulously preserves the authentic character of prayer because she knows that Christian prayer reflects her own unique identity: "In prayer the Holy Spirit unites us to the person of the only Son, in his glorified humanity, through which and in which our filial prayer unites us in the Church with the Mother of Jesus."⁷³

⁷⁰ See CCC, nos. 2115–17.

⁷¹ CCC, no. 2117.

⁷² CCC, no. 2655.

⁷³ CCC, no. 2673.

Conclusion

The saints often repeat that they would like to sing the mercies of the Lord forever.⁷⁴ No occupation is more appropriate for the human person who has been redeemed by the Blood of Christ. The renewal of authentic spirituality in the Church is a mandate that imposes itself on every member of the Church. All are urged to heed those recognized spiritual masters of past generations who have contributed to the Church's treasury of authentic religious exercises. Because religion is also a natural or human virtue, that is, one that can be practiced without the benefit of divine revelation or the gift of grace, it comes as no surprise that these past masters have from time to time borrowed some of their methods and notions from sources outside of the Christian tradition, including, for example, the accepted division among the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways of the interior life.⁷⁵ In the final analysis, however, it always remains the judgment of the Church, even when pronounced over the course of time, that determines whether a particular practice suits the Christian mystery or detracts from it. The Church, to the benefit of all, has exercised this prerogative in the past. In the seventeenth century, for example, the Church was obliged to correct certain errors about the nature of prayer—for instance, the view that the object of contemplative prayer could only be the divine ubiquity and not the mysteries of the life of Christ.⁷⁶ In this case, the Church clearly refused to privilege a certain class of persons with respect to growth in prayer and at the same time safeguarded the commandment that Christ himself enjoined on his disciples: “‘See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven’” (Mt 10:18).

An honest examination of conscience is required on the part of those who may have become lax with respect to activities that possess no clear relationship to the preaching of the Gospel or to programs or elements of programs that contradict the Gospel message as it is proclaimed in the Church. The popularity of the programs or the service that they may

⁷⁴ For example, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*, trans. John Clarke, O.C.D. Manuscript “A,” chapter one: “It is to you, dear Mother, to you who are doubly my mother, that I come to confide the story of my soul. The day you asked me to do this, it seemed to me it would distract my heart by too much concentration on myself, but since then Jesus has made me feel that in obeying simply, I would be pleasing Him; besides, I’m going to be doing only one thing: I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally: ‘The Mercies of the Lord’ (Ps 88:2).”

⁷⁵ See *Orationis formas*, no. 17.

⁷⁶ “Instruction” of the Holy Office of October 1682, “On contemplation and meditation, against the errors of quietism,” DS 2185–87.

render to certain persons who may be drawn to the programs precisely because they lack a clear identification with the Christian religion do not justify their continuance. Some other form of apologetic should be devised to reach persons who are only remotely disposed to hear the Gospel. Anything that would qualify as an authentic *praeparatio evangelica* should never accustom a person to lend credence, still less to become personally attached, to beliefs or practices that are alien to the deposit of divine revelation. When the Fathers of the Church acknowledged that elements of classical philosophy could be viewed as certain preparations that would dispose men to receive the Gospel, they clearly referred to what human genius or communities had already produced in pre-Christian civilizations. They did not, however, envisage that the Church herself would multiply the occasions to perpetuate these preparations. To argue that the Church should now underwrite the promotion of non-Christian practices as a way of better explaining the Gospel is like arguing that Saint Paul should have encouraged the erection of altars “to an unknown God” wherever he traveled so that his hearers more readily would have embraced “the God who made the world and everything in it” (see Acts 17:22–34).

The place that the Blessed Virgin Mary holds in the promotion of spirituality derives from her role in the mystery of our redemption. As Blessed Pope John Paul II exclaimed, “The *Magnificat* expresses Mary’s spirituality.”⁷⁷ Nothing could be further removed from the strenuous exercises of self-help programs, difficult-to-master therapeutic techniques, or fashionable esotericisms than the simple exclamation of the Blessed Virgin Mary when she met her cousin Elizabeth: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden” (Lk 1:46, 47). It is difficult to envisage any truly Christian program of spirituality or wellness that does not inculcate in its participants a deeper understanding and love of the Blessed Virgin Mary and her “spirituality.” To the extent that Mary’s *Magnificat* shapes a spiritual activity, there exists solid hope that every believer will come away from it with an understanding deeper than before of how best to exchange conversation with Christ. N-V

⁷⁷ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 58.