

THE  
LIVING CHURCH

September 9, 2012

CATHOLIC

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“Spiritual but not Religious”  
as **Seed** of Evangelization

Icons of Christ   Inclusive Mission  
Market Your Parish   Each Bite a Gift  
Anglican Faces: Harriet Starr Cannon

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PARISH ADMINISTRATION ISSUE

# THE LIVING CHURCH

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## SBNR: WWJD?

What if, for even a minority, [“Spiritual but Not Religious”] expresses thoughtfulness, a grasping of something truly significant? What if the statement actually issues from a sensibility that can only find a proper home in Catholic Christianity?

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—Matthew Dallman, in this issue’s cover essay



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A Personal Tale

# “Spiritual but Not Religious”

as Seed of Evangelization

By Matthew Dallman

**S**urely enough ink has been spilt about how the claim “I’m spiritual but not religious” reflects some sort of depravity. Whether it is a pervasive laziness or unthinking reaction to any whiff of institutional religion (usually the Christian Church) is unclear. Perhaps it is both. Perhaps it is the original sin for Westerners born into the global village. Perhaps it demonstrates the detrimental consequences of a culture that has become increasingly secular.

Regardless, the statement often meets scorn and derision. The Rev. James Martin, SJ, writes in *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything* that “spirituality without religion can become a self-centered complacency divorced from the wisdom of a community” (p. 50). His is not an isolated reaction. “SBNR,” as it has come to be known, is widely seen as an irritating pose against any sense of obligation beyond oneself. SBNR adherents describe themselves on a Facebook page as people who “believe spirituality can exist outside of organized religion.” At heart, SBNR is clearly a declaration of spiritual autonomy.

But what if there is more to SBNR than first meets the eye, or at least an additional dimension? What if, for even a minority, SBNR expresses thoughtfulness, a grasping of something truly significant? What if the statement actually issues from a sensibility that can only find a proper home in Catholic Christianity?

If that were the case, then SBNR could be interpreted theologically, and in fact must be. But is there basis to do so? “Not religious” might seem to be an immediate disqualifier, but maybe it is not. Christ said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6). Hence Alexander Schmemmann calls Christ’s incarnation the “end of all religion” (*For the Life of the World*, p. 19). “But the hour is coming, and now is” (John 4:23), Christ said to the Samaritan woman at the well. This hour destroys cult and religion, which are born of separation between God and man, now obliterated by the Incarnation. “He has inaugurated a new life, not a new religion,” Schmemmann writes, reminding us that pagans called the first Christians atheists. Christ is the “answer to all reli-

gion, to all human hunger for God.” John Macquarrie leads in the same direction when he writes that “to pray is to think in such a way that we dwell with reality, and faith’s name for reality is God” (*Paths in Spirituality*, p. 30). God is the Truth about life, full stop.

What’s more, our identity is only found through Christ, whose Incarnation inaugurated a new creation, a new reality. As Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has written, “the question about what the human being is finds its response in the following of Jesus Christ” (*In the Beginning...*, third homily, p. 58). The question *Who am I?* is ultimately christological, no matter how it is asked. To understand Christ’s revelation as merely one possible religious option among others is to miss the point. Our creed reads: “Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven.” Therefore we can speak of Christianity as the *root* of “not religious.”

Yet what of “I’m spiritual”? Here we need merely point to our liturgy, in which we confess our thankfulness to God “for the goodness and love which you have made known to us in creation”; God who is the “fountain of life and source of all goodness, you made all things and fill them with your blessing; you created them to rejoice in the splendor of your radiance.” To the extent that “being spiritual” — what Martin Thornton calls “being-aliveness” (*Prayer*, p. 49) — means apprehension of the beauty of creation, then, yes, being spiritual is the beating heart of Christianity.

**P**erhaps SBNR is not a sidetrack from, but rather a step along the road toward, Catholicism. My own journey reflects something of just that. I was raised in an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregation in suburban Milwaukee. Going to church every Sunday was something my family just did, and hence I did as well. I went through Sunday School, youth groups, and off to college without holding a modicum of ill will toward the Church, and in fact loving its music. Yet subsequently, outside of Christmas, Easter, and my wedding, I didn’t set foot into any church for the next 17 years. Simply put, nothing called me.

I was a seeker, only elsewhere. First it was through

music, which my paternal grandmother, herself a faithful church person, taught me to love as a spiritual reality. During college I became a “Phishhead,” tapping something of the search for beauty in the band’s 25-minute free-form jazz performances. After college I developed a meditation practice through free workshops at a Zen monastery in Minneapolis. Later it was through study of the works of the American philosopher Ken Wilber, who assembled a particularly intriguing mix of psychology, biology, and spirituality. Wilber asked me to write a few hundred pages of research that would make his work more accessible to working artists, and after 18 months I started my own (now-defunct) web journal — no longer to proselytize for Wilber, but to develop an online community of artists seeking to live in a reasonably balanced, philosophical, spiritually aware way.

During this time something of a vague call to the Church appeared. It grew after I finished one year of adult education in a Great Books program offered by the University of Chicago, where discussions of Scripture inspired me to see the central place of the Bible in the history of thought. Elsewhere, I discovered Mortimer Adler and Marshall McLuhan. Learning that Adler was a late-life convert to Anglicanism and that McLuhan converted to Roman Catholicism long before the media was the message was deeply intriguing to me.

Then the first of my four girls was born. The question *Where does this new life actually come from?* led to the doors of local churches, yet the first places we knocked didn’t feel like home. We tried a couple of Lutheran churches, then a Roman Catholic parish (to investigate the Latin Mass). Later we tried a local Presbyterian congregation. Finally we found a Catholic Anglican parish that seemed like a fitting community in which a family might thrive. And so we have. My girls and my wife (a filmmaker) all feel perfectly at home. And I am now four semesters into graduate work in theology, discerning a call to the priesthood. Without doubt I was hungry and thirsty for righteousness, that “contemplative awareness” of the christological truth of “one’s place in creation and one’s relation with God” (Thornton, *Prayer*, p. 56).

Before finding our parish, was I “spiritual but not religious”? Yes. And yet nothing of my journey from SBNR to Catholic Anglicanism felt like a leap or momentous change from that sensibility. Instead, it felt like a somewhat surprising, yet seamless and natural, next step. If there was a leap at any point it came later, in realizing how much there is to learn about Church vocabulary, and how little my wife and I knew before

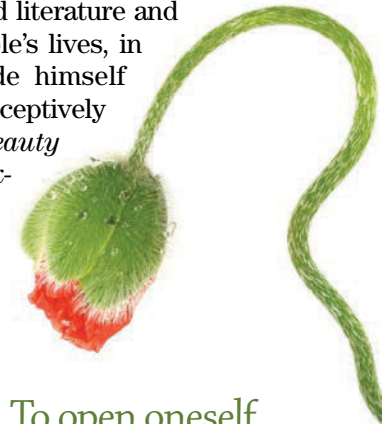
our formation began.

Yet, in another sense, we knew more than we thought we did, and perhaps this is true for many people. As our rector teaches, something of the “grammar” of English Catholic spirituality is imparted simply through one’s experience of life. To be sure, the Holy Spirit led us (back) to the Church. But the Spirit kept his identity secret till we were ready to bear it. Through beauty in works of art and literature and the landscape of Creation, in people’s lives, in farmers’ markets, the Spirit made himself known, challenging us to explore deceptively simple questions like *Where does beauty come from?* and *Whom are we thankful when we feel thankful?*

Among those who adopt — more or less articulately — SBNR as their identity, there already resides a seed of evangelization. To open oneself to the silent beauty of a flower in bloom is a step toward understanding the loving adoration of Christ in solemn liturgy. The silence, and the love, are the same.

The evangelical challenge is to *show* rather than *tell*, starting from the profound sacramentality of all things. A theology of creation is iconographic, and as Macquarrie writes, “to believe in creation is already to believe in the Church” (*Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 347). Both notions could bear refinement for purposes of evangelization. True thoughtfulness about our being in the world and about “all ye Green Things upon the Earth” might very well require a “Catholic imagination” that yearns for the ancient and renewing liturgies of holy Church, supplemented with the support and guidance of ecclesial community. As Thornton writes, “the taste of coffee, the smile of a child, the embrace of lovers, the smell of a cherry tree, the sound of music, or any such experience can be holy communion ... a sharing in the sacred humanity” (*Prayer*, pp. 105-06). This is nothing less than the Christhood of all human experience — the world charged with the grandeur of God. Holy, holy, holy. ■

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