



# Spirituality in the Catholic Workplace

*Does It Differ from the  
Now-Fashionable Versions  
Found in Other  
Organizations?*

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**E**arlier this year, I read the following sentence in a memo from the Catholic Health Association: “Perform an Internet search for ‘spirituality in the workplace’ and more than 9,300 web links will appear. In one month alone, Google turned up 22 news articles related to corporate America and spirituality.”<sup>1</sup> No wonder people are confused about the topic! And if you were to read all those articles, you might wind up with even less clarity and understanding of the subject than you had before you started.

From corporate offices to the local Wal-Mart to government agencies (not to mention traditional faith-based organizations), spirituality in the workplace has become a hot topic. The concept of “spirituality”—like “mission” and “retreat”—has moved over from the cultures of Western Christianity (and other religious traditions) to secular corporate culture. (Whether this signifies a positive addition to secular culture, on one hand, or the watering down of a rich religious tradition, on the other, would make for an interesting conversation.)

In this article I will focus, first, on spirituality in the workplace, and then, more specifically, on its place in Catholic health care delivery organizations (leaving aside corporate office environments, except by extension). Because Catholic health care employs and serves people of many cultures and faith traditions (and people with no professed belief at all), it is important to say a few words about the more broadly based “secular” understanding of spirituality.

## **WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?**

In framing the question we can ask, somewhat baldly: How can people with no religious belief have spirituality? Isn’t some concept of God or the transcendent essential to spirituality? Not necessarily; not, that is, if spirituality is about the workings of the *humanspirit* and its ways in the world.

Every human person dreams, desires, gets disappointed, hurts, and hopes. And, in the process of living, every person seeks to come to some personal understanding and make sense of it all. We strive for meaning and purpose, and in doing so put together a complex network of categories




and values that helps us make sense of our life and our world. This, in turn, gives us a sense of self-worth and purpose (mission)—and also helps us *to cope along the way!* The fashioning of meaning and purpose is never complete, and whatever sense we make of our life and world is always provisional. Our world of meaning is always being reaffirmed or challenged by life's events—it is constantly being fragmented, unraveled, and put back together again in a new way.

Many people include in their world of meaning and purpose an understanding of God or the transcendent and develop and nurture a relationship to this God. In the course of human history, shared understandings of the divine have given birth to the world's great religions. No two people, however, share exactly the same understanding of God; all relate personally and differently.

Not every personal world of meaning and purpose, however, contains a reference to God or another transcendent being or spirit. That is why atheists and agnostics can still have spirituality. Spirituality is about the ways of the human spirit in the world, for believers and nonbelievers alike.

### SPIRITUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

All that is fine for church and society—but what connection does a person's spirituality have to General Motors, Southwest Airlines, or any other workplace environment? Most simply put, you cannot leave your human spirit at home or in the parking lot when you go to work. "Work" (and home, family, synagogue, and society) is where we invest the energy, talents, and professional training that express, incarnate, and fashion our

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values and beliefs.

Some employers may seek to foster spirituality in the workplace because it helps boost "employee engagement" and raises their Gallup scores. Other employers, however, realize that the "spirit at work" enhances the product or the productivity of the worker. People seek work that is meaningful, that is worth their time, talents, and energy—work that is worth their *self*.

When there is consonance between the mission of the organization and what employees truly value and want to do with their lives, there is, of course, greater employee engagement. The work people do adds to their sense of purpose—and they do not have to find this only in the areas of life outside the workplace. If the paycheck is the only motivation, employee dissatisfaction will be high. If what I do with the major portion of my day is important only to someone else—management, the board, or the stakeholders of the organization—I will feel little motivation to do it well. But if the work is important to me and worthy of my best self, it will *get* my best self.

*How* the organization nurtures workplace spirituality takes many forms, not all of them mutually exclusive. The following are a couple of approaches (in admittedly stereotyped form), which I will cri-

### SUMMARY

"Spirituality in the workplace" has become something of a fad in corporate America as companies seek to find a balance between their employees' personal beliefs and the bottom line.

Does this newfound spirituality-meets-margin differ from the spirituality traditionally observed in faith-based organizations? Often secular organizations, in an attempt to be as non-offensive and inclusive as possible, adopt an all-or-nothing approach to workplace spirituality. This can translate into a celebration of every religious belief system or a "New Age" appeal to universal human values.

Spirituality in a Catholic health care workplace differs,

however. It is quite specific in that it focuses on the healing ministry of Jesus Christ. It is precisely this healing ministry that nurtures the spirituality found in Catholic health care organizations and differentiates it from its secular counterparts.

Although nurturing spirituality in the Catholic health care workplace can be seen as the job of each person involved, from sponsor to caregiver, chaplains serve an integral role. Their unique perspective and training can be crucial to successfully fostering an organizational culture based on the values that Jesus portrayed in the Gospels.



tique, suggesting some ways in which Catholic health care can be both inclusive of its diverse workforce and true to its Catholic traditions.

**"Generic" Spirituality** Some organizations, perhaps in an attempt to include everyone and offend nobody, foster what I would call a "generic spirituality." A generic spirituality avoids a transcendent reference and is articulated mostly in humanistic language (which some characterize as "New Age" spirituality). This type of spirituality could be seen (more cynically) as appealing to the "least common denominator" in the workforce; or (more benignly) as appealing to universal human values.

In either case, a generic spirituality is an inadequate model for Catholic health care. Although the values of the Catholic health ministry do appeal to universal human values (and thus can appeal to a diverse workforce), they are much more than that.

**"Eclectic" Spirituality** Other organizations, again perhaps in an attempt to include all and offend none, foster what I would call an "eclectic spirituality." They seek to ensure that every belief system and personal spirituality in the broad spectrum of the workforce gets recognized and celebrated, with its holidays and holy days and rituals: Ramadan, Rosh Hashanah, Chinese New Year's, and Easter all get celebrated in an effort of inclusivity.

Most Catholic health care organizations do, indeed, make attempts to recognize and celebrate the diverse faiths and cultures represented in their workforces. The downside of the eclectic approach, however, is that as an organization aims to include and celebrate all its members equally, there may be a kind of leveling effect. That eclectic model alone is an inadequate model

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for the Catholic health ministry if adopting it means that the Catholic tradition, and the values associated with it, will be only one among many to be celebrated.

For the Catholic health ministry, I would argue, both the generic and eclectic models of spirituality are inadequate.

### SPIRITUALITY IN CATHOLIC HEALTH CARE

The spirituality of Catholic health care is grounded neither in the collection of the individual personal beliefs systems represented in its workforce nor in universal human values but, rather, in the healing ministry of Jesus. It is a spirituality neither of the collective (the sum total of all personal beliefs) nor of the common denominator (simply appealing to that which would appeal to all). It is the spirituality of the *organization* and its culture.

How can an organization have spirituality? And what might it look like? The spirituality of Catholic health care is a spirituality that is:

- \*Rooted in the healing ministry of Jesus

- \*Shaped by the traditions of its founders

- \*Brought forward, reshaped, and nurtured by the organization's current configurations—its sponsoring congregation (or congregations) or a public juridic person

The values of Jesus portrayed in the Gospel are particularly applicable to this ministry. Jesus' ministry was especially devoted to people who were poor and vulnerable; healing and curing was a special sign of the presence of the reign of God (see, for example, Lk 7:21 and the verses that follow it). Respect, compassion, unconditional care, and love characterized his mission and ministry. Generations of Christians have reincarnated these values in their own times. Religious communities (and their apostolates)—as well as later organizations and systems—were founded to live out these values, the values of the healing ministry of Jesus.

Although each Catholic health care organization articulates its own expression of these values, it shares common ground with all other such organizations. This is especially true today, as institutions founded and shaped by the tradition of a particular religious community merge and create new systems. They all stand in the tradition of their founders and sponsors and are shaped by the founders' and sponsors' spirit. These institutions adhere to a common set of Gospel values.



(I know of no Catholic health care organization concerned about articulating its own particular “charism” that would try to use that charism in a way that made the organization unique in the Catholic health care community.) While each has its own spirit and articulation of its values, it shares with others the common ground of the healing ministry.

### ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

If organizational spirituality is an essential dynamic in the organization’s workforce culture, then nurturing the spirit of the organization is not the exclusive responsibility of any one department or individual. It cannot simply be delegated to “Organizational Development” or to the mission leader. The CEO and senior leaders, who themselves hold primary responsibility for pursuing the mission of the organization, are key to the success of the effort. There are, however, other key players: human resources personnel, especially those in organizational development; the diversity officer; the mission leader; and, I will argue, chaplains play a critical role in nurturing the organization’s spirit.

Chaplains bring special competencies to this task. They all have theological training as part of their certification. More important, they are trained to be sensitive and responsive to the ways of the human heart and spirit. In a survey of Trinity Health chaplains, most chose “listening” as the best skill or competency they bring to the ministry of spiritual care. Most chaplains fulfill this role not only in their one-on-one care of patients and families but also, frequently, in their interaction with the organization’s employees concerning personal and work-related issues.

There are, however, often varying degrees of resistance to this involvement in nurturing the organization’s spirituality. Some chaplains feel that such work might pull them too far away from their primary ministry of one-to-one care. And, given the sometimes skeletal staffing of chaplaincy services, chaplains sometimes feel that they simply have no time to devote to this task.

Nevertheless, the professional organizations that accredit chaplains recognize the importance of chaplaincy involvement in this effort. The joint statement of the Council on Collaboration (which comprises six professional certification

## Nurturing a organization’s spirit is not the responsibility of a single department.

agencies) requires of chaplains a competency to articulate “a conceptual understanding of group dynamics and organizational behavior” and “an understanding of institutional culture and systems, and systemic relationships.”<sup>2</sup>

Those responsible for developing an organization’s culture need not hesitate to invite chaplains to participate in the endeavor. Persons who are especially trained in body-mind-spirit care in their spiritual care ministry have much to bring to the table, beyond their one-to-one ministry to employees. They know the ways of the human heart and spirit, and they understand human interactions. They can play a crucial role not only in education concerning the body-mind-spirit care of patients but also in the education and formation of staff about how the spirit works in life—including work life.

### CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Every human person has a spirit and spirituality that he or she brings into the workplace. Every organization has a spirit and spirituality. For Catholic health care, this spirituality is not one built on the personal beliefs of the employee base but, rather, one that comes out of the Christian tradition (in multiple expressions) and is based on values universal enough to appeal to diverse faith and cultural backgrounds. ■

### Notes

1. Catholic Health Association, memo of January 14, 2005.
2. Competencies TPC5 and PR03, *Common Standards for Professional Chaplaincy*, November 16, 2004, the text of which can be found at [www.acpe.edu/council.htm](http://www.acpe.edu/council.htm) (bottom of page).

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