

# Introduction

## Schools of Spirituality in the Christian Tradition

“WHAT KIND OF PRIEST are you?” I queried. Fr. McCarthy looked dumbfounded. I was barely eighteen years of age and had just started my first semester at Carroll College, a small liberal arts diocesan college in Helena, Montana. “You know,” I clarified, “are you a Jesuit or a Franciscan, or what?”

I smiled encouragingly. I was familiar with religious congregations. In rural Havre, Montana, where I was raised, St. Jude Thaddeus Church was a mission parish staffed by Jesuit priests and Franciscan sisters. These admirable priests and sisters had reared me in the faith. These were the only priests and nuns that I had known. So, innocently, I wanted to know to which religious community Fr. McCarthy belonged.

“I am a diocesan priest,” he finally answered. That meant nothing to me so I inquired again. “Okay, but what community are you?” He now smiled. “I am a diocesan priest, ordained for the Helena diocese. That is my community.” I had never heard of diocesan clergy. We were both startled. It was the beginning of my education beyond my parochial experience into a larger world in the church. I started to ask further questions around what were the distinctions between these. I wanted to know what the differences were between communities of religious and their origins, as well as this new category of diocesan clergy. This information would factor into my discernment about my own vocation, ministry, and call to serve.

Now looking back on it, I realize that the bulk of my formation as a Catholic Christian came from those early years of “schooling” by the religious communities with whom I prayed and lived as a child. It was at their

knees that I learned about developing a passionate relationship with God. In my experience, religious men and women were clustered around the genius of an early founder, who breathed inspiration and life into those who wanted to live their fire for God together. Though my knowledge as a child was rudimentary, I knew there were differences between these religious communities for the men and women who belonged to them.

St. Benedict was the first one to refer to religious communities as “schools of spirituality” through which one could learn about faith and discover how to express it more fully. A phenomenally rich heritage has been left to us by these religious communities, which have emerged throughout the centuries. As I have grown to appreciate the gifts of diocesan clergy, I have also recovered a profound respect and gratitude for these “schools of spirituality” formed over the centuries by religious women and men, which schooled me in the faith.

I circle back to those early days of exposure to priests, sisters, brothers, and lay associates who buzzed with attraction to the founders from which their communities were born. I knew the Second Vatican Council invited them to return to their founders to see if they needed to recapture some of that original fire that prompted them to start something new. I wanted to see what they still had to offer us. I wanted to know more about the founders of these “schools,” the charism or specific spirit of these men and women, which formalized itself into structured communities so that generations of like-minded believers could follow in their footsteps.

Perhaps I am not alone in this quest for knowledge about different religious communities and their origins. Like me, you may be a little familiar with some of the schools of Christian spirituality and the orders that continue today. Perhaps you went to a school run by the Jesuits, the Dominicans, or the Franciscans. Maybe you have read literature produced by the Redemptorists or Carmelites or Maryknoll. You may have been intrigued by monastic buildings that you have seen and wondered about what a Benedictine or a Trappist is. Fundamentally, though, you do not know much about the development and identity of these congregations.

This book is an introduction to these “schools of spirituality” out of which has grown an amazing array of Catholic religious communities. These communities developed over centuries in response to real needs of people of faith. Terms like “monastic,” “mendicant,” “ministerial,” or “missionary” may be somewhat new or ambiguous, but they are umbrella categories that describe forms of spirituality that broadened the

opportunities for people of faith to explore their devotion to God and serve the larger community. They continue today to be fabulous resources for our own development.

This book attempts to introduce these umbrella terms and the religious congregations that live out these styles of spirituality. The numerous founders and foundresses, whose energy formalized into “schools of spirituality” through the centuries, have stories and spiritualities with the power to enhance our own spiritual lives even today.

This book is divided into four parts. Each part opens with an introduction to a school of spirituality, a category such as monasticism, mendicancy, ministerial or active apostolic, and missionary. Following this brief description, individual religious congregations that incarnate this type of spirituality are explored. Like an umbrella, these religious communities form the “spokes” that make up the overarching school of spirituality as it has evolved through time to today. These communities offer a vivid illustration of the lived reality of this type of spirituality and how it shapes the religious identity of each group and offers us something now.

Since the founder is significant in the emergence of each “school,” each chapter will include an overview of the historical time period in which the founder lived, followed by the founder’s own story of call and response to God. Out of this, a description of the spiritual legacy bequeathed by the founder is outlined. Finally, pertinent for us today is a section on relevant spiritual and pastoral contributions this spiritual tradition continues to offer to contemporary Christians.

As believers in the twenty-first century, we are dependent on those who have gone before us to transmit the faith. Because they have bravely told their stories of struggle, fidelity, and failure, we can walk more easily in the Christian path. These stories through time have gathered idealistic followers that have institutionalized what they have learned so that it can be passed on more readily to the next body of believers. Their stories convince us that we, too, with all our beauty and blemishes, have a place in the building up of the faith. We stand on their shoulders and depend on their encouragement.

As we journey together, I hope you will enjoy the passage through history and add to your own knowledge of the origins of these schools and the women and men who have contributed to this storehouse of wisdom. Indeed, our story has been enriched and blessed by these feisty, controversial, and saintly sages whose radical choice to follow the Spirit

*Introduction: Schools of Spirituality in the Christian Tradition*

lead them into new terrain and resulted in the emergence of a diversity of forms of spiritual lifestyles. From within the treasure house of Christian riches, we, then, can draw support and inspiration to contribute our own stories and pass on this legacy to those who come after.

SAMPLE