

## New gifts from the Spirit

Rich Heffern | May. 24, 2010



"Deep respect for that fierce green fire is a key element of ecological wisdom, which can help us understand the relationships among different parts of a system." (Dreamstime)

We Catholics have new sins for the 21st century. The old sins -- sloth, envy, gluttony, lust, pride -- have a rather individualistic dimension," said Vatican official Msgr. Gianfranco Girotti in 2008. "The sins of today have a social resonance as well as an individual one," he said, naming new transgressions for a new age.

"You offend God not only by stealing, blaspheming or coveting your neighbor's wife," he said, "but also by ruining the environment, carrying out morally debatable scientific experiments."

Okay, but what about virtues, those qualities that strengthen and fortify us to avoid sin and do right?

Values endure but nevertheless each age probably brings its own understanding of what traditional virtues mean practically and how they help us to cope with new realities and challenges.

The church's sacrament of confirmation, for example, marks spiritual maturity, rooting us more deeply in our relationship with God. It's seen too as increasing in us the spiritual "gifts" of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, piety, fortitude and fear of the Lord.

Here are those traditional Catholic gifts of the Spirit recast for today, with a similar eye toward their social and ecological resonance.

### Wisdom

Defined as knowledge, experience and intuitive understanding, along with a capacity to apply these qualities well toward solutions to problems, wisdom gets short shrift in our fast-paced, information-heavy world.

A particular variety needed for the challenges ahead will be "ecological" wisdom, the recognition that human society is enmeshed in the web of nature. We've learned that attempts at dominating nature for narrow purposes lead to destructive consequences.

Aldo Leopold, a founder of the U.S. environmental movement, described an encounter he had early in his career

as a hunting party he had joined brought down a wolf in the New Mexico mountains: "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes -- something known only to her and to the mountain. I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view."

Deep respect for that fierce green fire is a key element of ecological wisdom, which can help us understand the relationships among different parts of a system, whether an old-growth forest or our own society

Insights from ecology can be extended to the folly in other forms of domination: man over woman, whites over people of color, the owning class over the working class, the United States over other nations.

Systems of domination are harmful to the ecology of nature and of society alike. We can increasingly opt for participatory, nonhierarchical structures as much as possible, such as consensus decision-making and cooperative, community-based economics.

When we view the many problems facing our society today through an ecological lens, we can see that, like tree branches, they have common roots. For example, the global concentration of wealth and power in transnational corporations is a primary source of problems, including wars, environmental destruction, loss of democracy, social injustice.

## **Knowledge**

Wisdom includes knowledge. Science, for example, has been successful in increasing knowledge with great benefit to humanity. New knowledge and technological know-how increase our power to act which, though, without wisdom, may cause human suffering and death as well as benefit.

Margaret Wheatley, author of *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, recalled a key experience she had while sitting on an airport commuter bus and listening as the driver trained a newly hired employee.

"For 30 minutes I eavesdropped as she energetically revealed the secrets and efficiencies she had discovered for how to get to the airport in spite of severe traffic or bad weather. She wasn't describing company policy. She was giving a nonstop, virtuoso performance of what she had invented and changed in order to get her customers to their destination. I'm sure her supervisor had no idea of any of this new knowledge she'd been creating on each bus ride."

The driver was typical, Wheatley felt. "People develop better ways of doing their work all the time. In surveys, workers report most of what they learn about their job, they learn from informal conversations. They also report that they frequently have ideas for improving work but don't tell their bosses because they don't believe their bosses care."

Good knowledge too, she points out, has an intuitive basis. It's rooted in the interplay between our personal experiences and the hard facts of life's vicissitudes, seasoned with street smarts and sheer grace.

## **Counsel**

Servite Sr. Joyce Rupp, one of the most popular Catholic spirituality writers today, features in her retreats the figure of Sophia, the personification of God's wisdom in the Old Testament.

"There are many passages that refer to wisdom as a person. It is here that the feminine pronoun is always used

and is consistently reflective of the divine presence. This wisdom is Holy Wisdom.?

In Proverbs 8, Sophia is described as being present at the beginning of creation: ?When there were no depths, I was brought forth when God established the heavens, I was there playing before [God] all the while.?

This connection elicited Rupp?s desire to explore Sophia. ?I count on her to help me make good choices and decisions. Whenever I am in doubt as to how to proceed in my work and relationships, I turn to Sophia for wisdom and courage. She has never failed to be there for me.?

We need to search for Sophia, Rupp says. ?By desiring to know her, her radiance will permeate our lives. Such is what happened recently with a concerned mother who was having much difficulty with her two young daughters, who were sulky and disruptive.

?One day after work she sat alone in her car feeling sad and troubled. She called on Sophia for guidance and insight, praying quietly for some time. Then she drove home, sat down with her daughters, and together they came to some much-needed household compromises that made all of them more peaceful and happy.?

It?s time to recover the richness the divine feminine that has been lost. ?We need Sophia?s compassionate presence and her ability to help us see clearly in the midst of a world that cries out for wisdom and love.?

## **Fortitude**

It?s strength, vigor and courage, together with a readiness to meet the ever-changing conditions of life as they come to us.

Jesuit Fr. Robert Kennedy, who is also a Zen master, recommends as a kind of fortitude the balance the Zen devotee strikes between self-reliance and not knowing.

The concept of ?not knowing? stresses the unknowability and utter mystery of God, the apophatic Christian tradition. ?That knowledge of God beyond words, beyond discussion, was clearly taught by the early fathers of the church. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, writes, ?The man who thinks that God can be known does not really have life; for he has been diverted from true being, to something devised by his own imagination.??

Such balance works well when we come up against what is inevitable in life, when the impermanence of life is brought fully home, for example.

?When the reality of sickness and death hits us full force, we have the opportunity either to sink or swim. Zen offers a way to swim within the currents of life. Content to walk along the path of not knowing and confident in her abilities, the Zen student meets the flux of impermanence. She appreciates the impossibility of clinging to things and is encouraged to participate in the process of life.?

## **Understanding**

Wheatley tells another story, this one about understanding.

?On Sept. 11, every plane was grounded. It took hours to clear the skies. The Federal Aviation Authority had to land 5,000 planes. It had never been done before. No preparation, no simulations, no training. Many planes had to land at small airports.

?Small airports have air traffic controllers, manuals and well-trained people but there was no rule book that covered this kind of circumstance, so they had to invent or disregard procedures. Everyone was being asked to be courageous by going against the book. And they all did this monumental task well.

They realized the reason they succeeded was the strength of their relationships. They trusted each other as they were communicating across the country. There was a real spirit among them. They could make new policies, making up rules that worked in the moment.

After Sept. 11, the FAA wanted to learn why and how this had worked well, so they could put it into a best practices book.

After its research, though, the FAA did something brave. They decided not to write a rule book about the incident; they understood that what had made it work was people's intelligence, dedication and relationships.

The only way through an uncertain time is to have a certainty about your values, your purpose, and a certainty about each other. We call it trust, but it's even more than that.

Wheatley said: It's knowing, as my friend's daughter who plays rugby says, "When you're moving a ball down the field, you can't see the people right behind you, but you may need to pass the ball to them, so they just keep signaling to you and they just keep staying with you, with you, with you."

This is the kind of reliable understanding that will guide us through perilous times ahead.

## **Piety**

Paying attention to the here and now, to our breathing, to observing our thoughts and actions without being critical or judgmental is what many call mindfulness. It's a kind of on-the-ground piety that serves us daily.

Mindfulness is being aware of and paying attention to the moment in which we find ourselves. Our past is gone. Our future is not yet here. What exists between them is the present moment.

Buddha told this parable: "A traveler, fleeing a tiger who was chasing him, ran until he fell over a cliff. He caught hold of a vine. Above him the tiger snarled. Below him he heard another snarl, and, behold, there was another tiger. He hung midway between them. Two mice began to gnaw at the vine. He could see they were quickly eating it through. Then in front of him on the cliff he saw a luscious bunch of grapes. Holding onto the vine with one hand, he reached and picked a grape with the other. "How delicious!"

That's living in the present moment.

Benedictine Br. David Steindl-Rast describes mindful people: "They are rooted in their bodies. They are alive in their bodies. It's significant that we don't have a word for that, that we just call it mindful. It indicates that there is something lacking; when a word is lacking in a language, there is some insight lacking -- the insight that full aliveness is mindfulness and bodifulness, and it's this full aliveness that we are talking about."

## **Fear of the Lord**

The great philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto, in his pioneering book, *The Idea of the Holy*, presents the idea of God's numinous aspect, pointing out that God is primarily a tremendously fascinating mystery. The primary responses to God are those of awe and wonder, and its byproduct, enchantment. Fr. Thomas Berry, when asked to identify the key quality of a spiritual life today, said: "Enchantment." A sense of wonder is healing. Re-enchantment with the Earth is the necessary condition for its rescue from the impending destruction we are imposing on it. Seeing the universe and the Earth that gave us birth as sacred mysteries is key to turning the world around.

"If this fascination, this entrancement with life isn't evoked," Berry says, "then our children won't have the

energies needed to sustain the sorrows inherent in our condition. They might never discover their true place in the vast world of time and space.?

So, as new sins come on line so do the virtues that enable us to triumph, endure and forge on into the future.

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- Thursday: [The 'buying diapers, keeping cheerful' quest](#) [4], By Melissa Musick Nussbaum
- Friday: [An ancient and contemporary pathway to God](#) [5], By Tom Gallagher
- Friday: [The catechism of our senses](#) [6], By Rich Heffern

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[3] <http://ncronline.org/node/18416>

[4] <http://ncronline.org/node/18499>

[5] <http://ncronline.org/node/18463>

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