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# The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality, by Ronald Rolheiser

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### THE HOLY LONGING: THE SEARCH FOR A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

RONALD ROLHEISER  
DOUBLEDAY, 1999  
\$21.95, 257 pages

*Reviewed by Max Engel*

The “search” in the title suggests contemporary Christians and Catholics are missing something in regard to spirituality. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* is for those with a gnawing sensation that spirituality can be, ought to be, and must be more than religious observance. Christianity is a way of life, but it so often feels remote from everyday life. Why is that? It is not that Christians do not have spirituality; the problem is many do not recognize and develop any spirituality, leaving a longing for a great faith gift in the heart. This problem impacts churches, relationships, and individual people as all struggle to articulate just what spirituality is and why it is so essential to one’s life.

Rolheiser endeavors to bring spirituality to a contemporary Christian, one wary of anything titled “spirituality” viewing it as synonymous with the terms “new age” or “touchy-feely.” However, Rolheiser is pastoral, articulate, humorous, wise, and profound, challenging readers to view spirituality as an integral part of everyday life not as an isolated segment.

Rolheiser addresses the question, “What is spirituality?” (p. 13). To have life is to have energy; the two great roles of energy are to power (motivate) and to join (adhere). These roles of power and joining are useful in understanding the soul as something inherent and active, not something processed. The energies that move and bind a person are healthy when they energize one to move beyond the limited view of self, to recognize a true sense of self and relationship with others and God. A sense of identity and mission integrate a person spiritually.

Rolheiser demonstrates this thesis using Mother Theresa, Janis Joplin, and Princess Diana as examples. Desire is a motivating force in the world:

Spirituality is what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our Eros...[It] will either lead to a greater integration or disintegration within our bodies, minds, and souls, and to a greater integration or disintegration in the way we are related to God, others, and the cosmic world. (p. 11)

Mother Theresa, not erotic in the conventional sense of the term, possessed great passion and energy – eros – in her ministry. She recognized God in India's poor and disciplined her eros, channeling it to serve God and those around her. Janis Joplin, as spiritually energetic as Mother Theresa but lacking her discipline, lost her eros in dissipation, loving all with such intense and indiscriminate fire as to burn herself out, dying at age 27. Princess Diana was both highly erotic and highly spiritual, "a tremendous complexity, a painful struggle for choice and commitment....She chose some things that left her more integrated in body and soul and others which tore at her body and soul" (p. 11). In addition to being engaging, these examples manifest the unique power of spirituality to motivate and remind the reader what happens when the power of spiritual passion is not disciplined and understood.

Janis Joplin and Princess Diana demonstrate why healthy spirituality can be a struggle in modern life. Spiritual naiveté, increasingly busy lives, and a lack of balance are at the forefront of "The Current Struggle with Christian Spirituality," a chapter that should be required reading for any Christian earnestly attempting to understand and deepen a spiritual life. First, Rolheiser suggests, energy and passion are difficult to contain. He argues that the ancients had good reason for the structures and taboos regarding passion and sexual energy:

The premodern world understood that spirituality is about how we channel our eros and, for them, the path needed to channel it correctly was the path that directed that desire toward God....This had a mixed result, not all of it bad....They lived with a lot more fear, superstition, and restriction...than we do. On the other hand, they had both a social and psychological substantiality that we, for the most part, can only envy....We can look at how they handled their spiritual and erotic energies and consider them legalistic and uptight, but their families and communities held together better. (p. 24)

Naively thinking one can understand and control energy and passion is dangerous. It is difficult to find a balance where passion energizes but does not engulf, swinging between spiritual inflation and deflation, joy and depression. "Spirituality is about finding the proper ways, disciplines, by which to both access that energy and contain it" (p. 27). To state that the hectic pace and distraction of our culture is antithetical to a deeper inner life is hardly new; however, Rolheiser elaborates that three specific elements of being constantly busy are particularly harmful: "narcissism, pragmatism, and unbridled restlessness" (p. 32). Taken together, one cannot love, cannot play,

and cannot rest. One is easily caught fluctuating between emptiness and excess, spiritually unaware and longing for something one cannot articulate.

The busy nature of our lives has developed five “divorces” or separations between elements that are inseparable if a deep inner awareness is desired. Religion and eros are meant to be paired together and their separation is a recurring theme in the work. Rolheiser repeatedly references the false dichotomy in today’s culture where passion and God are on opposite sides and Christians feel forced to choose one or the other. Second, spirituality and ecclesiology are divorced; people “want” faith but not the church, the questions but not the answers...and the truth but not obedience” or they “want the church but not faith, the answers but not the questions,...and the obedience, not the truth” (pp. 35–36). Third, Rolheiser poignantly laments the divorce between private morality and social justice. This insight cuts especially close to the current political climate in the United States: “the person who leads the protest group usually does not lead the prayer group, the person concerned with family values is usually not as concerned with poverty in the inner cities” (p. 36). Fourth, to paraphrase, in today’s culture there is a break between the Gospel ideal of self-sacrifice and how it is lived. Often manipulation and victimization parade as altruism and generosity. Lastly, contemporary culture shuns its Christian heritage. Western culture developed under the values and guidance of a Judeo-Christian worldview that today’s postmodern world considers trite and antiquated. These divorces are not the end, but a starting point for the discussion; most of the text is dedicated to developing how to bring these divorced elements together for an integrated and life-giving spirituality rooted in Jesus Christ.

The role of Jesus Christ in contemporary Christian spirituality is often downplayed or misrepresented. The incarnation is developed as essential to integrating spirituality into a Christ-imitating way of life. Why did God become incarnate in Jesus? To issue an invitation to us to be the Body of Christ in everyday actions. Paul said in 1 Corinthians, “We are Christ’s body”; the community is Christ’s presence in the world. The Body of Christ, the community, the Church, is the core of Christian spirituality. This successful description explains and confirms the importance of a text by an author described by some as “the new Nouwen.”

Rolheiser is both theologically and stylistically indebted to Henri Nouwen; many readers will be grateful for Rolheiser’s fluid, accessible style similar to Nouwen’s. Starting with the comparison of Mother Theresa, Janis Joplin, and Princess Diana, Rolheiser uses anecdotes, stories, and myths repeatedly throughout the work to clarify main points. Not only is Rolheiser a good writer with an understanding of the reader, but an excellent theologian as well. Scripture references with explanation repeatedly ground his text in the Catholic tradition of the Christian faith.

The text is challenging, especially the insight into the connections between social justice and spirituality and sexuality and spirituality. The community as the Body of Christ is not groundbreaking, but Rolheiser's insistence on its central importance, especially its role in reconciliation may unnerve some. The human foibles of the Church – sexual abuse by priests and its subsequent mishandling by the hierarchy, a lack of pastoral care in enormous parishes, and incomplete or incoherent catechetical education for its members – are never whitewashed or glossed over; however, the part these faults play in the spiritual distance many Catholics feel with their Church could have been better addressed. These criticisms aside, *The Holy Longing* is an excellent work of faith, scholarship, and storytelling. It is not a memoir, step-by-step reflection guide, or a theological treatise, but it is a clear articulation of the connection between God and the deepest longings human beings innately possess.

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## **UNDERSTANDING STUDENT AFFAIRS AT CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: A COMPREHENSIVE RESOURCE**

SANDRA M. ESTANEK, ED.  
SHEED & WARD, 2002  
\$24.95, 208 pages

*Reviewed by Michael P. Fierro*

During a senior writing seminar at the University of Notre Dame, a discussion began about whose job was most important: the president of a university, a department chair, a faculty member, a trustee, or a maintenance worker. One student remarked that naturally a president's job was more important because he or she directs the operations of the university. Another student believed the faculty members were the most important because they provid-