

## *The Spirituality of Community*

Adele J. Gonzalez,  
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Two words in the title of this book may have grabbed your attention as they did mine: “spirituality” and “community”. Both are hot topics in the church and academy, although they often generate more heat than light. Adele Gonzalez, in this deceptively simple little book, does just the opposite, providing incisive definition and clarified understanding to both terms. I’ll have more to say about the title later in this review, but first let me introduce you to the author and her intended audience.

Gonzalez, a Cuban-born Roman Catholic laywoman, earned a DMin degree from the University of St. Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota and writes, consults, and offers spiritual guidance in English and Spanish through her non-profit organization “Get With It/Ponte-en-Onda”. The book is part of a series, “Catholic Spirituality for Adults” in which General Editor Michael Leach invited “the best Catholic authors writing today . . . . to explore the deepest dimension of their own faith and to share with us what they are learning to see” (8). Like other books in the series, *The Spirituality of Community* reflects the author’s particular socio-cultural location, passions, and vision of Christianity. She intentionally writes as a non-clergy/non-religious layperson to other

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ordinary Catholic laypersons “who are totally immersed in the world and who desperately need to find God in the midst of our everyday life” (12-13). Her goal is to help readers recognize and respond to the presence of God in their lives, their churches, and their world.

In the mode of a Christian teacher of adults, Gonzales fills each chapter with clear definitions of key terms, generous quotations from and references to Scripture, and vivid personal illustrations of her main points. In chapter one she posits a Christian spirituality expressed in lived relationships with a transcendent God, oneself (God within), one’s neighbor, and all creation. She grounds this theologically in the doctrine of the Incarnation which she explains using both Scripture and references to early church thinkers.

Chapter two fleshes out the author’s understanding of relational spirituality through use of three qualifying adjectives: passionate, communal, and contextual. The interweaving of these three themes supports one of her key goals for this book, to help Christian adults in “identifying and naming their own spiritualities” (59) through careful and respectful listening to one another, rather than conforming to one person’s passion or to a single cultural experience.

In chapter three which gets to the heart of the book’s assignment – a treatment of “Christian Community” – Gonzalez offers this definition: “A Christian community is the web of relationships that provides the sacred, safe space where all members can discover and develop their uniqueness, their giftedness, and their belovedness. It is the locus where God, acting through others, removes the scales from our eyes so that we

can discover God's presence in every aspect and dimension of our lives" (65-66). She then explicates this definition in terms of the historic four activities that constitute the Christian Church: *koinonia*, *kerygma*, *liturgia*, and *diakonia*.

Chapters four and five shift the examination of Christian community from conceptual foundations to the nitty-gritty of human relational systems. Drawing on her expertise and experience in parish work and in leading small Christian communities, the author addresses the challenges of diversity and conflict. She normalizes these challenges, pointing to a theology of hope rooted in the Incarnation and confirmed by the Apostle Paul's teachings on the Body of Christ. Gonzalez includes the dynamics of both individual members and the inter-relationships between members in her analysis, concluding that "if true community life depends on the growth and transformation of relationships, then differences and even conflict have to be an integral part of the journey" (105-106). The author's vision of Christian community is ultimately missional: "Beyond individual transformation and the transformation of relationships lies the promise of the transformation of society" (112). True Christian communities are those who discern practical ways to share the good news of Jesus through service that addresses "the violence, injustice, and greed that control our world today" (113).

How well did the author do with what she set out to do in this book? In my judgment, she was successful on at least two counts. First, Gonzales communicates well, teaching as she writes. For a book addressed to the laity, it appropriately avoids technical jargon while remaining substantively educative. I would recommend it to DMin students as a good example of how to write as an educated person for the

Church, making theology accessible. Second, the author clearly and compellingly invites the reader to embrace and partake in a vision of the Christian life that is within reach of any “ordinary” person. No one needs to feel left out of the call to discipleship because no one needs to be excluded from being formed in community. In asserting this, Gonzales challenges churches to, in fact, be communities that do not exclude—easier said than done.

This raises a practical question about the scope of this book: are non-Catholics excluded from the benefits of reading it? In light of the up-front, explicit naming of a target Catholic audience, a non-Catholic might need encouragement to read beyond the title. As a non-Catholic reader myself, let me offer some: (1) this primer offers a window into contemporary Catholic theology and church culture; (2) the writing style models good andragogy; (3) most of the teaching can easily be transferred to non-Catholic Christian contexts. Each Christian denomination could benefit from a book (and series) like this; for those who do not already have such a publishing project, *The Spirituality of Community* provides a helpful model.

An examination of the author’s sources as they are referenced in-text and in the endnotes reveals a philosophical, conceptual underpinning for the book that is broader than just traditional Roman Catholic dogma. She draws heavily on Catholic Incarnational theology as well as the Johanne corpus of Scripture. Gonzales has been deeply influenced by the Ignatian spiritual tradition through her early exposure to the writings of Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin (the epilogue reveals him as a hero and mentor), training as a spiritual director, and participation in a program of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

My sense is that a central theme from these sources – that God is most profoundly experienced in the ordinariness of daily life and, therefore, is manifested in diversity – provides the true subject matter and central agenda of this book. Because community is the primary arena for discovering and expressing this central truth, Gonzalez could legitimately go with the book's title; however, I think a more accurate title would be something like *Spirituality in Everyday Life* with a subtitle reference to community.

To clarify, *The Spirituality of Community* is a book about Christian community, but it will not meet all the expectations a reader might have based on the title alone. For example, it is not an exposition of how to build community nor does it provide program tools for Christian communities. There are plenty of other books that do. Gonzalez' book, however, provides something as important and perhaps even more needed in today's churches where we are often tempted to give up on communal Christianity and rely solely on a personal devotional life: a passionate call to listen for God in the often-times messy arena of human relationships and affirm our Christian identity in the fellowship of diverse yet "beloved" others.