

An Interview with *Donald Goergen, OP* Encountering the Holy Spirit

Donald Goergen, OP is a Dominican priest, teacher, and author. He was previously the provincial for the Central Province of Dominican Friars. Afterwards he co-founded a contemplative Dominican community of men and women in which he lived for nine years. He has given retreats in Asia and Africa as well as throughout North America. He currently teaches at the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis where he is also the prior of the friars' formation community. He has published many books and articles on religious life, spirituality, and Christology. His most recent book was *Fire of Love: Encountering the Holy Spirit*. LCWR associate director for communications **Annmarie Sanders, IHM** interviewed Fr. Goergen on the matters of contemplation and the Spirit.

Q There is a strong hunger within religious these days to find ways to live fully inserted into the joys and pain of the world from a deep and grounded contemplative place. What advice could you offer us for how to do this? What does such a life look like? How is it reached?

I think this is an extremely important topic. I was provincial for nine years and when I finished I felt that what our province most needed was to retrieve and re-own the contemplative dimension of our Dominican lives. Many of my brothers have probably not thought of themselves as contemplatives. We tend to divide religious life into those who are contemplative and those who are active, and most of us see ourselves as active religious. I feel that was a mistake. For us as Dominicans, and this would be true for many other orders, there was a strong



contemplative dimension in our history. So how do we retrieve and rediscover this -- which isn't easy in a busy, modern, technological world that is focused on efficiency and speed.

After being a provincial I spent two months in India where I picked up from a wise person a saying that has stayed with me: "It doesn't make any difference how fast you're going if you're headed in the wrong direction." Not that I had a

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sense that we were headed in the wrong direction, but I felt there was something that we were missing.

I think that being contemplative allows us to be instruments of the Holy Spirit. So when we hear people say that they

desire to live more contemplatively, this doesn't mean they want a quiet life or a pain-free life removed from all the tensions and stresses. Living contemplatively means being more deeply grounded in God. It is standing back from the ways in which we serve the world through all the ministries that we do and taking a look at how we let the Spirit breathe and move through us. Of course, this raises the challenging question of how do we know that something is of the Spirit, and not just from myself.

I think this desire to live more contemplatively is the work of the Spirit for this period. This may not be on target, but I wonder if the diminishment of vocations in religious life has been for the good. If we had now as many vocations as we have had at a past time, none of our congregations would be required to stand back and take a look at where we are going. We would probably keep doing the works we do and trying to respond to all the needs out there -- and is this really what religious life is to be? Diminishment in numbers has required that we become conscious that the essence of religious life is less about what we do than who we are. What does it mean to be contemplative in a very frenetic world?

Q The question of what religious life can be as we go into the future is a critical one for all in religious life. What other insights on the essence of this life would you like to offer?

It seems that we want to give priority to certain values that have been traditional and maybe need to be rediscovered in a new way. Values such as the role of silence in our lives, the time given to

prayer, the exploration of forms of prayer that are more meditative or contemplative, being open to taking space and time to listen to guidance from the Holy Spirit. Someone once wisely said, "Move at the pace of guidance," and I add, "the pace of the guidance of the Holy Spirit." I think we are almost hard-wired to want what we now desire, such as the discipline of giving things time in order to see more clearly or deeply. So much has to do with the busy dimension of our lives and wanting to respond to the tremendous needs of the world out of a certain depth. To do this, we need to take care of our interior lives. So while I know religious take time for retreats, our religious congregations are structured with so many commitments that it is difficult to allow ourselves time before we reach retirement to explore the interior life. This involves a self-discipline to retrieve this asset that I think we sometimes even run from. Although gratification can often come from our ministries, they can also take us from being what we may most need to be at this moment.

Our consumer society has led us to build our identities around what we have. Even in our religious communities it is amazing that much of our lives can get cluttered with what we have. That leads us to ask: Who am I? How do people perceive me? What amount of energy do I give to spiritual practices? What does it mean to simply offer a holy presence? How do we have our ministry flow more out of a deep level of inner life rather than a frenetic response to the horrendous needs of our world? It's not that I have an answer, but I do think if we stand back and ask the questions, it would require some restructuring of how we approach matters and what it means to be a spiritual person in our world today. Religious are associated more by the good works we are doing, the corporal works of mercy. But there is also that other dimension of being grounded in God, being a person who listens to the voice of the Lord, who lets God guide.

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the need – or the hunger – calling for a response from us at this moment in history? What might we look like in 50 years? It would seem that the answer is not to keep doing the same things we have done, but to take a look at this modern, busy, efficient, consumerist society and ask what it would mean to embody God's presence in the midst of it.

Q You have written about the danger of having an attitude that "prevents the Holy Spirit from breaking through into our lives, our institutions, our cultures, and our histories." You raise the question, "Are we hardened against the Spirit so that the Spirit is unable to breathe or break through?" What are the signs that this hardness exists? What can we do to soften our personal and institutional hearts, so that they stay penetrable?

It is interesting that in the scriptures Saint Paul in his letter to the Ephesians says, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit," and in his letter to the Thessalonians says, "Do not suffocate or extinguish or quench the Holy Spirit." He is quite aware that it is possible for us not to give the Holy Spirit breathing room. Is it possible for us to be so interiorly, spiritually desensitized that the Holy Spirit doesn't have that much space? We need to ask ourselves: In the course of my personal life, what space do I give to the Holy Spirit? Where do we, as religious, suffocate the Holy Spirit?

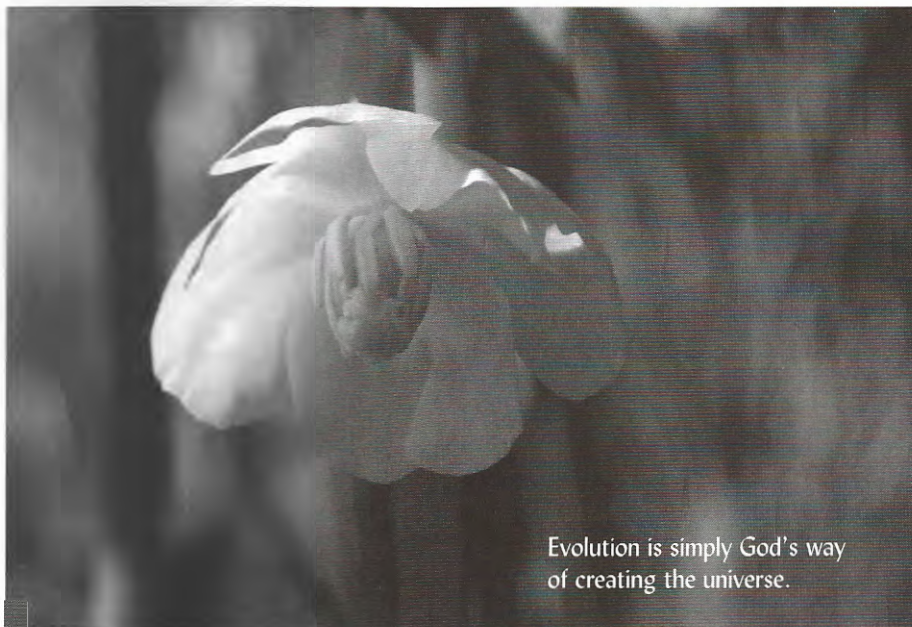
Where today has the church institutionally grieved the Holy Spirit?

We can get caught up – for very good reasons – in our own agendas, our own theologies, and our own deepest convictions that we have formed through experience over decades. But how can we still remain so malleable or flexible to hear the Holy Spirit say that there is something new happening? Whether we are progressive or conservative – and I don't think that language really works for us anymore – we can get so tied into that which gives us an identity and a meaning in life that, while the Holy Spirit can still use us, it may not be as fully or as totally.

I think we have to realize that diversity is a gift of the Holy Spirit as well – and that includes theological diversity. We might not always recognize that as a gift institutionally in the church and it is easy for us to say when we think another person should think as we do. Karl Rahner, in response to a question he was asked, said

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that some persons in the church may be given the charism to be an accelerator, while others may be given the charism to



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be a brake. It can be hard for those who are the accelerators to see what value there is in a brake, and vice versa. So the challenge is to open ourselves more and more to the different calls in the life of the church. Hardness enters in when we discover bitterness or divisiveness or a kind of enduring anger that we cannot heal. Those are the things that from wherever or whoever they come, are not of the Holy Spirit.

The challenge today is to live a life of integrity in a world with many different voices in it and not let our hearts become hardened through the wounds that we are bound to experience. We need to keep asking ourselves: Am I really open to the ways in which the Holy Spirit might be speaking to the church? We need to do a deep asking of that question on the ecclesial level, as well as on the congregational and personal levels, and not let our thinking become solidified or let our progressive or conservative perspective predetermine how we are going to hear what the Spirit might be saying. This is difficult to do, but I think if we are at least asking the question and living the question in a contemplative way, it may keep us open.

Sometimes what may have been of the Spirit in the past, is not necessarily what may be of the Spirit for the church today. We can harden ourselves at times with very good values that can also make it difficult to see what might be coming from elsewhere from a different theological perspective. We can also either canonize or demonize some people. There are people we want to listen to exclusively, or people we don't want to hear from at all. When we do this we put ourselves in a risky position since we may become less able to hear what the Holy Spirit might actually be doing.

Q You speak of the Spirit's helping to structure the church and note that the church is a complex system which requires a balance between order and disorder, structure and adaptability. You also note that "the church as structured is always inadequate to the gospel. There is always 'more' to the gospel than the church can express." How can the church best keep the balance needed? What should be the role of its leadership and the role of its membership in keeping the balance?

First, I would like to define the church as a sphere of influence of the Holy Spirit. Irenaeus, the second-century great theo-

logian, once said, "Where the Spirit is, there is the church; and where the church is, there is the Spirit." It is important to keep this link. When we come at the church with anger or negativity or we look at the things of the church that have caused us pain; we are looking at the church institutionally in its visible form. We need to come at the church with that sense that this is the realm within which the Holy Spirit is at work. We also have to remember that there is a lot of church outside the visible church, and there is a lot in the church that is not truly the church.

The challenge comes down to seeing these two sides of the church. There is the more charismatic side of the church that Paul speaks of when he writes to the Corinthians about the many gifts, the many ministries, the many ways in which the Spirit is manifest among us – all given to us in diverse ways for the common good. There is also the institutional side. So the question is how to hold these two sides together and in balance. There has to be structure, but that structure has to be very flexible and adaptable over time in order to survive. There has to be order, but that order can never be so rigid that it is no longer alive.

Now we all have our ideas about how to hold the church together. There are those in the church today who are extensively anti-hierarchical, rather than recognizing that there is hierarchy in nature, in life, in institutions. On the other hand, you can go to the other extreme and not be aware of how structure needs to respond to the needs of the time, to feedback from the people, how the Spirit is speaking, or what is happening within the episcopacy. I think in religious life, we have found a way to balance this structurally through our government structures, particularly through our chapters. In chapters, the people have a voice. We elect people to leadership and then the leadership needs to be empowered to lead. How is this possible in the larger church?

I don't expect the church to become democratic, and I think sometimes we idolize democracy in this country. It is by no means a perfect form of government. But I do think that the national



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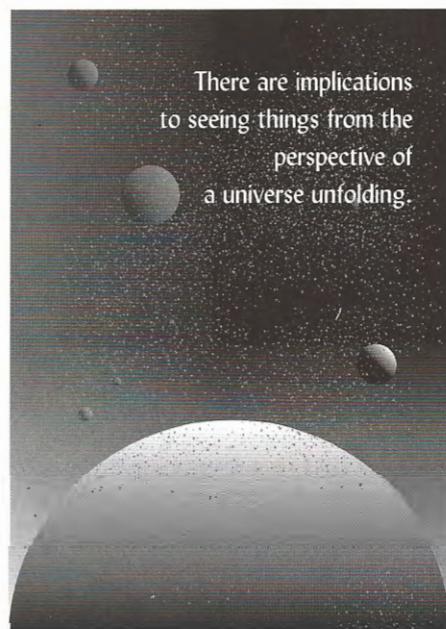
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episcopal conferences could be strengthened and empowered. I think a mistake made under Pope John Paul II was the great centralization of the church, with less authority given regionally. Do even synods of bishops have some voice – and granted these are still synods of all male bishops – or in the end is it the Holy Father who gathers all the insights and puts out an apostolic exhortation? What a difference it could make if the college of cardinals was more collegial, if it were really a gathering of church leadership from all over the world, with no one group having more influence than others? These are just ways in which we might think about how the leadership could open itself to flexible structures. Structure is valuable as long as the ability to adapt is also there.

We also have to ask what the role is of membership. It is not simply to be servile, but rather to raise questions, to see that their voice is heard, to assure that if there are national episcopal conferences there are opportunities to hear the voices of the people at local levels. So there may not be a need in the church to give every member of the church a vote, or to have everyone in a diocese choosing the bishop, but there are ways of assuring that peoples' voices are heard. One of the avenues in which the Spirit speaks is through members. As a member of a religious community, we also have to ask what our obligations are. We have an obligation to speak and to listen and it is important to ask: To whom do I listen? With whom do I interact? How wide is the circle of voices that I hear? Do I listen mostly to those who think like myself? To what degree is my voice out there in some way?

Q Drawing on Teilhard de Chardin's work, you note that "the universe is not a cosmos, but a cosmogenesis. It is in the process of coming to be, not yet finished." You go on to say, "God created the world evolutionarily," and that "evolution is simply God's way of creating the universe." How does this concept influence your own thinking about some of the major questions of these times? Does it help you take a long-view on matters and, if so, how?



I think that the thought of Teilhard de Chardin has a great contribution to make. Now this is not to the exclusion of the hundreds of profound voices from the past. In many ways, similar points have been made but without the framework of evolutionary thinking, whereas Teilhard brings that thinking into touch with a lot of the currents in our world. Teilhard struggled as a scientist and as a priest with this question of evolution as far back as the 1920s when the church wasn't able to really cope with the implications. He did not see evolution and creation in conflict with each other. If we look at the universe from the perspective of without – or scientifically, empirically – we see that the universe is evolving. Something comes to be by way of birth from what was there before. This does not mean that the universe is not being creative, but rather that it is being created. If we look at it from the perspective of within – or interiorly – we see the universe being created evolutionarily by God. So we are saying that God is creating the universe, and doing so in time, evolutionarily – or, in other words, evolution is God's way of creating. Creation isn't instantaneous and it didn't proceed as described in Genesis in seven days, unless we think of "days" as certain time periods.

Teilhard's contribution was to help us think in terms of both/and. I think there is an element of both/and in everything.

The Gospel of Matthew talks about a scribe who goes into a storehouse and brings out things that are both old and new. Which is more important: Love of God or love of neighbor? Adaptability or stability? Inhaling or exhaling? Also, what may have been important in the past may require something different now, and what is required now might not be what is required in 40 or 50 or 100 years from now.

Both/and thinking is not new. Thomas Aquinas structured his greatest work, the *Summa Theologiae*, in the same way, where he showed that there is truth here and truth there and then having a sense of what lies in the middle. A friend of mine, the late Dominican priest Ralph Powell, who was a mystic and a philosopher, said, "It's hard to see the whole picture when you are inside the frame." It is good to have this perspective – to remember that we never see the whole picture, but the Holy Spirit does.

There are implications to seeing things from the perspective of a universe unfolding: the universe is unfinished, the church is not where it will be, I am unfinished. Teilhard said, "I am a pilgrim of the future on my way back from a journey made entirely in the past." I think his frame of reference helps us to see that what we might want to accomplish in our own day and age may take centuries, especially if you look back historically to the billions of years of life in which species evolved.

I think one of the things that emerged after the Second Vatican Council was a kind of utopian sense, which at the time, I thought was good. But by utopianism I mean that somehow we expect the City of God to emerge on earth in our own lifetimes. We were so imbued with the vision of Vatican II that it was disappointing and difficult to accept that what God was doing might have been different from what I envisioned, or might be working itself out differently, or might take more time. However, if you had asked a bishop in southern France or a peasant woman in Italy in the year 1000 what the world would be like in the year 2000, they would not have had a clue. Could they have known that there

would be scripture in the vernacular, that there was a world outside of Europe, that the Reformation would cause a split in Christianity? If we asked ourselves what the church will look like in the year 2500, most of us would say, "I don't care; I want to know what it's going to look like in 2020 when I might still be around." That's the difficulty. On one hand, it is helpful to know that the universe and society and the church are unfinished, but on the other hand it is challenging to realize that there is more that lies ahead than we ourselves might live to see. We can only plant the seeds.

Q You note that Christians' understanding of Christ is often too small and limited to only Jesus of Nazareth. You explain that the concept of "Christ" refers as well to the pre-incarnate Christ, as well as the risen Christ and the incomplete Christ. You propose that rather than ponder only the question: "Do I believe in Jesus?" we look as well at the question: "Who is the Christ in whom I believe?" What suggestions could you offer for how we can explore this important question?

I suppose our faith can be formed at a certain period and then become fossilized so that how I understood Jesus Christ when I was in fifth grade, or in college, or when I was 40 or 60 remains unchanged. If I haven't thought theologically since I was in college, then that is where my faith stays even though my

understanding of politics, science, and other disciplines might have been transformed many times. In terms of evolution, we can also see that Christ himself evolves. Note that I am not saying that God is evolving. That is not a concept I would endorse and it is a different question.

Pope Pius XII in his encyclical on the mystical body said, "Christ requires members." We may not expect that insight to have come from the 1950s, yet it makes sense that if Christ is the head, there can be no head without a body. So if the body of Christ is unfinished, and if we

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can think of the whole historical, evolving mystical body of Christ, then Christ too is not yet fully formed.

An important question is the one Jesus raises in the Gospels: "Who do you say that I am?" There is the earthly, prophetic, human, divine Jesus of Nazareth, but there is also the Christ. That historical, incarnate embodiment of the Christ is revelatory of whom Christ is. It is not that Christ is something other than that. Christ is that – and more.

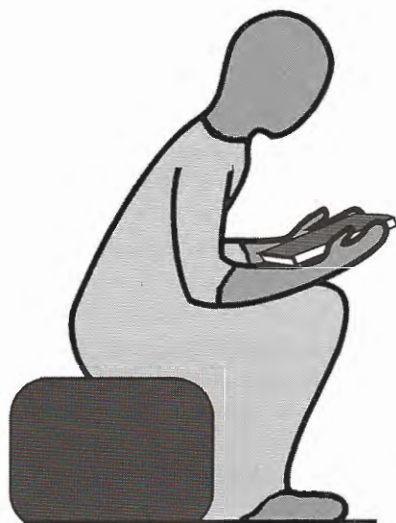
In the Pauline vision the universe itself in its evolution continues to bring something to who Christ is, and it is only in the end that God is in everything and everything is in God. So the question is: How can we keep expanding our consciousness? Teilhard believed that once evolution reached the human sphere it didn't stop, but rather continued as the

evolution of consciousness. This is a consciousness that cannot be divorced from the roots from which we come.

This raises a lot of other questions about the value of a particular religious tradition. There are some who think that we will outgrow religion. I am not of that opinion and personally think that most people will come to an awareness of God and have access to the life of the Spirit through their religious tradition. The challenge though will be how religious traditions allow themselves to evolve. So, what might Christianity look like 500 years from now? How will scripture and the sacraments be made manifest? What will the structures of the church be? Religious traditions need to be open to these changes. This doesn't mean that we simply discard the past from which we have come. Just as the Christ is Jesus, full Christianity is holding that revelation that has been entrusted to us while continuing to expand our awareness of what might still lie ahead of us.

Q Is there anything in particular you would want to say to LCWR and US Catholic sisters at this time?

I understand that you undoubtedly feel vulnerable at this time. I think we are at a moment in history when it is important to express our gratitude for what women religious have done. In the history of the church in the United States perhaps there is no other corporate group that has done more in terms of education, catechesis, ministry to the poor, healthcare, and more. So, I would encourage you not to lose hope and to remember that nothing is accomplished without pain. The question is how do you retain your integrity and be open to what the Holy Spirit might be doing. Everything that LCWR was or did in the past does not necessarily have to go into the future in the same way. We always need to be rethinking how we want to model who we are. So I would want to express great gratitude and trust that God is marvelously at work and I am hopeful that good will come from the process that LCWR is undergoing no matter what happens. □



What does it mean to be contemplative in a very frenetic world?