

Essay:

How male spirituality expresses itself uniquely in the context of young adolescents in a multi-cultural school in the outer western suburbs of Sydney and how the spirituality of the Breastplate of St Patrick can speak to these young men.

The context of this essay is how Breastplate spirituality speaks to male students in Catholic schools with a multicultural population. Specifically, the context will be that of young Australian adolescent students in the outer western suburbs of Sydney. The situation is made more complex as we are now living in a fluid, post-modern society. This will affect the way that we come to ‘awakening’, to use Lonergan’s epistemology.¹ It also situates the themes of gender and sex within geographical and cultural contexts.

I propose further that the breastplate prayer of St Patrick is a way for the young men to come to experience the presence of Christ in their lives more effectively than through creedal statements.² This finds a backing in the statement by Rohr and Martos in the book *The Wild Man’s Journey* that the essential mystery of faith for Catholic Christians is the Christ-revealed patterns in life.³

Also, coming to an appreciation of the statement of Socrates that “the unexamined life is not worth living”, the Breastplate prayer is a way of examining one’s life journey in

¹ David Ranson. “Maleness: A ‘New’ Context in Spirituality”. In *The Australian Catholic Record*, (Vol 79, No 3): 299.

² The Breastplate of St Patrick is a prayer, attributed to St Patrick that is an important prayer at the school. The prayer is: Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right hand, Christ on my left, Christ where I lie down, Christ where I sit down, Christ where I arise. Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me. Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me. Salvation is of Christ, Salvation is of the Lord, may your salvation be ever with us Lord. Amen.

³ Richard Rohr and Joseph Martos, *The Wild Man’s Journey: Reflections on Male Spirituality* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1996), 55.

The text also traces the male spiritual journey and the part applicable to the age range I am addressing is the ‘heroic’ journey stage (ages 1-32) with reference to the initiation stage in the early teens. xxxiv.

the assurance of Christ's constant presence with us on our pilgrim journey to the Kingdom of God.⁴ By proclaiming that Christ is everywhere and in everyone, the Breastplate calls us to a spirituality that is truly relational. I propose that the Breastplate spirituality is authentic spirituality, one that combines attention with intention, the hallmark of true spirituality.⁵ This spirituality well addresses the deeper spiritual needs of young men.

Spirituality and Gender

In addressing male spirituality I do so with the understanding that gender is a psychological and social term.⁶ While anatomy determines the sex of a person, the issue of gender is far more complex and involves, among other things, culture, social and biological factors.

This appreciation of gender develops the notion of a 'theology from below' or Incarnational Theology.⁷ From this we get an understanding that spirituality is not something that is added onto life, but rather something that permeates all of life.⁸ Hence our ontological endeavor in our response to a relationship with God gives meaning to our spirituality. Through a healthy spirituality the young men can understand and channel their sexual fire correctly.⁹

The author Pable suggests that there are two movements to spirituality: firstly God's gracious invitation appealing to something deep within us, and the second is our response.¹⁰ These two movements can be symbolised by the Cross – the vertical axis representing God's action and the horizontal being our response.

⁴ Socrates as quoted in *The Masculine Spirit: Resources for Reflective Living* by Max Oliva, (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1997), 135.

⁵ David Ranson. *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today*. (Sydney: St Pauls, 2002), 17.

⁶ James B Nelson, *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988), 20.

⁷ Richard Rohr, *Adam's Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), xi.

⁸ Martin W Pable, *A Man and His God*, (Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1988), 73.

⁹ Ronald Rolheiser. *The Holy Longing: the search for a Christian spirituality*. (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 193.

¹⁰ Pable, *A Man and His God*, 21

There is a diversity of writing on male spirituality and much of it comes from North America. The topic of spirituality is also well covered by the media. One of the characteristics found in this expression for American men, which Donald Bisson calls the psycho-spiritual model, has the participants going to ‘sweat lodges’ and to the wilderness to get into contact with their masculine side.¹¹ I have even seen this being applied to the Australian context. Apart from not being directly focused on the age group of our school population, this model does not echo our geographical context either. For one thing, our ancient land does not resonate to the sound of the drum. If anything, it resounds with the didgeridoo and the pounding of people’s feet who regard the land as sacred ground. But this is not the point. In fact Bisson goes further. He concludes that placing an Australian indigenous tradition, with its cultural and religious rituals, on top of western traditions does not create an appropriate spirituality.¹² How we reconcile this juxtaposition and come up with a gradual synthesis of a new Australian spirituality will be a continual challenge to us as cultural and geographical reality develops. Our students come from such a diverse mixture of cultures, that this evolving Australian spirituality can become a unifying force towards a more integrated and meaningful spiritual vision.

So in looking at our situation we need to be aware of the uniqueness of the contexts of our geography as well as culture(s). These need to be given suitable recognition if we are to respect their important roles in the development and formation of young men. This does not just mean inferred recognition but one that visibly acknowledges and celebrates the wealth that their cultural diversity. We also have to celebrate the rich history of our land and the gift of the maleness of each student. It is through them, as with all people, that Christ can be made present to the world and each can make the Christian mission of making the Kingdom of God visible to the world today. I shall now address these two contexts.

Geographical Context

As touched on earlier, the Australian context gives rise to a particular expression of spirituality. For Australia as a vast continent, space is an important issue. This

¹¹ Donald Bisson. “Men’s spirituality”. In *The Way*, (October 1998), 319.

¹² Bisson, “Men’s spirituality”, 319.

appreciation of space permeates our consciousness at an unconscious level. The consequence is that there is a sense of awe at the vastness of our land. One response of this is that as people are walking among the beauty of our wilderness, they are struck by the silence of the space. Their response then is to reciprocate this silence with silence. The appropriate response is one of silent contemplation.

This response is different to that elicited, for example, by a Gothic cathedral in France. A Gothic cathedral is a place which reflects the angelic or celestial presence of God and so the fitting response may be to sing praise. Likewise in North America, which has a similar geographical area to Australia, there is a very different response to the vastness of the land. It is to verbalise a response, to externalise their reaction as if to protect themselves. They seem to be avoiding feeling overwhelmed by the expanse of space. The land has produced a different response within its people.

Australia causes a resonance of silence within people in response to the spiritual around us. This geographical context is utilised by the school when the students go on their ‘camps’ or retreats. The reason why the school chooses quiet rural settings is because we are aware that this way the young men can better make an appropriate response to land. This flows into their life of faith.¹³ When thus separated from the distractions of the hectic pace of everyday life they are open to new insights that God is encouraging them to journey with Jesus.

Cultural Context

At the secondary school level that I am focusing on there is a broad multicultural mix of young men. A recent census of the school population identified some thirty-seven different cultural groups and some thirty-one languages spoken at home. A central finding was that after English, Vietnamese is the next most frequently spoken language.¹⁴ I observe that the Asian culture in general, after Anglo-European, is the

¹³ David Douglas. “A way in the wilderness: Men and the environment”. In *The Way*, (October 1998), 341.

¹⁴ The data has been taken from the school’s 2006 census information. The following is the break-up of language spoken at home (of student numbers and percentages). It is my experience that the number of students who actually speak a language other than English at home is greater than those shown here.

English	418	39.5%
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most prominent in the school. Another feature I observe is that most of the boys and young men are either Australian born or have arrived here as the children of migrant parents. There is among this group a marked initial reluctance to discuss things that affect them deeply. While this is a common characteristic in male adolescents, it is interesting to observe that even though this reluctance wanes within a short period of time, the silent response to the wilderness elicits this transition. This is most evident when they are in a rural retreat setting. While silence and introspection are essential elements of the retreat, I am inclined to conclude that the rural context facilitates this way of being.

Within the Australian multicultural context students bring with them their own diverse cultural traditions which enrich the quality of their relationship to each other. The diversity of cultures helps the other students to recognise and respect these other view points that arise. The Breastplate prayer, with its Irish spirituality, forms the link that helps unite these different cultures into Christ-revealed patterns in life. This can take place whatever their notion of deity is, and whatever place this has in the spirituality of their original culture. They see that there is richness in difference and that all can contribute to the culture of the school community as well as to the wider Australian culture. They come to appreciate that we are all Australians, whether we are of Irish, Vietnamese or Maltese origin. This ancient land itself is also part of the transforming process.

This observation appears to differ from the conclusion in David Ranson’s book *Across the Great Divide*. In the text he acknowledges that spirituality cannot be

Vietnamese	217	20.5%	Arabic	63	5.9%	Samoan	12	1.1%
Cantonese	40	3.8%	Lebanese	1	0.1%	Tongan	10	0.9%
Chinese	38	3.6%	Spanish	56	5.3%	Hindi	4	0.4%
Cambodian	9	0.8%	Assyrian	47	4.4%	Russian	2	0.2%
Mandarin	9	0.8%	Italian	38	3.6%	Dinka	1	0.1%
Loa	5	0.5%	Croatian	23	2.2%	French	1	0.1%
Thai	3	0.3%	Polish	9	0.8%	Macadonian	1	0.1%
Indonesian	1	0.1%	Maltese	7	0.7%	Portugese	1	0.1%
Korean	1	0.1%	Greek	6	0.6%	Prussian	1	0.1%
Philipino	33	3.1%	Ukranian	3	0.3%	Telum	1	0.1%
Total ‘Asian’	356	33.6%						

conceived apart from context and this is has at its basis cultural experience.¹⁵ He then makes the assertion that any spirituality that attempted to override a “migrants’ own heritage” or that is “the product of the dominant Anglo-Celtic ethnicity” would be illegitimate.¹⁶ The success of the Breastplate spirituality appears to challenge this conclusion. It is probably due to the respect the prayer has for the journeying of the people concerned. It does not attempt to override the existing culture but to accompany it in imitation of Christ’s example of acceptance of all people.

This approach is also a response to spirituality in the Australian context as proposed by David Tacey. He suggests that our spirituality it is a spirit of the earth. As such it enters our lives “from below”.¹⁷ It is as though it is a gentler spirituality imbibed through the earth, rather than intellectually through creedal statements.

Thus we come to the question of what we mean by male spirituality in the context of the multicultural outer western suburbs of Sydney.

Male Spirituality

There is a lot written about male spirituality but I will concentrate on that which applies to our particular context.

My experience in schools in the western suburbs of Sydney gives credence to the words of Sam Keen:

“A man must go on a quest
to discover the sacred fire
in the sanctuary of his own belly
to ignite the flame in his heart.”¹⁸

Some of the young men I come in contact with have a high desire to succeed, even when this may be directed and motivated by the parents. While acknowledging that a product of success is affluence and prestige, the price they often pay for this is stress

¹⁵ Ranson. *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today*. 62.

¹⁶ Ranson. *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today*, 65.

¹⁷ As quoted by Ranson. *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today*, 67.

¹⁸ Sam Keen. *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), ix.

and burnout.¹⁹ At the same time locating one's energies between the poles of success and failure is part of the struggle that young men find in becoming men.²⁰ It is at this time that they need to be journeyed with in order to discover the sacredness within. They can thus discover that God is intimately with them in this inner journey and so they can enjoy this profound intimate relationship with their God.

Through this journey they will discover an important lesson, that God is not one who protects them from life but to engage with life. They learn that God helps them to engage with life. They learn of God's desire to enter into their experiences, in their moments of joy as well as ambiguity, pain, grief and struggle. This happens significantly when they are present to their own experiences.²¹

I believe that the present school situation is looking for a new religious figure. It is not the clean-shaven figure presented in the glossy advertisements. Rather, it is the one who is completely in touch with his God and his total humanity, with his inner spirit and with the earth.²² This includes an acceptance and expression of strong emotion like anger in the Temple, indignation and frustration at pharisaical attitudes, and fear in Gethsemane. In this way they get in touch with the 'wild man' within and recognise that the road to holistic maturity requires the liberation and befriending of the hidden male psyche, the wild man within.²³

One way to do this is through appropriate friendships with their peers. Young men seek friendships. It is through cultivating this gift of friendship that dialogue can occur. Dialogue can assist them in coming to self-awareness. This process of dialogue exemplifies Jesus' life and relationships. Jesus is seen befriending those he meets, as exemplified in the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:4-26). Through a personal relationship with him, Jesus is able to bring them to right relationship with God. This takes place through the transforming power of a love which accepts the

¹⁹ Sam Keen. *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 60.

²⁰ Dom Violi and Marie Joyce. "Searching for masculine identity". In *The Way*, (October 1998): 352-364.

²¹ Bisson, "Men's spirituality", 323.

²² Robert Bly. *Iron John: A Book About Men*. (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co, 1990), 249.

²³ Philip Culbertson. *The Future of Male Spirituality: New Adam*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 156.

other unconditionally. The Breastplate prayer is asking Jesus to befriend the students on their daily journeying, “Christ be with me ...”. As more spiritually mature adults, teachers can be the visible model of a Christ-patterned life to them.

In a reflection of modern society many of the young men that I come in contact with come from single parent homes. Often the father-son relationship is either lacking or fractured, sometimes severely. If the students are to come to an experience of God as Father, then an appropriate friendship needs to be developed. This way a more positive model of masculinity emerges. It not only allows them to better “negotiate their way to manhood” but it also allows them to come to a positive relationship with Jesus.²⁴

This approach appears to be consistent with the findings by David James. He recalls historical anthropological evidence which suggests that as part of their initiation, boys are brought to manhood through temporary removal from the world of women.²⁵ This does not mean that the influence of women is to be denied or ignored but rather that a healthy interdependence with fellow men is called for, to build up their place in the community. A healthy parallel towards a God-path to manhood is achieved through their initiation into a personal relationship with Christ as expressed in the Breastplate prayer. The staff and the school community also model this expression.

This is also consistent with the understanding that in order for men to develop a healthy relationship with the divine, they need to connect with masculine images of God.²⁶ The masculine spirituality to be found in the Breastplate prayer helps the young men on their pilgrimage of presence to both themselves and their God.²⁷ A spirituality that is to be an authentic vehicle for the masculine development of these young men needs to connect them with God and others.²⁸ While acknowledging that God is both fully male and female, and more, there is the psychological need for young men need to connect with the maleness of God. Jesus is the model par

²⁴ Mark Pryce. “On modelling relationships: Jesus, men and friendship”. In *The Way*, (October 1998), 311.

²⁵ David C James. *What are they Saying About Masculine Spirituality?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 13.

²⁶ James. *What are they Saying About Masculine Spirituality?* 17.

²⁷ James. *What are they Saying About Masculine Spirituality?* 21.

²⁸ James. *What are they Saying About Masculine Spirituality?* 46.

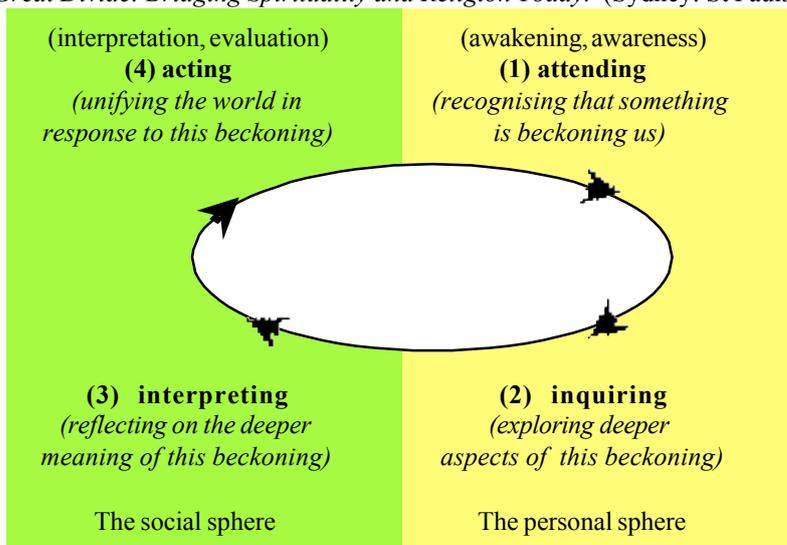
excellence of this. He was fully aware of his connection with the human and the divine.

The Breastplate spirituality

In the pursuit of an authentic spirituality Lonergan proposes that it involves the fourfold core activities of attending, enquiring, interpreting and acting, all held in creative tension.²⁹ While not distinct phases, they can nonetheless be expressed in a Cycle of Spirituality. The school environment provides a suitable environment where these four stages can be encouraged and awakened in the young men. As the awakening is assisted through word and symbol, the use of the Celtic Cross becomes an apt symbol, signifying among other things, the ongoing journey through life as expressed by the inner circle, God’s role in our journey and our response to God. It is the Celtic Cross which helps focus the symbol so it has a religious meaning rather than having only a spiritual meaning. It expresses the bringing of the young men into the social sphere of the Cycle.

The words of the Breastplate prayer helps focus the intention of the boys praying it to the realisation that Christ is always present in this journeying. Just as they ask Christ to be ever present to them in their journeying, the young men can also reflect this

²⁹ The Cycle of Spirituality illustrated below was taken from the book by David Ranson. *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today*. (Sydney: St Pauls, 2002), 19.



journeying. In this way they come to reflect Christ to the world, making Christ present to everyone they meet. Hence individual men are acting out a reality in their life which they have interiorised, and the Cycle continues anew.

It is wondrous to see how the interiorisation of the Breastplate is independent of the culture of the boys. For most of the boys this Celtic spirituality resonates with an inner desire to be religious as well as spiritual. It affects how they respectfully relate to others around the school community. It is this religiosity that gives depth to their relationships and to their self-understanding. In the end, they may come to the realisation that as they progress on their pilgrim journey with Christ, they can come to “another way of knowing, another way of being” Christ to the world.³⁰

We see that an essential feature with Breastplate spirituality is the place of Christ. As discussed earlier, the prayer is unashamedly Christian. It holds the Incarnation as central to its understanding of the relational nature of God. That God chose to become ‘one of us’ and took on human form is not only significant, but also unique in monotheistic religious experience. It taps into the rich Christian tradition and builds atop a rich Celtic spirituality, with its respect for the earth and nature. In this way it has universal appeal as it resonates with a deeper human understanding.

The Breastplate itself builds on centuries of Christian tradition as well as Celtic respect for the earth. It also acknowledges the immediacy of Christ’s presence. Rather than seeing God as someone transcendent or ‘from above’, it acknowledges the familiar Christ, One who is always with them as they journey on.

The Celtic tradition of journeying was important to the Irish missionaries as they carried the Gospels into Europe and more recently into Australia in its foundational years of white colonisation. There were great intellectual centres in Ireland established by the Irish monks in the first millennium such as Lindisfarne. Their journeying also took them over Europe. St Patrick, to whom the Breastplate is attributed, modeled this traveling tradition. His acceptance and later adoption of the Irish Celtic culture enabled him to be present to those he ministered to. He was able

³⁰ Words of Michael Leuning as quoted by David Ranson. *Across the Great Divide: Bridging Spirituality and Religion Today*. (Sydney: St Pauls, 2002), 54.

to be Christ's messenger to them while remembering the Roman foundational culture he was educated in as a child. It is plausible that after his capture by raiders and his life as a shepherd he gained this connection with the land as well as his connectedness with Christ. Through this connection came his call to evangelise the people of Ireland.³¹

This tradition of evangelisation by example and through establishing a healthy relationship with those you minister to is a characteristic of Celtic spirituality. There is a desire to establish and maintain a connectedness with those they meet. I suggest that this connectedness flows from a Christian basis at its heart, a relationality that has Christ at its core. And the Breastplate is a poignant expression of this.

Exposing young men to this male Christian spirituality recognises their deep need for a relationship with a male God. This can later develop to a fuller understanding of God as both male and female and more. This exposure builds on the Catholic Irish tradition in Australia as well as recognising the vast ancestral traditions of this sacred land. Thus the students, young men, become truly spiritual and religious people who journey with the assurance that God is always with them.

Summing up

Based on my experience and observations, founded on the tradition of the Patrician Brothers, I have found that the Breastplate prayer of St Patrick is a powerful tool for young men to experience the presence of Christ in their lives. By proclaiming that Christ is everywhere and in everyone, the Breastplate calls them to a spirituality that is truly relational, a spirituality that best addresses the deeper spiritual needs of young men. They are called to see Christ in everyone they meet as they interiorise and enact the Breastplate. All this develops in them an awareness of the essential mystery in the life of faith of Catholic Christians.

³¹ From the Confessions of St Patrick. <http://www.ccel.org/p/patrick/confession/cache/confession.txt>
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