

# LIFELONG CONVERSION: The Dynamics of the Spiritual Life

By Tom Zanzig



**Note:** Nationally known writer and speaker Tom Zanzig will be at Bon Secours Spiritual Center for a weekend retreat titled “Spirituality, Religion and the Struggle for Integrity” in February, 2010 and again in June 2010. The June retreat will be immediately followed by a two-day workshop focused on the ministerial implications of the retreat themes. Those attending the February retreat will be invited back for the June workshop. Please consult the website for specific registration information and discounts for parish staff groups wishing to attend together. In this article Mr. Zanzig summarizes his basic understanding of the dynamics of life-long spiritual transformation and suggests some implications for ministry. ’

For more information consult [bonsecoursspiritualcenter.org](http://bonsecoursspiritualcenter.org).

**MY UNDERSTANDING OF THE DYNAMICS** of lifelong conversion or spiritual transformation is, at first glance, deceptively simple. Most of us think of our life and, therefore, our spiritual journey as a kind of linear process of growth (or backsliding) from one point to another. But the reality, I believe, is that the process is really cyclic or, even better, spiral-like.

I identify four movements in that repetitive cycle, which we experience over and over again throughout our life in a kind of rhythmic pattern. The four movements are (1) hunger, (2) search, (3) awakening, and (4) response. As we experience this cycle day-by-day—in fact, minute-by-minute—the process, through the grace of God, leads us deeper and deeper into the most profound mysteries of life.

I described my model of the spiritual life as deceptively simple. One complicating factor is that the cyclic process unfolds on multiple levels of our lives, from birth to death. I’ve named eight of those dimensions and illustrate them with the Spirituality Wheel below. Each dimension includes a challenge to grow: to accept and honor our body through a healthy life style; to exercise disciplined freedom in our emotional lives; to seek committed relationships that open us to and include others; to develop integrated worldviews reflected in lifelong learning and a comfort with ambiguity; to adopt and live according to life-affirming core values; to accept and grow in trust of the deep Mystery at the core of one’s life; to recognize the value of communal faith commitments and the worship and service they ask of us; and, as Christians, to see all the other dimensions through the lens of deepening discipleship.

As we grow and deepen in these multiple dimensions of life, we find ourselves moving toward deepening integration and integrity as persons. Or, if we think or act in negative ways within the dimensions (e.g., looking for love in all the wrong places) we experience, almost literally, dis-integration. Our life can start to fall apart.

Some dimensions of this lifelong journey inevitably predominate and others recede in influence and significance at different ages and stages of our life. Additionally, try to imagine within the Spirituality Wheel a spiral moving from the outer edge of each of the bars representing the

eight dimensions to the center of the chart, deepening integration. This suggests that we move toward deepening integration within any one dimension primarily through the recurring rhythms of hunger/search/awakening/response. We normally grow morally, for example, when confronted with a moral conflict or dilemma that shakes our current life situation, creates a hunger for relief from the conflict, which in turn promotes a search for some resolution, and so on.

Very significantly, the cyclic process reflected in the Spiritual Growth Cycle and the experience of the spiritual life that it attempts to name is a *universal human experience*. All people in all times have gone through this process. All the major world religions try to name and celebrate (and, at times and inevitably, control or manipulate) the process in various ways. So, the obvious and critical question: What distinguishes the conversion or transformation experience *for Christians*? The simple but profound answer: Jesus. Jesus is, on one hand, the *model par excellence* of the process, the one in whom we discover how to live our humanity fully. That is, at least on one level, the very meaning and purpose of the Incarnation—to show us what it means to be fully human.

But for believers there is more. Jesus Christ is also the One toward whom this personal growth is moving or evolving. To use the language of Teilhard de Chardin, he is the “Omega Point” toward whom all creation is moving and converging. Look again at the Spirituality Wheel. When presenting that material in workshops or retreats I frequently click the Powerpoint and replace the term “Deepening Integration” with the name “Jesus Christ.” This clearly moves the discussion into mystical theology. For Christians are called not only to follow Jesus but also to *become* him, to incarnate the Spirit of God in the world today as persons, to become the Body of Christ as a community of faith. This is what I believe Paul meant when he exclaimed, “It is no longer I

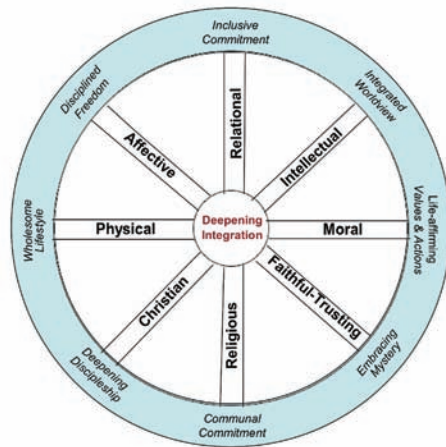
who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). When leading people through a retreat on this theme, I try to unpack what this means in the “real world.”

And there is still more. Christians are convinced that we can only fully experience this process and pursue it in depth *in communion with other disciples*. This is what it means to be church, a community of disciples committed to growing in relationship with God the Father through Jesus in the Spirit. Some Christian denominations, most clearly Roman Catholicism, *sacramentalize* that communal and personal experience; through words, symbols, and gestures we communally lift up, name, and celebrate the conversion process. We have a theological name for this lifelong process of transformation: the Paschal Mystery. And we celebrate it ritually through another cyclic process: the liturgical year.

My model of the conversion process and the dynamics of the spiritual life, finally, suggests many insights and guiding principles

continued on page 26

## The Spirituality Wheel



© 2009 Tom Zanzig

# Exciting News from Rome!

AS [BRIDGES WENT TO PRESS](#), we learned that the Sisters of Bon Secours have elected the leaders of the Congregation during their Chapter in Rome.

The leaders are:

- Sr. Pat Eck, Congregation Leader
- Sr. Marie Ryan, Ireland
- Sr. Rose Marie Jasinski, United States
- Sr. Ann Morrison, Great Britain
- Sr. Rosalinda Pajuela Urena, Peru

We join with all of Bon Secours in prayer for the success of their leadership into the future. ✚

## Pass It On!

If you have enjoyed this new *Bridges* and are as excited about all that is happening at Bon Secours Spiritual Center as we are, please help us to **PASS IT ON!** You are the best resource that we have for bringing new people to the Center. So please, share this copy of *Bridges* with a friend, neighbor or colleague, invite them to download a free copy of their own from [www.BonSecoursSpiritualCenter.org](http://www.BonSecoursSpiritualCenter.org) or if they don't have internet access call 410.442.1320, we will be happy to mail them a copy. Together let's share the Peace, Healing and Hope that is Bon Secours! ✚



Lifelong Conversion, continued from page 19

for ministry and for those who lead it. In light of even this brief overview of my theory, I hope the following principles are rather self-explanatory:

### Ten Principles for Ministry

1. Get in touch with the real hungers of those to whom you minister.
2. Look for conversion on many levels. It may not look “religious.”
3. Help them name their operative hungers and modes of search.
4. Explore with them ways they might search that are life-giving and within their reach.
5. Lift up and celebrate their awakenings. They may not recognize them!
6. Tell stories related to their hungers, issues, and needs. Show them that others have shared their journey.
7. Share your personal experience as your own. It is your story, not theirs . . . but they might learn from it.
8. Encourage their response to awakenings, but accept and support them if they can't or don't know how.
9. Pray for and, perhaps, with them.
10. Give up illusions of power and control. Trust them . . . and their God. God loves them more than you do! ✚

*To learn more about Tom Zanzig and his work in adult spirituality and faith formation, see his Web site: [tomzanzig.com](http://tomzanzig.com).*