

Father Richard Rohr: Crossing into the second half of life

BY R.W. DELLINGER
Staff Writer

In his 2011 Religious Education Congress workshop, as well as in his just-published book of the same title, "Falling Upwards: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life," Franciscan Father Richard Rohr pointed out the two very different tasks and goals people have in their lives — and how to cross from one to the other.

As the titles suggests, it's only through the paradox of "falling upwards" that human beings come to fully realize the reign of God.

The first half of life, up until the 40s or so, are all about achieving order, structure, predictability, safety, pleasure, control and success, he said, what the psychologist Herbert Maslow called the basic hierarchy of needs. In essence, he explained, it's forming the "container" or "crucible" of life, which is necessary for growth and development.

"But we have to be careful," Father Rohr cautioned. "If we get so used to the container and maintain our container by building up walls of our container, they totally take over, and by the second half of life they become all-controlling needs. These are the rigid people we all know: 'It's either my way or the highway.' And they have the same response over and over again. So a lot of them are boring people or control freaks."

But the noted author and speaker stressed that life is not supposed to be that way. He said that while the first half of life is the container, the second half is the more vital "content." And the only way to cross over is through what he called "necessary suffering," or the moment that people in 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous call powerlessness.

"I can't do it! I can't do it! Now that's where God has to lead us all, maybe not in a completely desperate way," he acknowledged. "But brothers and sisters, there has to be one issue, and usually there's more than one, that you cannot fix, you cannot control, you cannot understand and you cannot explain: 'It just is. And there's nothing I can do about it.' That's when you've hit bottom."

Because the crossover involves such powerlessness, suffering and pain, many people, Catholic Christians included, never make the transition from the first to second "sacred" half of life, according to Father Rohr, where there is more compassion and less black-and-white separation and condemning. Instead, they often try to relive the first half over and over instead of trying to experience the seeming contradiction of "falling upwards."

"The soul has many secrets," said Father Rohr. "They're only revealed to those who really want them. They're never forced on you. And one of the best kept secrets, and

"BRIGHT SADNESS" — Only by going through some suffering does a person learn "what life itself is about," says Father Richard Rohr.

yet one hidden in plain sight, is, 'the way up is the way down.' The pattern is so obvious in all of nature, in all mythologies and stories of the world. Something always has to die or be sacrificed or let go of for something new to happen.

"And we Catholics call it the Paschal Mystery: 'Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.'"

So what looks like going down is really up, he stressed, calling it the "bright sadness."

"There's a kind of calmness, security, foundation and ground that we should be coming to by the second half of life," the Franciscan said. "But it's been hard won. You don't laugh at everything. You can see the beauty of things, but always putting the dark and the light together. It's a kind of nobility of sadness, a kind of nobility of purpose that, frankly, is much more sober.

"And it can't be gained just by thinking or studying books," he added. "I think it's gained by loving and losing, loving and los-



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ing, and loving and losing — and the learning that comes from that. That's what the middle of life is supposed to be about. And then you redefine what success is. You redefine what union is. You redefine what love is. You redefine, I think, what life itself is about." ❖

CONGRESS

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Son — listen to him!" are addressed to us today. "In everything you do, always be listening to the call of God in your lives. Always say 'yes' to him in the obedience of faith. And, as you behold his glory, always live to do his will," said Archbishop Gomez.

Congress: 'Just incredible'

Idaho residents Harv and Pat Babendure, attending their third Congress on their 41st wedding anniversary weekend, said highlights include the music, liturgies and the incredible speakers. "Celebrating with 40,000 other Catholics is just incredible," said Pat.

Dominican Brother Lupe Gonzalez, serving at St. Dominic in San Francisco and coming to Congress since 1995, said the speakers are always uplifting. Jack Jezreel's keynote talk, about renewing the possibilities of parish purpose and structure, really resonated with him, especially regarding the church's potential to "move outward and extend to the rest of the world," said Brother Gonzalez.

Longtime St. Cornelius Church (Long Beach) parishioner and volunteer Novelle Miller and Religious Sister of Charity Mary Murphy welcomed Jezreel's ideas.

"We need transformation in the church," said Sister Murphy, Long Beach's Veteran Hospital chaplain and school teacher, "which begins with the parish and the pastor."

"We need to go back to our roots," added Miller, "to renew and refresh our spirit and bring that hope to others."

Hillary Reyburn, a 10-year Congress attendee from St. Patrick Church in Merced, said she very much liked the workshop given by Brother Michael O'Neill McGrath, whose

colorful illustrations are in books she uses with her Catholic pre-schoolers. "My husband is a permanent deacon, and through the years we have gone to a lot of the diocese and parish [management] sessions," said Reyburn.

Religious of the Sacred Heart Maureen Chicoine, a pastoral coordinator in the Diocese of San Bernardino and serving at a new 6,000-family, multi-cultural parish, Our Lady of Hope, formed from three inner-city parishes, said Congress is a real picture of the diverse church.

"It's my church 'fix' to come to Congress [where people] can really experience that vitality that's part of the Catholic Church," said Sister Chicoine.

Evan McGrath, who teaches scripture at Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy in La Cañada and remembers attending his first Congress as a teenager in 1968, said Brother McGrath's description of his paintings of "Women Icons of Holy Wisdom" provided valuable insights which he could use teaching at his all-girls' school. "Of all the Congresses I've been to, this has been the best for workshops," said McGrath.

Phyllis Thinkii, a religious education teacher for sixth and seventh graders at Incarnation Church, Glendale, said this year's Congress highlights included Saturday's young adult Mass in the arena "where we were told that we are not alone and God is there for us."

A three-year Congress attendee, she looks forward to coming every year. "There's so much love and camaraderie here," said Thinkii. "It's awesome rockin' it over here with all the other Catholics." ❖

Compiled by Doris Benavides, Paula Doyle and Mike Nelson.

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