

# explore

AN EXAMINATION  
OF CATHOLIC  
IDENTITY AND  
IGNATIAN  
CHARACTER IN  
JESUIT HIGHER  
EDUCATION

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## On the Contributions to Theological Scholarship of William C. Spohn (1944-2005)

with essays by Martha E. Stortz,  
John R. Donahue, S.J.,  
Anne E. Patrick, SNJM,  
James T. Bretzke, S.J., and  
Richard M. Gula, S.S.



**Santa Clara  
University**

The Ignatian Center for  
Jesuit Education



SPRING 2007

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JESUIT EDUCATION AT SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY

## FROM THE CENTER DIRECTOR

This issue of *explore* is in living memory of Bill Spohn (1944-2005), who served as director of the Bannan Institute from 1998-2005. What better way to celebrate his life than to feature a series of articles reflecting on Bill's theological scholarship. For long before Bill discovered the work of directing the Bannan Institute as "quite engaging"—ironically, after having "spent most of [his] life avoiding administrative work"—he was doing theology, particularly moral theology in America, and doing it very well. To begin our tribute, Marty Stortz, Bill's wife and ethics scholar, first places his theological project within the context of friendship (in her original introductory article); then four of Bill's friends and colleagues present articles based on presentations made at a special panel organized for the Catholic Theological Society of America's 2006 Convention.

As these articles relate, Bill's contributions to theological scholarship are numerous and distinct—to scripture and ethics, to American theology and philosophy, and to moral theology. I pointedly describe these contributions in the present tense, for they challenge us to continue the conversation among various disciplines begun by Bill in his distinctly American theological project.

On a personal note, it was Bill who got me hooked on the study of social ethics, which eventually led me to study law, jurisprudence, and social policy. As a third-year divinity student at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, I finessed my way into a year-long doctoral seminar on the history of social ethics convened by Bill and Marty. From Aristotle to Dorothy Day, with Aquinas and Hobbes among other notables along the way, the ride was fabulous! We read foundational texts critically, argued about important social and political issues intelligently, and began to discern our own ways of proceeding in a confusing world, gently guided by Bill's own distinctive theological hand. For that alone, I thank Bill Spohn and hail his legacy.

For further material and tributes to Bill Spohn, see [www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/billspohn](http://www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/billspohn).

Peace,

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# Follow the Friendships

The Work of William Spohn



BY MARTHA E. STORTZ

*Spohn's wife and Professor of Historical Theology and Ethics, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA*

IN THE SPIRITED INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY HE PRESENTED TO THE PACIFIC COAST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY IN NOVEMBER, 2001, BILL ISSUED A CAUTION TO ANYONE WHO WOULD TRY TO POSITION HIS WORK IN A MATRIX OF GREAT IDEAS:

My intellectual course cannot be neatly extracted from the web of human relationships and personal interests that have defined my life. In hindsight, teachers and friends retain color and warmth more than a number of ideas that were burning issues once upon a time. They seem like punch lines to jokes that I've forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

These words offer the hermeneutic for appreciating his work: follow the friendships. Indeed, each of the scholars reflecting on Bill's work in this volume locates him both in the field and in their own lives. James Bretzke addresses Bill as "teacher and ecumenist," but

also "mentor and friend," and the combined faithfulness of Jim's note-taking and his friendship yields words we all remember Bill saying at one time or another: "It's hard to die for a moral norm ...!" John Donahue can draw on Bill's unpublished works, in particular, the compelling "Have God's Commandos Gone AWOL?" because John was so often called upon to offer feedback on them—usually over drinks. Anne Patrick and Bill were the Catholic voices in the fabled "Gustafson seminars" at the University of Chicago Divinity School, where close reading of primary texts began discussions in which both began to test out constructive positions that would emerge years later. As the two pursued a common passion for the work of Reformed theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, a friendship quickly developed. Richard M. Gula addresses Bill's "practical piety," but he also shared it. Often dinner guests at Rich's home, we all prayed together before one of his world-



class meals. A lot of the debates on the tough competition cultivating the “truly Christian moral culture” that Rich describes so pointedly in his contribution occurred around his table.

Bill did not work or think or pray in isolation. As an extrovert, he said everything out loud before it hit the page, and each of these scholar-friends contributed—and contributed greatly—to the many and various conversations that informed Bill’s work. Any talk of “the achievement of William C. Spohn” must be theirs as well. He would demand it.

Behind these friendships are other relationships to people, some of whom who are recent or long-time residents in that vivid but hard-to-Mapquest “communion of saints.”

While the articles in this issue situate Bill’s contribution in terms of academic field, he reminds us that scholarship is a crowded enterprise.

Real people prompted his reflection; they also illumined his own experience. Both Bill’s master’s thesis and his dissertation explore not simply an idea, but an idea as it emerged in the raw stuff of a life. The titles say it all, rooting lofty ideas in particular people: “Thought, Action and Nature in John Dewey and Wang Yang-Ming” (M.A. thesis at the University of Chicago, Ideas and Methods) and “Religion and Morality in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards” (Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Chicago Divinity School). One could explore Bill’s contribution in terms of the people he met along the way.

**THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

Bill was drawn to Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), Puritan preacher and theologian in Northampton, Mass., which was then the American frontier. Edwards wrote and ministered in the Great Awakening, a period of religious revival that swept through congregations. Edwards sought to distinguish the work of the Spirit from crowd-induced

hysteria, and he found it in a God whose compelling beauty grounded all of life. Bill had experienced his own “great awakening” in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement, and he knew first-hand the power of religious affections. The problem was that they could serve many spirits, including but not exclusively the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ. He admired Edwards for steering “a careful course between the cool-headed but cold-hearted rationalists and the fervid but misguided enthusiasts.” Edwards became his own mentor and friend, companion across the centuries.

As one of the first distinctively American theologians, Edwards was helpful on another score. Though the Society of Jesus encouraged him to study in Rome, Bill consciously chose to pursue graduate work in the United States. In the wake of Vatican II and its stimulus to local theologies, Bill felt strongly that his generation of Roman Catholic theologians and moralists had a chance to forge a distinctively American Catholicism, combining pragmatism with the experience of pluralism and democracy. He put the challenge compellingly:

“Perhaps moral theology in America needed to find its own voice and lose its German accent.” Jonathan Edwards introduced Bill to other thinkers in the lively tradition of American pragmatism, most of them claiming descent from the Great Puritans: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Orestes Brownsen, Horace Bushnell, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and H. Richard Niebuhr. Every scholar has a book (or two or three!) that never gets written, though all the notes are there, perhaps even drafts of chapters filed away in cabinets or on hard drives. As Anne Patrick notes in her accompanying article, Bill’s unwritten volume treated these decidedly American voices under the theoretical title *American Ethics: The Interaction between Augustinian Piety and Experiential Naturalism*.

Bill reminds us that scholarship is a crowded enterprise. Real people prompted his reflection; they also illumined his own experience.



*Moving from the Catholic Charismatic Renewal into the divinity school was like bringing a fire extinguisher to Pentecost. The religious affections became objects of study, not subjective forces driving one deeper and deeper into the mystery of God. Bill resisted fiercely, preaching regularly at a Roman Catholic parish in one of the southern suburbs and praying regularly with other Roman Catholic students.*

#### ROMAN CATHOLIC MORAL THEOLOGY

A polestar in Bill's constructive project was doctoral dissertation advisor James M. Gustafson. Bill went to the divinity school at the University of Chicago, not to credential himself at the "Harvard of the Midwest," but for one reason only: to study with Jim Gustafson. He had long admired Gustafson's ability to train students without forcing them to master their mentor's language, encouraging them instead to develop their own distinctive voice. More deeply, he respected Gustafson's commitment to place Protestant ethics in dialogue with Catholic moral theology. Gustafson wed the Roman Catholic rationalism and its casuistic strengths with a Protestant biblical richness and Christological focus.

Bill was not the only future Catholic moral theologian at Chicago working with Gustafson. Gustafson seminars included future Roman Catholic moral theologians like Lisa S. Cahill at Boston College, Anne E. Patrick, SNJM, at Carleton College, and Dennis McCann at Agnes Scott College. These students-now-scholars define the field of contemporary Roman Catholic moral theology. They have simply continued and expanded their seminar debates among the pages of *America*, *Theological Studies*, the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, and the *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, moral theology seemed to be moving away from the formalism and deductive reasoning of traditional seminary manuals. What would take its place, particularly in a

distinctively American context? The answer to that question lay in the capable hands of these then-young scholars. Through their work, Roman Catholic moral theology has turned away from the object of moral deliberation, i.e., action and inaction, toward its subject, the human person. Bill and his generation of moral theologians choreographed a movement toward more subjective dimensions of the moral life: conscience and the religious affections; virtue, vices, and the hard work of making commitments; a love that works for justice. The lively witness of Scripture speaks throughout.

#### SCRIPTURE AND ETHICS

Moving from the Catholic Charismatic Renewal into the divinity school was like bringing a fire extinguisher to Pentecost. The religious affections became objects of study, not subjective forces driving one deeper and deeper into the mystery of God. Bill resisted fiercely, preaching regularly at a Roman Catholic parish in one of the southern suburbs and praying regularly with other Roman Catholic students. He regarded himself as an "outsider" in an academic field that seemed to require divorce between religious experience and academic rigor: "If you prayed you must be anti-intellectual; if you were a scholar you couldn't possibly be a practicing believer." The secular academy had its own gods: the idols of objectivity and detachment, required sacrifice at the altars of publication, and worship of the French intellectual of the month. He quickly saw through "the limited shelf life of many contemporary favorites.

Perhaps Michel Foucault is only the Jean Paul Sartre of the nineties. Does anyone truly miss post-structuralism? Will anyone miss deconstructionism?”

Tempting as it was to define oneself “over against” the academy, Bill simply moved in other directions. The combination of the Charismatic Renewal and Jesuit spirituality drew him deeply into questions of Christian discipleship. Scripture and the life of Jesus anchored that journey. As he closed out his doctoral work, Bill began teaching at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, and the rhythm of teaching, preaching, and formation offered an important counterpoint to graduate studies. Bill boasted that he learned the New Testament team-teaching the course Scripture and Ethics with John Donahue, and this is most certainly true. The JSTB dean, T. Howland Sanks, got Bill an invitation to write regularly on disputed questions in moral theology for *Theological Studies*. As he probed issues of immigration and refugees, AIDS and homosexuality, he brought Scripture to bear on issues that had previously been treated within the narrow scope of moral norms and casuistry. Story and parable, character and virtue, spirituality and ethics entered increasingly into his analysis, along with the person of Jesus.

Nor was scholarship the only way Bill probed the relationship of Scripture and ethics. He also deepened his appreciation for Scripture through regular preaching and daily prayer. Bill jumped at the opportunity to preach. When a group of high school friends invited him to lead a monthly house-church meeting in Walnut Creek, he readily consented. For over fifteen years, he celebrated Mass with these people. Those monthly meetings gave Bill the opportunity to be part of family life and observe first-hand God’s mysterious work there. While he always opened the sermons to reflections from the community, he framed the contributions into a voice from the whole community.

“Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again,” Paul Ricoeur wrote in *The Symbolism of Evil*.<sup>2</sup> Bill listened for that call through daily prayer. At a time when seekers sought to be “spiritual, but not religious,” Bill fell back on the regular practices of meditation and worship, service and scholarship that were central to his formation in the Society of Jesus. Years of Jesuit formation “had done more to shape my life as a Christian than any peak experience,” he wrote, for “the values and mindset of Jesus only gradually enter into character over a lifetime.”



Charles Barry

Spohn (with Bart Charlow and Michael-Ray Matthews) discusses the movie, “The Passion of the Christ,” on March 16, 2004, at a Commonwealth Club panel at Trinity Cathedral, San Jose.



*Bill talked about Jesus as if they'd just had drinks the night before. The freshness and urgency of his message was quite simply infectious. We all wanted to have been there.*

### LIFE IS IN THE DETAILS

Standing in the center of this cloud of witnesses from the Society and the seminary, from parish, house-church and the silence of prayer, are the figures of the apostle Paul and Jesus. Bill talked about Jesus as if they'd just had drinks the night before. The freshness and urgency of his message was quite simply infectious. We all wanted to have been there.

Perhaps the apostle Paul prodded Bill, as he delighted in Paul's letters to the contentious little communities that comprised earliest Christianity. Here was the stuff of ordinary life—food fights, class struggles, power-plays, everything in delicious detail.

Bill loved the particular; he delighted in detail. Biography was his default drive; he read it to relax. Every day he studied the obits, "the Irish Sweepstakes," as he called them, from the unscripted ache of the locally departed in the *San Francisco Chronicle* to the more elegaic tributes of the *New York Times*. Remembering the dead is a spiritual practice, and this was his way of doing it. Then there were the advice columnists, "Dear Abby," "Ann Landers," and the weekly ethics column in the *Times*. Someone who anchored his moral theology in human flourishing needed to know where it foundered. The advice columnists chronicled everything, and even when he could no longer read, he wanted to hear about the everyday trials of ordinary people; he wanted to hear the stories of lives well-lived or cut short. Bill made the connection between his academic work and his daily life seamless.

Dying would not destroy the fabric of this life. Perhaps Bill's best scholarly work was his last one: his reflections on his illness in a regular series of e-mails to his friends. When he could no longer write, he dictated. When he could no

longer dictate, he simply lived out his message to the last breath. And the message was this: "We are not in free fall; everything we believe in is true."

That truth lay in the family and friends who surrounded us. We found that we were not alone. Bill's dying was as crowded as his scholarship. There were quite simply a lot of people alongside. Walter Kirn said it best reviewing a book for the *New York Times*:

Time passes,  
and what it passes through is people—  
though people believe that they are  
passing through time,  
and even, at certain euphoric moments,  
directing time.  
It's a delusion, but it's where memoirs  
come from, or at least the very best ones.  
They tell how destiny presses on desire  
and how desire pushes back,  
sometimes heroically, always poignantly,  
but never quite victoriously.  
Life is an upstream, not an uphill, battle,  
and it results in just one story: how, and  
alongside whom, one used his paddle.<sup>3</sup> e

### ENDNOTES

1. William C. Spohn, "An Intellectual Autobiography" (unpublished address to the Pacific Coast Theological Society, November 2, 2001), 1, [www.scu.edu/spohnmemorial](http://www.scu.edu/spohnmemorial). (Unattributed quotations throughout this article are from the same source.)
2. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 349.
3. Walter Kirn, review of *Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties*, by Robert Stone, *The New York Times Book Review*, January 7, 2007.

# Hearers and Doers of the Word

The Challenge of William C. Spohn to Scripture and Ethics



BY JOHN R. DONAHUE, S.J.

*Raymond E. Brown Distinguished Professor Emeritus of New Testament Studies, St. Mary's Seminary and University; Professor of Biblical Studies, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, 1980-2001.*

RABBI YOHANAN TAUGHT THAT WHEN THE LIVING QUOTE THE TEACHINGS OF A SCHOLAR WHO HAS DIED, THE DEPARTED SCHOLAR'S LIPS WHISPER IN THE GRAVE.<sup>1</sup> As we honor the memory of William Spohn, we recall his contributions to theology while remaining attuned to his whispers from the grave.

I first came to know Bill in 1969 when he did his first degree at the University of Chicago, and then was privileged to be a faculty colleague at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley where we taught together five courses on the New Testament and ethics. William Spohn was truly an embodiment of the call of the Second Vatican Council that moral theology must be renewed by engagement with Scripture and that Scripture is the soul of theology, which is an apt metaphor for Bill's work. In traditional hylomorphic terms, the soul is the animating principle that gives life and identity to the whole

body. Before he reflected on the relation of Scripture and ethics, Scripture animated Bill's life when as a Jesuit scholastic he was actively engaged with biblically based prayer groups in the early '70s while teaching at the University of San Francisco. Throughout his most productive but sadly too brief academic career, issues of Scripture and life were never far from his consciousness. While taking the risk of over-simplification of the work of a profound thinker, I would like to explore William Spohn's work with admittedly overlapping headings: (1) mapping the territory, (2) charting the way, and (3) pointing to the goal. Lest this seem too serious, I would add that Bill's pilgrimage was seasoned with a good dose of "The Canterbury Tales." He embodied Hilaire Belloc's mark of true Catholicism, "where the Catholic sun doth shine, there is laughter and good red wine, at least I've always found it so, *benedicamus domino.*"

*I recall vividly a social visit by James Gustafson to Berkeley when he told Bill that his main objection to Bill's 1984 work on Scripture and ethics was that it was too short and could have been expanded into a major work.*

### MAPPING THE TERRITORY

Not only in the two editions of *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?*, but especially in the survey articles published in *Theological Studies*, Bill provided a guide to Catholic theology for the then largely unexplored territory of Scripture and moral theology, by drawing Catholics into the rich thinking of leading non-Catholic ethicists, initially assessing the work of leading figures such as Barth, Gustafson, Niebuhr, Bultmann, and Yoder.<sup>2</sup> I recall vividly a social visit by James Gustafson to Berkeley when he told Bill that his main objection to Bill's 1984 work on Scripture and ethics was that it was too short and could have been expanded into a major work. In "The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology" (1985), Bill entered into the lively discussion of that period in dialogue with a wide range of non-Catholic thinkers. His discussion of the work of others was always characterized by accurate representation and respect for views other than his own. Emerging here were perspectives that would influence all subsequent work, such as attention to the genre(s) and literary setting of biblical statements, awareness of the hermeneutical gulf between New Testament statements and contemporary ethics, and the limning of directions for future development such as a focus on the agent. Here he also sketched out what became a significant contribution: his disagreement with the moral autonomy school of Josef Fuchs and Bruno Schüller which limited the role of Scripture to offering paraenesis and motivation for an ethical system based primarily on the natural law, seasoned with systematic theology.<sup>3</sup> Bill first denied that motivation and content can be so easily separated, but turned

more and more to the figure and teaching of Jesus as paradigmatic, or quoting Stephen Mott, "a model of behavior which the hearer is expected to apply to other areas of life."<sup>4</sup>

A decade later, also in *Theological Studies*, Bill offered a thorough and wide-ranging survey of the flood of works published on the historical Jesus, ranging from the meticulous studies of John Meier through the work of "The Jesus Seminar," and the critical reflections of Luke Timothy Johnson. Anticipating the next decade of research, he noted, "In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it seems that ethics may be supplanting history as the primary mode of scriptural interpretation. Questions now focus on the meaning of Jesus, rather than on factual knowledge about him."<sup>5</sup> Respect for other scholars and coverage of the field characterized his work as it shifted direction from the nineties to his own model for the relation of Scripture and ethics.

### CHARTING THE WAY

Spohn did not attempt to write a New Testament ethics on the model of Wolfgang Schrage or Richard Hays, that is a description of the moral world of particular books. Rather, Scripture animated Spohn's work from the inside to external expression. Two texts were beacons that guided his work: Phil. 1:27, "Only live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel," and "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). His direct engagement with Scripture took three major forms: attention to literary genre and context, the highlighting of paradigmatic texts, and directives on the proper use of Scripture for moral discourse. Though eschewing a canon within a canon, Bill underscored the paradigmatic role



of certain themes and texts, such as the Exodus, the teaching of non-violence in the Sermon on the Mount, hospitality to the stranger and the vulnerable in the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the enacted proclamation by Jesus at the Lord's Supper. He recognized not only the diversity of the New Testament witness but correlated this diversity with the requirements for a constructive ethic by his use of motifs and texts that deal with perception, emotions and identity.

Spohn also provided directives for the proper use of Scripture. In the revision of *What Are They Saying?*, he proposed criteria for the proper use of Scripture: (1) centrality of the image or story, (2) theological soundness, (3) consistency with Christ, (4) fittingness, and (5) moral rightness. Never simply a biblicist, he aligned his work with those who follow the fourfold approaches to ethics. He wrote: "Our selection of biblical material must be justified by the other sources we use: theological validity in the tradition, consistency with the normative portrait of the human person in ethics, and relevance to the factual situation as determined by the best empirical analysis available."<sup>6</sup>

Spohn was also sensitive to the flawed use of Scripture that he sketched in his 1995 article "Morality on the Way of Discipleship: The Use of Scripture in *Veritatis Splendor*."<sup>7</sup> Given the repressive theological atmosphere of the last two decades, it is also a work of some intellectual courage. His study begins with a reverent appreciation of the encyclical: "No papal document in history has concentrated to such an extent on the role of Jesus Christ in the Christian moral life or relied as much on Scripture as the source of its argument" (83). Spohn then poses three criteria for the use of Scripture in ethics: selection, interpretation and application. He faults the encyclical on all three counts. After a careful catalog of the biblical texts selected, Spohn remarks, that *Veritatis Splendor* "rarely pays any attention to the original context or intent," and in effect results in a more elegant form of proof texting. He then argues that the interpretation of biblical material constitutes a "theonomous naturalism," which "leap[s] from qualities of God to corresponding characteristics of the moral life" (98) and speaking of application, he notes "the encyclical truncates the life of Christ



Charles Barry

Spohn in an interview with *San Jose Mercury News* reporter Brandon Bailey during the SCU press conference and panel, "Sins Against the Innocent: Sexual Abuse by Priests and the Role of the Catholic Church" (May 30, 2003).

to make it morally normative in a deontological way" (101). The result is that "Christonomous ethics become not 'theonomous,' but 'heteronomous' ethics of the Church's Magisterium" (102). I would add that the use of Scripture in this document differs little from the directive of *Humani Generis* that the function of the theologian is to find in what manner (*qui ratione*) the teaching of the Magisterium is found in Scripture and tradition.

### POINTING TO THE GOAL

Spohn's pilgrimage of the engagement of Scripture and ethics sadly never reached its goal. With regrettable oversimplification, I will simply indicate the directions he plotted, which emerge forcefully in two posthumous works, "Scripture," chapter 6 of *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (2005) and "Christian Spirituality and Theological Ethics" in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (2005).<sup>8</sup> In "Scripture," he synthesizes approaches that also characterize his major work, *Go and Do Likewise*, by highlighting the lens of character and virtue and proposing a synthetic task for a Christian ethics informed by Scripture. He stakes out his own approach "which (a) gives primacy to the Synoptic Gospels' portrayal of discipleship (b) as configured by the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, in order (c) to shape the character of Christians and their communities" (96). Here he also presents his most succinct exposition of the role of analogy in applying the New Testament data to modern life, and then moves to a discussion of spiritual practices that arise from the analogical imagination. He issues a challenge that is now for us to assume:

If communities play so central a role in shaping believers, ethicists need to assume a new form of research. They should examine the practices of communities of faith as they strive to interpret the word of God as communities of moral discourse (104).

In the final work that I will mention, "Christian Spirituality and Theological Ethics," he returned to a project highlighted in the 1997 article in *Theological Studies*.<sup>9</sup> In the past two decades, largely due to the leadership of scholars such as Ewart Cousins, Walter Principe, and especially Sandra Schneiders and her colleagues in

the Christian Spirituality program at the Graduate Theological Union, spirituality emerges not as a branch of ascetical theology, but as an independent dialogue partner with other theological endeavors. But at this point Christian ethics and spirituality seem to be "dating," rather than moving to marriage. Schneiders, for example, does not list ethics or moral theology among the "constitutive disciplines" of an adequate biblical spirituality, perhaps due to a tradition of viewing Christian ethics as concerned primarily with rules or norms of action. Spohn has truly broken new ground to marry these disciplines. In this posthumous work that is too rich to summarize, he has truly become a *yenta*.

Preparing these remarks gave me a much more profound appreciation of the depth of scholarship, range of interests and intellectual distinction of Spohn's work, while allowing me to grieve more deeply over his departure. My fondest hope is that biblical scholars and theologians continue to hear those whispers from the grave, and "go, and do likewise." [e](#)

### ENDNOTES

1. bYebamot 97a, Sanhedrin 90b. I owe this reference to Burton L. Visotzky, in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown*, John R. Donahue, ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 91.
2. William C. Spohn, *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?*, rev. ed. (New York: Paulist, 1995), original edition published in 1984; "The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 47 (1985): 88-102, excerpted and reprinted in David K. Clark and Robert V. Rakestraw, eds., *Readings in Christian Ethics: Volume I, Theory and Method* (Minneapolis: Baker Book House, 1994); "Jesus and Ethics," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 49 (1994): 40-57; "Jesus and Christian Ethics," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 92-107.
3. "The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology," 99-101.
4. *Ibid.*, 97.
5. "Jesus and Christian Ethics," 93.
6. *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?*, rev. ed., 120-21.
7. Michael E. Allsopp and John J. O'Keefe, eds., *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses* (Kansas City, Mo: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 83-105.
8. Arthur Holder, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (London: Blackwell, 2005), 269-85; Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 93-111.
9. From *The Oxford Handbook*; also "Spirituality and Ethics: Exploring the Connections," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 109-123.

# Jesus and the Moral Life

Edwards, H.R. Niebuhr, and Spohn



**BY ANNE E. PATRICK, SNJM**  
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AT THE TIME HE WAS FIRST STRICKEN WITH SYMPTOMS OF BRAIN CANCER IN APRIL 2004, BILL SPOHN WAS WORKING ON A BOOK THAT WOULD TRACE AMERICAN THINKERS FROM JONATHAN EDWARDS THROUGH H. RICHARD NIEBUHR AS A SOURCE FOR A DISTINCTIVELY AMERICAN MORAL THEOLOGY. He wanted to overcome the limitations he found in much revisionist moral theology, especially that of German Jesuits who, to Spohn's mind, combined insights from Rahner and Kant in a way that was strong on universality but weak on Christian distinctiveness and inspirational force. In an intellectual autobiography shared with the Pacific Coast Theological Society on All Souls Day in 2001, he observed that Bruno Schuller had once "likened the moral teachings of Scripture to training wheels on a child's bicycle: helpful for the beginner but dispensable once

[one] got the hang of moral reasoning. Jesus exemplified universal moral truths, but he did not call his disciples to a distinctive way of life." Objecting to this analogy, Spohn asked:

But is that all there is to Christian moral living? Had the German penchant for universality made them blind to the particularity of Christian ways of living? The Gospels seemed to offer quite a bit more than training wheels to get Christians to become good Kantian universalists, as in an ethics of indiscriminate love, unending forgiveness, detachment from wealth and power, nonviolence, a commitment to the poor, and the radical trust that God's life in Christ overcame sin and death .... Perhaps moral theology in America needed to find its own voice and lose its German accent.<sup>1</sup>

Spohn's doctoral research was on Jonathan Edwards, whose theology was influenced by the powerful religious experiences associated with



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the Great Awakening. His own experience with charismatic prayer groups in the late 1960s had prepared him to see the significance of Edwards' idea that "true religion was grounded in authentic emotions, religious affections that lay at the heart of the human response to God. The real challenge was not to eliminate emotions from religion but to tutor them by the beauty of God and the person of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, he argues in his principal constructive work, *Go and Do Likewise*, that the beauty of God is best discerned in the person of Christ, beginning with Jesus as available in the gospels, and that the tutoring of the affections so necessary for true religion and authentic morality is best accomplished through spiritual practices, which he considered "the missing link between the story of Jesus and the moral life."<sup>3</sup> Spohn derived this emphasis on practices not only from contemporaries such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Margaret Miles, but also from a series of classic American thinkers that he continued to probe after graduate school. He thought that Jonathan Edwards and such descendents as "Ralph Waldo Emerson, Orestes Brownson, Horace Bushnell, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, William Ernest Hocking, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and H. Richard Niebuhr" might "provide the framework for a genuinely American Catholic moral theology," one that would avoid the pitfalls he saw in European work. However, Spohn took exception to "standard" interpretations of this American lineage, which held that the "tradition started religiously in Edwards and ended in a thoroughly secular pragmatism in Dewey." Instead he maintained that H. Richard Niebuhr belongs at the end of the line and deserves credit for

combining "experiential naturalism" with "Augustinian piety" to "create a . . . uniquely American take on religion and morality." My sense from reading Spohn's later works is that he was successful in traveling further along what he called the "bridge that spans two centuries from Edwards to Niebuhr," for we see both the *pragmatism* of Dewey and the *piety* of Edwards and Niebuhr in his treatment of the significance of Jesus for the moral life of Christians, especially in his emphasis on the *spiritual practices* conducive to tutoring the affections and training the heart in discernment.<sup>4</sup>

It is our loss that Spohn was not able to publish the full discussion of this American lineage that he had planned, and perhaps someone can undertake to complete this project the way James Gustafson and Richard R. Niebuhr brought out H. Richard Niebuhr's last book, *The Responsible Self*, after the Yale theologian's death in 1962. Indeed, something that Gustafson wrote about Niebuhr in the "Introduction" to that work is applicable to Spohn as well: "He relished a freedom which he found in the American theological scene to be deeply involved in what the Scripture is saying to us without being bound to ground everything he wished to say in it."<sup>5</sup> There is no doubt that what engaged Spohn most fully in Scripture were the stories of Jesus. Consider the telling lapse in documentation for *Go and Do Likewise* where Spohn confuses the title of his own earlier book, calling it not *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* but rather *What Are They Saying About Jesus and Ethics?*<sup>6</sup> With this outstanding example of synecdoche provided by Spohn himself, let me discuss here just two ways that Niebuhr and Edwards influence Spohn's

views on Jesus and the moral life, which could be shown much more fully had we more time. These involve Spohn's analysis of discernment and his emphasis on the practice of prayer.

In an early essay called "The Reasoning Heart: An American Approach to Christian Discernment," Spohn voiced the conviction that although Rahner was right to say that Christian discernment "should become central to the pastoral task of moral theology," Rahner's emphasis on freedom and transcendence painted a generalized picture of the discerning self that neglects the unique identity of the agent in her specific historical and social situation, a context formed by memories and symbols.<sup>7</sup> He writes: "Rahner concentrates on the moment of discernment, like one freezing a moving picture to examine a single frame of film. Considering the personal history and social context of the person would be like viewing the film progressively up to this moment, thereby providing a richer framework for discernment."<sup>8</sup> It was Niebuhr's book on "the responsible self" that helped Spohn to develop his "motion picture" account of Christian moral agency, for from Niebuhr he took the idea of regarding the agent fully in historical and social circumstances, with the aid of the root-metaphor of the agent as responder to God's action in history. Clearly Spohn agreed with Niebuhr's emphasis on an "ethic of the fitting," and he drew insight as well from the Yale theologian's attention to metaphor and symbol. Indeed, I believe Spohn seized on Niebuhr's writings about Jesus Christ being "the symbolic form" by means of which Christians interpret experience, and then linked this with Niebuhr's recognition that governing metaphors are both like and not like the terms of the comparison to develop his own highly significant stress on analogy in *Go and Do Likewise*.

Spohn wanted in this book to retain the emotional power of the *imitatio Christi* approach to the moral life, while avoiding the literalism and sentimentality associated with bracelets that would reduce discernment to the simplistic question, "What would Jesus do?" "The danger of some 'imitation of Christ' spiritualities," he declared in his 1994 CTSA plenary address on Jesus and ethics, "is that they terminate in

the person of Jesus, like worshipping an icon, whereas the Jesus of the Gospels was radically concerned [not about himself, but] about God" and "the breaking in of the Reign of God and the people most in need of justice and reconciliation."<sup>9</sup> On this point Spohn seems to develop Niebuhr's argument in *The Responsible Self* that the "symbolic form" of Jesus Christ is necessary but not sufficient for the moral lives of Christians.<sup>10</sup> The story of Jesus, Spohn insisted, was a normative pattern requiring creative application, not direct imitation. "Disciples do not clone their master's life," he wrote, "They follow the master through discerning imaginations, graced emotions, and faithful community."<sup>11</sup> Imagination, flexibility, creativity—these are the qualities needed to relate to Jesus as the "Rosetta Stone" that supplies the key to decoding what God is "enabling and requiring" each uniquely situated Christian "to do and to be."<sup>12</sup> As Spohn put it,

Jesus did not come teaching timeless moral truths or a uniform way of life to be replicated in every generation. Rather his words, encounters, and life story set patterns that can be flexibly but faithfully extended to new circumstances. These patterns lead us to envision analogous ways of acting that are partly the same and partly different.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, for Spohn, Jesus supplies a paradigm, not a "blueprint," and thus his directive, "Go and do likewise," not "Go and do exactly the same."<sup>14</sup>

The question then becomes: How is the Christian imagination to be schooled in the skill of "spotting the rhyme" amidst the chaotic demands of everyday existence so as to be able to respond appropriately to God's ongoing invitations?<sup>15</sup> It is here that Jonathan Edwards' emphasis on religious affections and practices of piety influences Spohn's ethics most directly.<sup>16</sup> Christians must *experience* what the Gospels are getting at in ways that affect their emotional lives profoundly, for that is the only way to learn how to be a disciple of Jesus. "Like the palate of a good chef," he wrote in an essay published last year, "the discriminating judgment of the Christian can be trained."<sup>17</sup> Spohn saw spiritual practices as basic to this training for conversion




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of life, which is a gradual process involving changes in our perception and our dispositions, and thus in our identity. By practices he meant “committed exercises, activities that we deliberately set time aside to do regularly,” such as Eucharistic worship, forgiveness, lobbying for social justice, working in a soup kitchen, and prayer.<sup>18</sup> What Spohn said about the practice of prayer provides an especially clear example of how Edwards influenced his ideas on Jesus and the moral life, and perhaps also encouraged him to employ metaphor so often in his own writing:

*Prayer is the place where we can hear the harmony that discernment seeks.*

The metaphor of harmony runs through the literature on discernment. There is a structural and valuational correspondence between a religious affection and its “proper object” that registers harmoniously. Edwards writes, “The soul distinguishes as a musical ear; and besides, holiness itself consists in spiritual harmony; and whatever don’t agree with that, as a base to a treble, the soul rejects” [Edwards, *Miscellanies*]. The practice of Christian discernment helps us develop that well-tuned ear. The tuning fork is the life of Christ as presented in the Gospels and present in faith. Prayer is the place where we can best hear the dominant tone of that tuning fork. No piano tuner has a radio playing while he is trying to work.<sup>19</sup>

Much more could be said about the influence of Niebuhr and Edwards on Spohn’s ethics, but his image of the tuning fork captures things well enough for now. 

## ENDNOTES

1. William C. Spohn, “An Intellectual Autobiography” (unpublished address to the Pacific Coast Theological Society, November 2, 2001), 6. Accessed April 11, 2006, from [www.scu.edu/spohnmemorial](http://www.scu.edu/spohnmemorial).
2. *Ibid.*, 7.
3. *Ibid.*, 8.
4. *Ibid.*, 7.
5. James M. Gustafson, Introduction to *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, by H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 20.
6. William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 211, note 7. First published in 1984, Spohn’s *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* was later revised (New York: Paulist, 1995).
7. William C. Spohn, “The Reasoning Heart: An American Approach to Christian Discernment,” in *Introduction to Christian Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes (New York: Paulist, 1989), 564. The essay first appeared in *Theological Studies* 44 (March 1983): 30-52.
8. *Ibid.*, 566.
9. William C. Spohn, “Jesus and Ethics,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 49 (1994), 51.
10. H. Richard Niebuhr. *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 158.
11. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 11.
12. *Ibid.*, 63 and 31. Spohn credits the Rosetta stone metaphor to Niebuhr’s 1941 study, *The Meaning of Revelation*.
13. *Ibid.*, 49.
14. *Ibid.*, 4 and 63.
15. *Ibid.*, 63.
16. William C. Spohn, “Spirituality and Its Discontents: Practices in Jonathan Edwards’s *Charity and Its Fruits*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31 (2003): 253-76.
17. William C. Spohn, “The Formative Power of Story and the Grace of Indirection,” in *Seeking Goodness and Beauty: The Use of the Arts in Theological Ethics*, ed. Patricia Lamoureux and Kevin J. O’Neil (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 29.
18. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 38.
19. *Ibid.*, 161.



# William C. Spohn's Contribution to Moral Theology



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*VERBA VOLANT, SCRIPTA MANENT* (“SPOKEN WORDS FLY AWAY, WRITTEN WORDS REMAIN.”) IS USUALLY AN EXHORTATION TO COMMIT ONE’S TEACHINGS TO PAPER. PERHAPS THE LATIN EQUIVALENT OF “PUBLISH OR PERISH”? And on occasions such as this volume dedicated to the work of our beloved colleague Bill Spohn, the genre usually calls for the accent to fall on the individual’s published corpus as the focus for his contribution to the discipline.<sup>1</sup> While I intend to honor this tradition, I would like to point out that the *verba volant* do not in fact disappear, and in the age of globalization, Bill’s unpublished contributions constitute an important part of his legacy to moral theology. To this end I would like to weave together Bill’s contribution not only as author in the discipline of moral theology but also his wider impact as teacher, ecumenist, mentor, and friend.

It was as one of the absolute best all-time teachers I’d had (next to another former teacher who also contributed to this volume) that I first came to know Bill in 1981 at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley. Those of us who were taught by Bill remember a number of oft-repeated phrases that he would employ as mnemonic aids, such as “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” Looking over some of my course notes in conjunction with reviewing some of Bill’s key writings I did find a number of compelling thematic rhymes which run throughout both his teaching and publishing.

One of these which I judge to be perhaps Bill’s central contribution to Roman Catholic moral theology is his emphasis on Jesus and the Gospels not merely as sources for moral norms but as change agents in the lives of the disciples. I remember Bill often remarking about a typical German manual of moral theology which

*“Rhyiming” with St. Paul a bit, Bill used to say, “It’s hard to die for a ‘moral norm,’ but we might imagine doing this for Jesus or another.”*

would not mention Jesus until about page 200, and then only in a footnote. It may have been a slight exaggeration, but only slight. Certainly Bill took seriously Vatican II’s call to make Scripture the soul of all theology, and especially to reform the approach to moral theology.<sup>2</sup>

While others obviously tried to take seriously this same Conciliar charge, none has done more than Bill, in my opinion, to let Jesus and the Gospels structure the blueprint and framework for approaching moral theology, rather than building the ethical project on a different foundation and then turning to Jesus and Scripture when it was time to move to the stage of interior decoration of the moral dwelling. “Rhyiming” with St. Paul a bit, Bill used to say, “It’s hard to die for a ‘moral norm,’ but we might imagine doing this for Jesus or another.” What Bill was pointing at was the absolute essentialness for reconnecting a Gospel-centered spirituality to the practice of moral discernment as foundational for doing moral theology:

*Spirituality* here means the practical, affective, and transformative dimension of a religious tradition. It is accountable to the norms and convictions of a faith community. The practices that express spirituality are pedagogical and transformational. They are the basic repertory for an engaged reading of the story of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

If we follow Bill’s lead here, then the task of moral theology points less toward making correct decisions and more to the whole process of conversion.<sup>4</sup>

Doing moral theology with this goal in mind meant that many of the founts of Roman

Catholic tradition would not provide us with the resources we needed. What Bill did then, and which I would also count as a major part of his legacy to the whole discipline of moral theology, was to turn to other thinkers and traditions. In this, Bill showed himself to be a master ecumenist, and speaking as one who has both studied and taught for considerable periods of time outside of the United States, I have relied immensely on Bill’s ecumenical approach to moral theology in doing my own work. Now I realize that in this regard I am probably preaching to the choir, but names like Jonathan Edwards, H. Richard Niebuhr, and James Gustafson would *not* have enjoyed the recognition or cautious acceptance among the seminarians and scholars in Rome, Asia and Africa if it had not been for Bill. Bill never discounted Thomas Aquinas and the classic natural law theory, but neither did he confine himself or us to these sources.

For my own work in moral theology I am particularly indebted to Bill for introducing us to James Gustafson’s own appropriation of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason (which I have renamed the “Normatively Human”). This four-sector source grid has now become so well established in the English-speaking world that I even find traces of it appearing in certain Vatican documents!

Besides modeling for us an ecumenical and collaborative approach to Christian ethics, Bill also broke important ground in trying to outline what I would like to call an inculturated American moral theology. That famous gentle homily “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”

was probably all that most of us knew about Jonathan Edwards' work prior to making Bill's academic acquaintance. I know that Anne Patrick details this contribution in her article in this volume, but in terms of Bill's overall contribution to moral theology I would underscore how he showed us we didn't always have to look to either the distant past or a remote Europe for doing Christian ethics.<sup>5</sup>

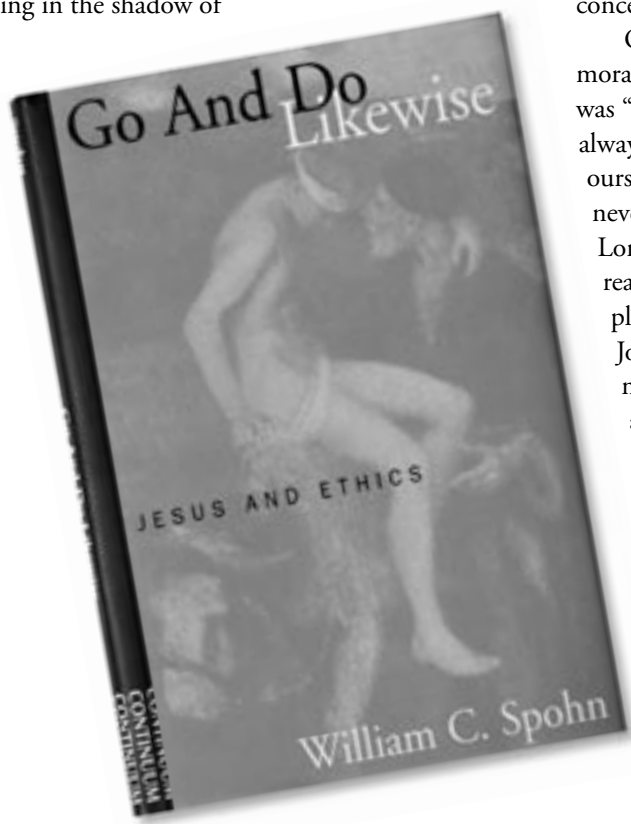
Another important area that Bill helped us explore as a rich source for Christian moral living was what Edwards called the "religious affections" and the "reasons of the heart." Using the work of a 17<sup>th</sup> century Protestant divine for the contemporary appropriation of the emotions in Christian ethics, I believe was a master-stroke on Bill's part—somewhat like the way that Josef Fuchs would cite Thomas Aquinas when he wanted to introduce a particularly novel interpretation on moral absolutes. If Bill had merely used a contemporary author (and I'll not name names to protect the guilty) to make this important point I think the notion could have been more easily dismissed, especially by those influenced by the *patres graviores* working in the shadow of

the Dome.<sup>6</sup> While Bill was respectful generally of the Magisterium, he did not hesitate, with a genuine *obsequium religiosum*<sup>7</sup> (usually!) to indicate instances in which he felt the Magisterium itself was not being as faithful as it could be in attending to the development of moral theology.<sup>8</sup>

What does one do, though, when one gets better in touch with one's emotions—moral or otherwise? The answer that Bill gave us marks the next important contribution to moral theology, namely the importance of the role of discernment in the moral life and how we can engage better in this crucial process. He published a number of works in this area, and time does not permit me to go into greater detail here on this contribution.<sup>9</sup> However, in the whole discernment process he did help navigate between a biblical fundamentalism associated with *WWJD*<sup>10</sup> on one hand, while steering clear of a somewhat cynical dismissiveness of those who would turn to the Bible for moral guidance. Spohn's approach was his articulation of Jesus as a "concrete universal" which we can access and appropriate through the use of David Tracy's concept of analogical imagination.

One of Bill's favorite sayings was that the moral mandate of the foot washing in John 13 was "not about pedicures!" He challenged us always to be not "clones of Christ," but truly ourselves—that is, unique and individual, but nevertheless members bound together to the Lord in the community of disciples. Here I realize I'm beginning to tread in the garden plot assigned to my esteemed colleague Fr. John Donahue, so I will say no more at this moment, other than to acknowledge that another real contribution Bill made to the discipline of moral theology was to model for us how a good moral theologian has to be cross-disciplinary and try to bring in the best insights from Scripture and the rest of theology, as well as anything else which would help illuminate one or the other sectors of moral experience.

As you have probably intuited by now, Bill's accent in doing moral theology falls far less on the "what" of moral theology, e.g., deducing the



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various levels of abstract moral norms or applying them to concrete ethical quandaries through casuistry than it does on the "who" of morality, namely the individuals and the communities they live in in our morally complex world (to sneak in the title of a book near to my heart<sup>11</sup>). Thus, the last contribution of Bill's that time allows me to make here would be his thicker description of our moral identity. Here again, those of us familiar with Bill's work spot another few rhymes.

In *Go and Do Likewise* Bill helped clarify the notion of personal identity by asking and answering the question "To whom do I belong?" I think Bill would say that getting the right question was not only antecedent to, but methodologically more important, than getting the right answer: "The right question is not 'Who am I?' but 'Whose am I? To whom do I belong? To what am I committed?' Personal continuity is determined by the persons and causes to which we have committed ourselves, and the persons who have promised themselves to us. Identity comes from identification with specific people and causes."<sup>12</sup>

Here Bill was echoing something he'd outlined 15 years earlier in an excellent monograph entitled "St. Paul on Apostolic Celibacy and the Body of Christ." In it, Bill gave what I still find to be one of the most compelling treatments of the promise of chastity priests and religious take, basing it not so much on traditional asceticism, but on a lived commitment of the God-given gift of one's whole sexual identity. Thus, despite the title, Bill really has given us a positive


theology of sexuality for all states of life, and he stressed that a lived expression of sexual identity for all should be first and foremost relationally oriented. Thus, no one, including those of us living out vowed celibacy, is dispensed from the life-long and life-giving striving to form bonds of intimate companionship: "We learn to acknowledge our personal worth through the love [others] have for us, receiving their gifts as they have received ours .... The celibate must be able to name specific people when the question is asked, 'To whom do I belong?'"<sup>13</sup>

Certainly most, if not all, of us who attended the panel on Spohn at the CTSA 2006 Convention did so because we realize that along with Marty, we too belong to Bill as he does to us. The testimony of his illness and death is not yet on library shelves, but they are powerful words which have literally flown around the world and likewise constitute an important part of Bill's legacy to moral theology. In going over my class notes for a 1985 course on moral discernment I had with him, I found the following which might serve as a fitting valediction from Bill to us who remain behind: "God's answer to theodicy was not a theoretical one, but rather a practical one—Jesus. Thus perhaps there is no apt theoretical answer to the question of theodicy—but only God's practical answer."<sup>14</sup> Here Bill and Marty both have given us a humbling and inspiring glimpse into God's practical answer to the problem of why good people suffer.

For my own conclusion, in the spirit of Bill's narrative approach to theology, I'd like to



relate a brief encounter I had when I first began teaching a course on the *proprium* or distinctiveness of Christian ethics in 1990 at the Pontifical Gregorian University. I had listed as a one of the core texts Bill's WATSA book on Scripture and ethics<sup>15</sup> and one of my erstwhile teachers and new chair, an eminent German moralist, was somewhat troubled by my approach and asked me if Spohn's book were really suitably "valido" for an STL course in fundamental moral theology at such an illustrious institution as the Greg. The response I gave him then remains my firm conviction today, not only for this one excellent book, but for the whole of the corpus of Bill's contributions to moral theology as author, teacher, mentor, and friend: *Si Padre, è' molto valido.*

*E così sia!* 

#### ENDNOTES

1. I'm sure a full bibliography of Spohn's works will be published soon, but I have counted thirteen page entries included in my *A Research Bibliography in Christian Ethics and Catholic Moral Theology* (Lewiston N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), and a further seven page entries in my *Bibliography on Scripture and Christian Ethics (Studies in Religion and Society)* (Lewiston N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997). Both of these books give brief annotations to the publications listed, so this might be of help to someone wishing to look at the works discussed here below (as well as those which could not be included in such a brief presentation).
2. Cf. *Optatam totius*, #16.
3. William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*, (New York: Continuum, 1999), 33.
4. Spirituality was a theme in much of Spohn's later writings, including "Scripture" in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (Oxford: University Press, 2005), 93-111; and "Christian Spirituality and Theological Ethics," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 269-85. See also his "The Need for Roots and Wings: Spirituality and Christian Ethics," *Theology Digest* 47 (Winter 2000): 327-340, which was delivered as the fifth annual Henri de Lubac Lecture in Historical Theology at St. Louis University March 21, 2000. Christians cannot be spiritual without being religious. Spohn argued that to be spiritual one needs the roots of religious tradition and community, while to be religious in a Christian way one needs the wings of committed spiritual practices. Also helpful is his "Spirituality and Ethics: Exploring the Connections," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 109-123.
5. See, for example, William C. Spohn, "The Reasoning Heart: An American Approach to Christian Discernment," in *Introduction to Christian Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes, (New York: Paulist Press, 1989): 563-582. This piece was originally published in *Theological Studies* 44 (March 1983): 30-52. It is also found in *The Reasoning Heart: Toward a North American Theology*, ed. Frank M. Oppenheim, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1986), 51-73. Based on the thinking of some American theologians, Spohn outlines an approach to Christian discernment which stresses the normative contribution of biblical symbols and distinctive Christian affectivity in guiding moral evaluation.
6. "In the shadow of the Dome" refers to St. Peter's in the Vatican and indicates a mode of thought either closely aligned to (or done in fear of a negative reaction from) the Magisterium.
7. Cf. *Lumen Gentium* #25, and there is a wealth of commentary on what this does and does not mean.
8. See, for example, his critique of the first draft of the Universal Catechism's overall approach to moral theology, "The Moral Vision of the Catechism: Thirty Years That Did Not Happen." *America* 162 (3 March 1990): 189-192. This article with its reference to a Vatican Rip Van Winkle is the source of a very amusing anecdote which connects Bill to Pope Benedict XVI.
9. See though his "Passions and Principles," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 69-87, which Spohn published as part of the "Notes in Moral Theology: 1990." He reviews and discusses recent moral literature that stresses aspects of the emotions and their involvement in morality. Two key concepts used in reference to the emotions are the criterion of "appropriateness" for moral assessments and strategies and the "education" of the emotions, and he provides ample reference to related literature on psychology and morality.
10. "What Would Jesus Do?" In my opinion Spohn discusses this problematic approach to Scripture and ethics best in the first edition of his *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?*, (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), especially in Chapter 5, "Call to Discipleship," where he references his discussion to Charles Sheldon's devotional classic of the late 19th century, *In His Steps*.
11. James T. Bretzke, S.J., *A Morally Complex World: Engaging Contemporary Moral Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004). I expressed in the acknowledgements section of this book my gratitude to Bill Spohn for his very helpful feedback on the manuscript—another example of his mentoring in moral theology.
12. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 24.
13. On this point compare the above reference with Spohn's earlier monograph "St. Paul on Apostolic Celibacy and the Body of Christ," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 17 (January 1985): 24.
14. From my course notes to Spohn's CEHR3200 Christian Moral Discernment, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, 10 April 1985.
15. William C. Spohn, *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984). Revised edition, 1995.

# Where Do We Go From Here?

Ways We Can Build on Spohn's Contributions



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TO IDENTIFY WHERE WE MIGHT GO FROM HERE IN DEVELOPING BILL'S CONTRIBUTION, I WILL ISOLATE ONLY TWO THEMES. ONE IS THE ROLE OF THE IMAGINATION IN THE MORAL LIFE; THE OTHER IS THE CONVERGENCE OF MORALITY AND SPIRITUALITY. Regarding the imagination, I am going to suggest a dialogue with the social and cognitive sciences to understand both how we form moral cultures that influence the imagination, and how the mind manages metaphors to shape behavior. Regarding morality and spirituality, I am going to suggest a greater dialogue with the social sciences and spiritual theology in order to appreciate the formative quality of spiritual practices and the critical-dialogical relationship of the moral and spiritual life.

## IMAGINATION

I draw the theme of the imagination from the way Bill used Scripture and from his treatment of Jesus as normative paradigm for the moral

life. Regarding Scripture, Bill did not so much think *about* biblical stories as think *with* them. He did so by means of the analogical imagination. This was his bridge between the words and deeds of Jesus and our own lives. The goal of thinking with the biblical stories analogically is to put on the mind of Christ so as to form a Christian moral character.

Over twenty years ago Phil Keane provided a foundational work on the imagination in his *Christian Ethics and Imagination*.<sup>1</sup> His work helped us see that the imagination is not to be equated with our private mental entertainment center, nor is it a gift some people have and others do not. Rather, he showed that everyone lives by his or her imagination. It is how we perceive the world, make sense of it, and create the world we live in. Bill's work has moved us forward by connecting the imagination to the formation of moral character, specifically one's perception, motivation, and identity.

At least two developments put us in a strategic place today to continue exploring the connection between character and imagination.

*Bill was excellent at drawing upon the Christian moral culture for frames of reference to interpret what is going on. But how do we understand the role and influence of multiple cultures intersecting simultaneously to influence character?*

One development is moral theology's shifting attention from action to agency. For example, one of the lessons we have learned by focusing on character is that the way we see things matters morally. H. Richard Niebuhr, an influence on Bill's work, once wrote, "We respond as we interpret the meaning of actions upon us."<sup>2</sup> In short, our frames of reference influence what we regard as morally significant in the situation. So it is very important that we pay attention to the stories that form us and the metaphors we live by.

A second development is in cognitive science.<sup>3</sup> It is teaching us how much the imagination plays a role in moral reasoning. What we perceive and how we reason about a situation depends on the metaphors that make up our frames of reference. While metaphorical frames do not tell us what to do, they do enlarge or shut down our capacity to see what is there. For example, if we see the immigrant as alien rather than as neighbor, we respond differently. We move from the metaphor (alien) to action (building walls as deflector shields) not by a simple trail of deduction but by way of analogy to our paradigm (a Star Wars cosmic battle). But if we inhabit a different story as our frame of reference (the Gospel), then we live by a different paradigm (The Good Samaritan) and perceive by means of a different metaphor (immigrant as neighbor) that influences our motivation and action (offer hospitality out of compassion).

Bill focused primarily on sources of faith to provide paradigms and metaphorical frames. He committed his work to understanding character formed within a Christian moral culture. The problem we face in forming character, however, is that we do not live within a monolithic moral

culture. We live within multiple cultures that overlap and often compete with one another, as our different ways of interpreting immigration illustrates so well.

Bill was excellent at drawing upon the Christian moral culture for frames of reference to interpret what is going on. But how do we understand the role and influence of multiple cultures intersecting simultaneously to influence character? We have the culture of non-violence from our tradition of faith, and we have the images of cosmic conflict from the popular culture of Star Wars. How do we create and sustain a primary moral culture of influence when the competition is so tough and perhaps more attractive? How do we evaluate whether and how well our churches and schools are cultivating a truly Christian moral culture, as Bill advocated so clearly in his work?

If we want to move forward Bill's agenda on character formation, then we need to dialogue with social and cognitive science to understand the formative dynamics of living within diverse cultures and to understand how the mind manages metaphors and thinks analogously in shaping behavior.

### **MORALITY AND SPIRITUALITY**

My second theme is the convergence of morality and spirituality. I read Bill's work as an exercise in practical piety. But piety is not to be confused with a pretentious display of religiosity. Piety keeps faith alive in action. As Bill's mentor James Gustafson would have it, piety is an attitude of respect that is evoked by an experience of the holy.<sup>4</sup>

For Bill, spirituality was the wellspring of the moral life. That is to say, morality is grounded in spirituality because the motivation


to follow Jesus comes from his spirit. The moral journey begins in that inner space where we accept God's love for us and awaken to our responsibility to love God, self, and neighbor in return. In this way morality reveals our spirituality.

But a long time ago, spirituality and morality went their separate ways. One of the reasons for the divorce was that morality became too preoccupied with actions, and left concern for the person to spirituality. That is changing now. It is time to put back together what belongs together. Bill's work moves us toward this integration. Spirituality's drive toward integrating the whole of one's life around the experience of God's love, and morality's emphasis on character as pervading the whole of our response to being loved offer a point of convergence for spirituality and morality.

The challenge of Bill's practical piety is to discover the self-involving meaning of our religious beliefs. We can discover this meaning through spiritual practices, such as prayer, forgiveness, discernment, Eucharistic worship, and serving the poor. For Bill, there is no genuine spirituality without practices. Spiritual practices are ways in which our spirituality nourishes the moral life at its very roots by allowing us to perceive the Good that loves us, by tutoring the emotions to motivate us to live in a way that makes that love real, and by deepening our identity with a faith community.<sup>5</sup> To move this aspect of Bill's work forward, we need to explore the social and psychological dynamics of how spiritual practices work in forming character. Such an understanding could serve the process of moral formation in parishes, seminaries, and schools of ministry.

While Bill was successful in showing that spirituality influences the moral life, we need to show that morality influences spirituality, too. Our involvement in working for justice, for example, can awaken us to examine our motivations and the roots of our commitment to justice in the first place. It can send us back to engage spiritual practices that focus on the deeper dimensions that unite us to one another and that lead us to our ultimate dependence on God.

Spirituality and morality function in a critical-dialogical relationship. They shape and reshape one another. While spirituality gives rise to morality, morality in turn reacts upon spirituality to correct or confirm its expression and direction. Without spirituality, morality gets cut off from its roots in the experience of God's love. Without morality, spirituality can spin off into ethereal ideas about another life in another world, or it can make us complacent about the way we are in this world. When ecclesial structures and spiritual practices, like the Eucharist, continue to obscure the baptismal equality of men and women as co-disciples, then we need to explore morality as informing spirituality.

As for where we should go from here, Bill's work has made those of us in moral theology aware of how morality needs spirituality. But I wonder if those in spirituality are as attentive to moral theology. While we might want to distinguish the respective interests of spirituality and morality by focusing spirituality on our relationship to God, and morality on character and action, we ought not to separate them so much that we lose their mutual influence on one another. A future agenda that would move forward Bill's contribution to the convergence of morality and spirituality is for moral theology and spiritual theology to be in dialogue so as to understand this critical-dialogical relationship more clearly. 

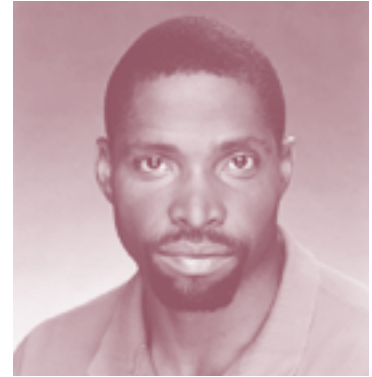
#### ENDNOTES

1. Philip S. Keane, *Christian Ethics and Imagination* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).
2. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 63.
3. The literature on the influence of cognitive science for ethics is growing. For a foundational work, see Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
4. James M. Gustafson, "Say Something Theological!" *Nora and Edward Ryerson Lecture* (University of Chicago, 1981), 5.
5. The importance of spiritual practices is woven throughout *Go and Do Likewise* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 50-71.



# Shakespeare at San Quentin

Santa Clara Students Perform Shakespeare For and With Inmates



**BY ALDO BILLINGSLEA**  
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*“The most dangerous creation of any society is the man who has nothing to lose.”*

—JAMES BALDWIN

While Santa Clara has long sought to stimulate the moral imagination of its students by direct contact with the poor and marginalized, our programs have often overlooked an important and steadily increasing segment of society—the inmate population. While serving out their sentences, prisoners lack mental stimulation. Subject to boredom and isolation, they often despair, both at their situation within the prison and the daily evidence they see that the world outside cares little or nothing for them. These inmates know that most people outside the prison gates will avert their eyes and bracket these souls from inclusion in the human family. As Kant reminds us, “It is ... a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sick-rooms or

debtors’ prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist.”<sup>1</sup>

## THE GENESIS OF THE PROGRAM

The idea of performing Shakespeare at San Quentin began in 2004. I was playing the title role in *Othello* at the Marin Shakespeare Company. Jonathan Gonzalez, who is director of education at the company, was playing Roderigo. One day, he talked with me and Paul Sulzman who was playing Iago, about ways in which we could reach out to students.

“I go into the prison, and I teach this Shakespeare class to these guys,” said Jonathan, “and I think they may be ready to perform a little and maybe do some monologues. I think it would be great if you guys could come in with me and you could see them.” I said, “Well, if we could perform along with your students it would be even better.” And Jonathan said, “Great! We could do that.” The rest is history.

I applied for and received two successive grants for the Shakespeare at San Quentin project from Santa Clara University. The first grant was received in 2005 from the office of the Dean of Arts and Sciences, and the second in 2006 from the Ignatian Center's Bannan Institute. These grants helped Santa Clara students to connect with prisoners and assist San Quentin State Prison in achieving its mission to assist those incarcerated "in achieving successful reintegration into society," by reminding them that there are people out there who are concerned about their well-being.

### THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAM

In the summer of 2005 the small pilot program funded one visit to San Quentin, during which students had a brief rehearsal with the inmate performers followed the same evening by a performance before an audience of inmates. This project showed how incredibly grateful the prison population was simply to have SCU students there. Their appreciation for the

work and the impact of their thankfulness was overwhelming for our students. The inmates brought themselves to the theatrical encounter in ways that were startling, amusing, joyous, and above all, irresistibly human.

For the students, the experience of attaining a level of theatrical solidarity with these men was a unique and powerful event, one that everyone felt was invaluable. Danielle Zent '05 was so moved by the experience that she has included it in her grad school application. "That experience," she said, "helped me figure out where I wanted to go with my education. I plan to major in forensic psychology so that I can work with people caught up in the criminal justice system."

In the summer of 2006 the grant from the Bannan Institute funded two visits to the prison, one rehearsal and one performance the following week. The visits were part of an SCU summer-session class, which fulfilled a Fine Arts requirement. It was listed as both upper and lower division. Upper-division students were required to perform several monologues,



Mallory Harper (Prospero) Katie Fier (Miranda), and Ronin (Caliban) share a laugh after their performance of *The Tempest*.

Photo courtesy of Aldo Billingslea

sonnets, and an additional scene. Lower-division students had no prerequisite and were required to perform one monologue and one scene. The planned San Quentin visits were optional. All but two students were able to attend. I prepared the students by introducing scansion and meter, and assigning Constantin Stanislavski's *Method of Physical Actions* and Scott Kaiser's *Mastering Shakespeare*.

The plan included a concurrent but distinct course for the inmates at San Quentin, to be taught by Gonzalez. He knew that he needed to meet often with the inmates in order to empower them with the confidence to perform for their peers. While the Marin Shakespeare Company was supportive of the endeavor, it could not afford to underwrite Gonzalez's time, so a vital part of the grant was a stipend to cover his work with the inmates. Thanks to the grant, Gonzalez was able to meet with the inmates over a period of several months.

The success of the project was tied to the ability to bring the San Quentin students

together with those at SCU. Gonzalez utilized his "Brown Card," which allows him to bring up to twenty guests for an event at the prison, to gather the inmates and students together on two occasions, once for rehearsal and once for the final performance before an audience of inmates.

#### THE PERFORMANCE AND ITS IMPACT

The media were out in force on the day of the performance, July 24, 2006. Reporters from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Marin Independent Journal*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, and *Inside The Bay Area* all filed news reports on the event.

Peter Fimrite of the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported this about the event's impact on the inmates:

The vulnerability was apparent in every scene. Michael Willis covered his face but could not hold back the tears as he finished a powerful scene from Act II of *As You Like It*.



Photo courtesy of Aldo Billingslea

Ronin receives congratulations for his performance from an inmate audience member.

*The inmates were grateful that we were there, even before we had spoken a word. By the fact that we had come, we were saying “We acknowledge that you exist. We haven’t forgotten you.” That in itself was a huge statement to them.*

“Shakespeare made me take a look at myself,” the 44-year old convicted burglar said later. “He was very conscious of human nature, of fear, of jealousy, things we all deal with. The more you read Shakespeare, the more you identify with Shakespeare.”

Louis Branch was also moved by Sonnet 30, which he performed with a command strikingly similar to that of actor Samuel L. Jackson. “Prisoners wake up at 3 a.m. and wonder what they’ve done with their lives,” said Branch, 59, who was first imprisoned in 1968, for kidnapping and robbery. “They think about loves lost and times wasted, friends who have died. That’s all in Sonnet 30. I relate it to my own life.”<sup>2</sup>

Inmates in our society are the epitome of those who, because of their actions, are prevented from fulfilling their divine purpose of full integration due to an oppressive system. I believe this class enabled the students to warm to the idea of connecting with individuals from the grittiest of realities.

The inmates were grateful that we were there, even before we had spoken a word. By the fact that we had come, we were saying “We acknowledge that you exist. We haven’t forgotten you.” That in itself was a huge statement to the inmates. And for them to see other people, young people, doing the same thing, was something they appreciated, too.

Reporting for the *Marin Independent Journal*, Paul Liberatore captured these comments from the SCU student participants:

“I was scared,” confessed 18-year-old Katie Fier, a tiny, outdoorsy-looking woman from Colorado. “I was out of my comfort zone.”

Calvin Johnson, a tall 19-year-old in a crisp white T-shirt, said softly: “After watching all those prison shows on TV, I didn’t know what to expect. When we first came in, I was very nervous and scared. They’re in here for a reason, you know. But you can’t really know what they’re like until you meet them. I found that there’s good in all of them.”<sup>3</sup>

### STUDENT JOURNALS

Students kept journals throughout the entire process. This was an excellent way for them to both reflect and decompress from what turned out to be an emotionally overwhelming experience.

The journal entries were moving and inspiring. “I want to do more of this,” wrote one student. “Is there a way to do this in the county prisons?” Three students wrote, “I know someone who is in prison.” One wrote, “I have a close family friend in prison. I would go and visit him and it meant the world to him that I was doing that. And that is one of the reasons why I am interested in this.”

Some students worked to find words to express their feelings. The journals were a great record of this, too, as they revealed the struggle of writing down a thought one way, then scratching words out, and trying again, looking for the right words, any words, to capture the power of the experience.



**THE FUTURE OF THE PROGRAM**

Should we continue this work? Yes. For me, reinforcement came that first summer via a touching recital of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 29. The inmate began, “Somebody else was supposed to read this, but cannot be here tonight. I want to do that one because I think it speaks to us.”

When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,  
I all alone beweepe my outcast state  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries  
And look upon myself and curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him,  
like him with friends possess’d,  
Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least;  
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
Like to the lark at break of day arising  
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate;  
For thy sweet love remember’d  
such wealth brings  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

This recitation particularly touched me because one of my heroes, Carl Upchurch, says that this is the sonnet that transformed his life when he was in prison.

I have seen these prisoners struggle with thoughts such as “I am in disgrace with other people. I’ve done this act that has been found disgraceful. And now what do I do?” I wonder, “Can there be redemption in this for them?”

As I explore where Shakespeare’s words intersect with these men’s lives, I see connections that could have a powerful impact. It is my hope that we can help these men and in the process shape our own students’ lives. <sup>e</sup>

**ENDNOTES**

1. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 251. (Ak. 6:457).
2. Peter Fimrite, “San Quentin—Convicts acting out Shakespeare bare their inner feelings,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, July 25, 2006, B 5.
3. Paul Liberatore, “‘Like birds in a cage,’ Inmates present Shakespeare at San Quentin,” *Marin Independent Journal*, July 25, 2006.



Photo courtesy of Aldo Billingslea

Audience member A.C., left, and Professor Billingslea recount a particularly humorous moment from the performance as the production’s guitarist, Stretch, listens.

## WILLIAM C. SPOHN MEMORIAL FUND

To recognize the passion and commitment that Bill Spohn had for developing leaders for religion and public life who are committed to competence, conscience, and compassion, his family members and the Ignatian Center created a memorial fund, which proposes to support an annual student internship.

### ABOUT THE INTERNSHIP

In collaboration with DISCOVER, and the SCU Religious Studies Department, the Ignatian Center offers undergraduate students internship programs in a variety of ministries, ranging from parishes to national faith-based organizations. Students use these paid internships to broaden their understanding of possible career choices and to test their interest in professional ministry.

The Ignatian Center provides resources and guidance for these students to design internships that enable them to make wise decisions about their lives after graduation. One of these internships is called the “William C. Spohn Internship for Ministry” and is funded annually out of this memorial gift fund.

### Donations may be sent to

Ignatian Center  
Santa Clara University  
c/o Spohn Memorial  
500 El Camino Real  
Santa Clara, CA 95053-0454

Make Checks payable to Ignatian Center  
Memo: Spohn Memorial

For more information, call Nikole Nichols,  
408-551-1951.

## NEXT ISSUE: FALL 2007


### Callings: Fostering Vocation Through Community-based Learning

**F**redrick Buechner famously suggests that you can discover your vocation by finding “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”

How do students discern what to do with their lives? Can community-based learning (CBL) play a distinctive role in this process? At its best, CBL enables students to encounter the genuine needs and suffering of their world; such experiences, in turn, prompt students to explore how their own passions and talents might best respond to the world’s needs.

However, community engagement does not automatically engender vocational reflection. Direct contact with human suffering often leaves students feeling overwhelmed, disoriented, and discouraged. Why, in some cases, does CBL naturally clarify and ignite a student’s sense of calling while in others, students are left untouched or, even worse, turned off?

This past March, the Ignatian Center at SCU held a national conference, *Callings: Fostering Vocation Through Community-based Learning* ([www.scu.edu/callings](http://www.scu.edu/callings)). The conference (and the web-based conversation that preceded it) aimed to examine five areas related to CBL and vocation: solidarity, student formation, international community-based learning, community connections, and diversity.

In our next issue, we will share some of the insights, proceedings, lessons, and surprises from our conference and its participants. 

“BOTH AS A TEACHER AND AS A MENTOR, BILL IMPARTED TO HIS LEGIONS OF STUDENTS HIS DEEP REVERENCE FOR KNOWLEDGE AND TRADITION, FOR THE RICHNESS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE, FOR RIGOROUS INTELLECTUAL INQUIRY, AND THE EXERCISE OF OUR GOD-GIVEN GIFTS OF CURIOSITY AND REASON. Together with his rich and continual prayer life, he demonstrated a faith informed by knowledge and experience, not fear and superstition, but continual searching, growth, and joy.

And throughout his years here, he eloquently expressed the ideals that inspire our work together in the formation of men and women for others. He was never reticent in his language, or in his challenge. In a characteristic address to students some years ago, he asked of them ‘What sort of life will put us in harmony with the goodness at the core of the universe?’”

—CATHERINE WOLFF, Sister of Bill Spohn, from a tribute delivered at the memorial service,  
Mission Santa Clara, Santa Clara University, October 3, 2005

*For the complete text of Wolff's tribute, as well as video streaming versions of presentations by Donahue, Patrick, Bretzke, and Gula, visit [www.scu.edu/spohnmemorial](http://www.scu.edu/spohnmemorial).*



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