

NCRcafe.org

Podcast: Interview with Ron Rolheiser
Host: Tom Fox

Part One (26:57)

Tom Fox: When people talk about contemporary spirituality it's not long before the name Ronald Rolheiser comes up. Rolheiser—lecturer, retreat leader, author, spiritual guide—is considered one of the more influential Catholic voices in contemporary spirituality. A member of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate for much of his priesthood, he has taught theology and philosophy at Newman Theological College in Edmonton Alberta, Canada.

In August 2005 he began a five-year assignment as the president of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio, Texas. Rolheiser is the author of more than a half dozen books including the award-winning *The Holy Longing*, published by Doubleday in 1999, and *The Shattered Lantern*, published by Crossroads in 1995.

His most recent book, *Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to Our Children*, was published by Crossroads in 2006, and it introduces voices in Catholic thought that show how the Christian faith can thrive in a secular world. Rolheiser writes a weekly column that appears on his website at RonRolheiser.com. Welcome, Ron.

Ron Rolheiser: Thank you, Tom, and it's great to be with you.

Tom Fox: Let's start with the basics: Why spirituality and how did you get to be a spiritual author?

Ron Rolheiser: It's kind of a double question there. One of them is my intellectual journey and then my personal journey. They're kind of linked, but I'll start with the personal journey. I grew up in the prairies in Canada—immigrant family, very Catholic, so I caught the tail-end of that powerful Catholic subculture in the '50s and '60s, being an altar boy and daily Mass.

Even though I went to public school, as Catholics we went to daily Mass. I went to seminary at 17. My parents died when I was in seminary but they were wonderful. Faith was the most important thing in our house. I was raised on the old Baltimore Catechism and the Pre-Vatican II liturgy and so on. That had its own wonderful power.

I went to the seminary early, right after high school, joined the Oblates because they were what I knew, then I caught the beginning of the new wave of theology. We had young professors. It was very exciting first in college, where we studied a lot of literature, languages, Latin, philosophy and Aristotle. I got high on that.

In high school I did well; I didn't enjoy high school because I realized what I really wanted was to get into depth and literature and so on. At the time, I thought I would go into literature and philosophy. Then when I got to theology I liked that even more. I was in the seminary in the late '60s doing theology and those were exciting times, especially learning in English.

Part of that theology we'd been taught in Latin and we didn't have a lot of resources. I liked systematic theology—Karl Rahner, all of these people, [Schillebeeckx]—and that's what I did my doctorate on and then afterward I got to teach theology. But more and more, something inside of me kept pushing more toward the area of spirituality.

Even though I'm trained in systematic theologian philosophy almost all the writing I'm doing right now is on spirituality. I can't even say that I made a conscious choice to move there. It's kind of just the way my life and my own spirituality and intellectual live evolved. I'm glad I'm there and I know it's also my niche. I can do more and better things in spirituality than I can as a philosopher.

Tom Fox: You're reaching a lot of people doing it.

Ron Rolheiser: Yes, and to be honest, I had to make some tradeoffs with that. I was and still am in the academic world. I left for a while to work with our order that's provincial and then our General Council in Rome, but when you're in the academic world, the prestige is in higher academics and if you write spirituality you kind of get suspect and people say, "Well, he's popularized or he's in deep."

So I had to make the conscious choice and swallow some academic pride to do this. I mean, I'm convinced it's false. I'm convinced spirituality is just as academic as systematic theology and so on, but that's not the perception, at least until recently, in academic circles.

I was teaching in Edmonton at a wonderful college, but initially they wouldn't let me teach courses in spirituality for credit. I

started doing them as non-credit courses and they became the most popular courses in the college so eventually the college credited them. At the time, the idea was that this isn't "real" theology.

Tom Fox: Where is the academic linkage between academic theology and spirituality? Is it in the arena of psychology? How do you make that academic tie as you argue you can?

Ron Rolheiser: I think it started being made already by people like Karl Rahner particularly, and Congar and some of the great European theologians would write their dogmatics and so on, but then there would always be at the end, this is where the tire hits the pavement—this is where it's got to go in life, otherwise what good is it?

Theology isn't just an art form; it's got to be a lot more than that. Initially they used to always call it pastoral applications and so on, but it's an academic field in itself. I think where the link would come is when you have great intellectual thinkers like John of the Cross. The link to psychology is both good and bad, as I'll say in a few minutes.

I don't think it helped give the credibility; it's more, let the great mystics and particular people like John of the Cross and Ignatius and so on...they stand up to academia. This is academia, it's just academia focused on a different discipline. The link to psychology is helpful, but it's very interesting.

For instance if you look at Henry Nouwen—his evolution as a writer and thinker, from when he first went to Notre Dame in the early '70s as a psychologist, and you look his early writings on intimacy and some of his earlier books—there was a lot in there about psychological terminology.

By the time he wrote works like [Dien], like that great piece on *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, he's pretty well purged himself of psychology, even though he was a psychologist. He was trying to get a language of soul. Dien psychology is an academic discipline. It's experimental psychology, empirical discipline, which has its own depth.

But the language of soul and archetype and stuff goes deeper than that and you can see Nouwen evolving where eventually he purges himself of that, of his own discipline—he was a psychologist and began to write spirituality (I hope this isn't an unfair expression) in a purer sense, just coming out of itself, coming out of soul.

Tom Fox: Help me to understand then, if you had to give a precise definition of spirituality, what would that definition be?

Ron Rolheiser: Mine would be wide and it's the one I use as my working definition in my books, particularly when I try to lay the basis in the early chapters of *The Holy Longing*. Let me lay the groundwork for this carefully. Our deepest identity as human beings is we are the image and likeness of God, but that doesn't mean there's some divine icon stamped inside of us.

We don't picture it that way; that could be true too. It's fire—just powerful, powerful Godly energies inside of us, which we experience in every way, in our appetites, our sexuality, our restlessness, our incapacity to ever sit still. That is our spirit; that's not part of our spirit, that is our spirit and what we do with the spirit, how we direct it, that is our spirituality.

Tom Fox: So the nature of our spirit is a restlessness.

Ron Rolheiser: Well, it's restless because it's divine and insatiable.

Tom Fox: Is it also incomplete without total unity?

Ron Rolheiser: Yes. Let me give you a little philosophical sound bite. We are infinite spirits working in a finite situation. That's the formula for restlessness. You want the whole world, you want to make love to the whole world, you want to consume the planet, you want to be everywhere, but you're in one place with one person. We're overcharged for our lives.

Tom Fox: Some of us are more overcharged than others, it seems. At least we're more consciously overcharged. You can go through life and meet people for whom these ideas are not, at least apparently, immediate or conscious. I guess at one level this exists within everyone, but at another level there are some people for whom this is a daily passion—they wake up with this holy longing that you speak about. First of all, do you buy that, is that true?

Ron Rolheiser: I think, Tom, you know that it's empirically true in terms that some people are more charged than others, but if you pause at the question "Why?" it's one of two reasons. One of them is temperament. Everybody has it a little bit at least. With some people the fire is hot and with others it's a cold fire. One of them is temperament and the more artistic or sensitive a person is, the more they're going to feel that.

Some people don't have an artistic temperament. I like the great line from Chris de Vinck, who I think is this wonderful essayist from New Jersey. In one of his books he says, "People are wired differently." He said, "Some people want a great embrace and others just want to build a deck off the living room."

So there's a difference of temperament, but then there's also a difference sometimes of stimulation. A lot of times we feel restlessness more than we're stimulated, literally in our grandiosity. I'll give you an example of that that isn't just Mick Jagger at the Superbowl and how you handle it if 100 million people are adulating you.

That's why, for instance, at big gala events like a commencement, Academy Awards and even weddings—why we oftentimes feel the most restless there. They're meant to be joyous events and you go there and everybody is wired because the event stimulates that grandiosity inside of us. We rent tuxedos and gowns and get our hair done in shops.

We're far, far too restless because in those times we're overstimulated and oftentimes people feel that at parties. You go to a big party and come back and it takes you some hours to come down, where you should have enjoyed this thing but in fact, you're too restless to have enjoyed it.

Tom Fox: You're saying that these basic elements are part of human nature and part of everyone's spirit, but that within certain people there is a more overt, or because of temperament, there is a seemingly greater passion.

Ron Rolheiser: Yes. This thing isn't abstract. People experience it in marriages. They want to go to a movie at night and the woman who may be more artistic wants to go to some powerful, romantic flick and he wants to go and see Stallone or Bruce Willis shoot a bunch of people.

He says, "I don't want to go to a chick flick." He's not as attuned. His temperament is different. She wants to go and see something that's got to really rearrange her chromosomes inside and get her romantically upset and crying and happy all at the same time.

Tom Fox: What is that saying? What is the point to the fact that we're wired differently? Certainly in the eyes of God, we're all in God's image, but we're wired differently, and how does one make sense of that?

Ron Rolheiser: That's a huge question—the fact that God didn't run people off a conveyor belt. We are really different and simplistically we could say it just makes for a richer variety, diversity.

Tom Fox: Let me put it a different way. If the movie that I want to see is going to stimulate my spirituality, my passion, and this need for sensitivity, openness and awareness on the one hand, or if I go to a movie because I'm stimulated to want to see Rocky beat the crap out of someone, am I going through life at a disadvantage?

Ron Rolheiser: An artist would say yes, that you're going through life partly asleep and probably a spiritual writer like John of the Cross would also say the same thing. At one level people would say that you're asleep to some of the deeper things inside of you. The nice thing about a Bruce Willis or Stallone picture, or watching Jerry Seinfeld on television or David Letterman's Top 10 List, is you relax and you go home and fall asleep.

You have a glass of scotch and you sleep really well, but it's not deep. Like Seinfeld himself says, "I'm about nothing," which was actually a brilliant statement. He said, "I'm about nothing. Don't try to read anything in to there." The artist would say you're missing something, and so would John of the Cross and the deep spiritual people. You're meant to be more sensitive to the movements inside of your own soul.

John of the Cross, for instance, I think was a great spiritual writer. He warned a lot about distraction almost as an anesthetic. He says you numb yourself and then what happens is you've got to face these deep things when you're not ready so that you don't look at any depth. Then one day you walk in the doctor's office and he says, "You've got eight months left to live," and then it all comes down on you at once. You've got no practice with depth at all.

Tom Fox: But it does seem, on the surface, that in our country, not just men but predominantly men are sleepwalking. Sundays are professional football and Saturdays are college football followed by basketball season and then baseball season. You find many people who can tell you exactly who's in first place, who's in second. I guess you're speaking to someone who enjoys sports as well, but it also seems to me that we avoid core elements of life.

Ron Rolheiser: Let me give you an image for that. I was listening to the NPR radio recently and they were doing an interview with a journalist who had just moved back to New York from Paris. He had been living

in Paris with his wife for 11 years. He worked for Time Warner or somebody like that.

While he was there, they were artists so they didn't have a television set, they weren't hooked to American culture—all the things we talked about like sports, Survivor, American Idol and who won the Academy Awards. Their son was born there. They moved back, he's eight years old and he's probably watched five hours of television in his whole life so he's not hooked to any of this stuff.

He's completely out of the loop from pop culture and so on. The interviewer said to the journalist, "Has your son held out against American culture?" The man laughed and said, "For about two days. Of course he didn't hold out. American culture is the most powerful narcotic this planet has ever perpetrated, for good and for bad."

I like that expression. It's really powerful and partly it's good because we can't be carrying depth all the time. What happens is we can plug into it and it's almost like an anesthetic, and then we can survive there until something happens, until there's a crack.

Your heart gets broken, your mother dies, you've got terminal cancer, and then it smashes it apart and we freefall and don't know what to do. We can live comfortably—I don't even have to say that facetiously—without depth for a long time until something happens.

Tom Fox:

I'm speaking with Ron Rolheiser, the Oblate Father and spiritual guide; his most recent book, *Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to Our Children*. Let's get back to this notion of longing because it seems in your writing there are central themes that reappear.

One is this longing, this need to complete, this spiritual/physical/psychological need for wholeness, for completion. Another is this sense of loneliness, good and bad. I'm trying to get a handle on it. It's almost like a Trinitarian spirituality, where life and meaning make sense in relationships, but they don't make sense without those relationships. Am I on the right track?

Ron Rolheiser:

Definitely, although when you say good and bad loneliness it sounds like cholesterol.

Tom Fox: If you were trying to summarize the core concepts of the spirituality that you profess right now, what are those concepts?

Ron Rolheiser: Starting from there, sometimes I get apologetic in public. Talk to me starting from loneliness, starting from longing, or are you sexually obsessed—that's the starting point to spiritual life. Notice even the great theologian, John of the Cross, remember how he begins his great poem "The Dark Night." He says, "One dark night fired by love's urgent longing." See, that's God's hook in us.

I always tell my students, we don't wake up in the crib serenely; we wake up crying. The difference between humans and animals is that cattle contentedly munch grass in pastures; humans discontentedly smoke grass in bars. We wake up with this powerful, Godly energy.

I begin *The Holy Longing* with this statement from Plato where he says: "We're fired into life with a madness that comes from the gods," but this madness helps you believe that you can have a great love, a great embrace, you can become immortal and contemplate God. It's what's best inside of us. We begin with that core concept and then begin in our self-understanding.

What's that going to do to you? It's going to knock you all over the planet but it's also going to be the root of all of your creativity and goodness and so on. Then the next step is how do you discipline it so it doesn't destroy you, but it works for you? Christianity and Buddhism are disciplines. Discipleship comes from discipline.

You put yourself under a discipline which shows you how to channel this. You soon see that the key part is relationship and community. We don't walk through life alone so community becomes a big piece. The first part is giving yourself over to something higher—the great statement by [C One Wile 21:32] where she says we spend our life looking for somebody to be obedient to because without that we inflate and destroy ourselves.

We put our great freedom under somebody, God, and then under a discipline, Christ, and then community. Those are the big blocks. Then it folds out for us and this fire makes for life and generativity as opposed to destruction and everything else.

Tom Fox: In *Christian Spirituality*, you talk about the non-negotiable essentials. Can you elaborate on those? I think you spoke about four pillars of Christian spirituality as opposed to any other wider spirituality.

Ron Rolheiser: I like using the word “non-negotiable” because so often we talk about cafeteria Christianity, and we’re all cafeteria Christians. If you asked me to take Christian spirituality or basically any really sound spirituality, it’ll come down to four pillars. The first one is our own private lives and integrity and certain intimacy to God. I’m only healthy if I’m honest, if what people see is what they get, I’m not a hypocrite.

I’m not saying one thing and living another. Nobody can do that perfectly, but there’s an essential integrity and honesty in my life and ideally, hopefully too, part of that is on relating in a personal way to God. Jesus puts that in one line, “Anyone who loves me, keeps my commands,” but sometimes we identify religion only with that, “This person is an honest person.”

Secondly, with that comes the dimension of justice. Every tenth line in the entire New Testament is a direct challenge to reach out to the fore an Jesus says some strong, strong lines. In Matthew 25 at the last judgment, notice there the way Jesus sets it up in that chapter. You’re going to be judged, not upon catecheses, there’s going to be no orthodoxy tests, no catechisms, no doctrines.

Did you feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked? In the New Testament, that’s every tenth line. In Luke’s gospel it’s every sixth line. In the epistle James it’s every fifth line. That’s pretty non-negotiable and sometimes we try to negotiate that one away.

For Christians, the third one is community. Unlike for instance precisely Buddhism or even Islam, you can be a good Buddhist and a good Islamic person, you don’t have to be in community—you can do that alone. In Christianity you can’t. Christianity is something we’re called to do with other people.

God calls a people, not just individuals. In Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, God calls individuals and they might form into a people and they might not. In Christianity and Judaism, God calls a group. We’re in a group outing, literally.

The last one, and sometimes we neglect this one though it’s very important, is that you can have the first three—you can be a person of integrity, be going to church, you can be just, and you can be bitter and angry as a slave inside. The last one’s just got to be a mellowness of heart, a certain peace and joy. It’s a softness inside of the spirit.

The Biblical example of the opposite is the older brother of the prodigal son. He stays home, he does all the work, he's never committed a serious sin in his life except he's so angry inside that he can't celebrate. That's the non-negotiable part. I always quote a line from T.S. Eliot, the great poet, where he says, "The last temptation that's the greatest treason is to do the right thing for the wrong reason."

You've got to have the right truth but you also have the right fuel and the fuel is gratitude and joy and softness. I got the clearest expression of that when everyone was answering me from Gutierrez, the Father of Liberation Theology. He's going around preaching justice but he's real clear.

It's not justice out of neurosis or anger, but out of gratitude and a mellow heart. He said drink beer if you need to, drink wine, have friendships. Do the types of things that keep your heart soft so that when you're doing justice, when you are going to church, there's a mellowness of heart there. So those are the four things, Tom—integrity, justice, community/church, mellowness of heart.

Tom Fox: This completes Part One of an interview with Ron Rolheiser, the author of *The Holy Longing* and *The Shattered Lantern*. This is Tom Fox and this has been an NCR podcast.

*

Part Two (25:40)

Tom Fox: This is part two of an interview with Ron Rolheiser, the author of *The Holy Longing* and most recently *Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to Our Children*. Ron, today it seems that you've come across many young people who will say, "I'm spiritual but not religious."

You'll find that they were raised Catholics, they've left the church, and they're not interested in Catholicism for a host of reasons. My question to you: Is the church missing something? Is there a way that we can reach younger people maybe by reformulating somehow these ancient teachings to reach a post-modern mind? Are you doing this consciously or subconsciously?

Ron Rolheiser: There are a couple of parts to this question. I think what complicates this question is—and I want to try to say this gently that doesn't get me in trouble with people and so on—young

people are divided. Let me begin with a story and then I'll contextualize and get to your question.

Recently, I was talking with a Bishop who told me, "I really don't like the way you write at all. I'm not sure why you're doing this." Incidentally, later I wanted to say, "I'm doing it very, very consciously, or trying to." He said, "Why did you just write catechises? People want the catechism. People want clear teaching and so on," and he's looking at a number of young people who do.

So I used this example, "Your Grace, you know, I went to the World Youth Days in Toronto. I was living there when the Pope came. It was wonderful. A million young people came and they wanted that and it was wonderful, but I'm a missionary—Oblates of Mary Immaculate. I was also conscious as a missionary that 50 million young people weren't there who need something else."

I said, "In my language, I'm trying for the other 50 million." Like somebody needs to address these million too, but like Jesus says, "Leave the 99 and go after the one." Today, sometimes we have to leave the one and go after the 99. Now, the second part of the question is the whole thing about the classical Christian doctrines.

You're so right the way you worded it. It's not that there's anything wrong with Christian doctrines and so on. Nothing has to be changed, but basically so often people have no idea, even people inside the church, what they mean. There's a language, but the language is more like an icon.

You're looking at a painting so you take a classical doctrine that's central to our faith—Jesus died to save us. I don't know any theologian who can explain that, not alone any pastor or a layperson. That means something deep but we have to try to get a language around it.

What we've been doing often times is simply repeating the biblical language, the dogmatic language, the language of our catechisms with the consolation that somehow that's accurate, but the non-consolation knowing a lot of times it just doesn't mean anything to somebody.

The search is really for a language, but the difficulty is that language doesn't exist; it has to be created and written. It's hard to find the formula. In fact, right now I would consider that my major work that I'm trying to do is every time I sit down to write something: How can I write this?

As Nouwen used to say or James Hillman says in a secular point of view, that's a language of soul. I believe the dogma. I believe the catechism but there has to be something further done. Somebody has to take this language and say that this is what it can mean in our lives.

That language has to be created. That was the greatness of Henry Nouwen. I knew Henry a little bit. Henry worked at that deliberately. Henry would rewrite some of his books five times over to try to get a simpler language, a clearer language, a language of experience, a language of the soul.

You mentioned others. Richard Rohr tries to do that, Mary Jo Leddy, [Kathy Norris]. There are people who really try to do that, but everybody would say, "It's difficult. It's hard." It isn't like learning French Berlitz. The language isn't altered to be learned. The language has to be created by people writing and doing it.

Tom Fox: You're making this effort. Is there anyone trying? Has there been a conference or is there any effort to gather like minds together and put them under one roof, or could it not ever happen that way?

Ron Rolheiser: No, in fact, we're trying. The last couple of years at our General Council in Rome, I organized two symposia, actually three, one in Ottawa and two in San Antonio, Texas. I got together a lot of those people and Nouwen isn't alive anymore, but Mary Jo Leddy and Robert [Schreider], and Richard Rohr.

People are trying to do this and we would try to reflect on that. Both times we had about 200 people there. We said, "How can we work at developing this?" I do have a book on that called *Secularity and the Gospel*, which talks about these symposia. Inside of that, at a certain point I give the formula that Henry Nouwen used to use.

I write according to this formula in terms of language. He'd say, for instance, "I want to try to be simple but not simplistic. I want to try to communicate sentiment but without being sentimental. I want to speak from a committed standpoint without being proselytizing. I want to speak the language of God without it being church talk." There's a whole formula you use. I try for the same thing. It's difficult. Yet, we have to keep trying.

Tom Fox: This is your latest book, isn't it?

- Ron Rolheiser: Yes, *Secularity and the Gospel*. It's Crossroads. About a year ago it came out.
- Tom Fox: Is the purpose of this book to try to give energy to, you might say, the old truths? Is that the core? I haven't read this book.
- Ron Rolheiser: The purpose is actually in our subtitle. The book is called *Secularity in the Gospel*.
- Tom Fox: *Being Missionaries to Our Children*.
- Ron Rolheiser: Yes, being missionaries to our own children.
- Tom Fox: To our own children?
- Ron Rolheiser: The real mission field today isn't Africa, or Asia, or wherever, or England. The real mission field is our own kids, as you just said, who are no longer walking with us, young people who say, "I'm religious but I don't go to church," or "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious," and all that and so on.
- I just saw some Gallup Poll statistics recently. There is some good news in it. They would say that in the United States right now 85% of the people acclaim some religious affiliation. That's good news. Good news too is that the 15% who don't, most of them fall into the age group of 18 to 30. That's an interesting stat.
- Tom Fox: Right, right.
- Ron Rolheiser: Between 18 and 30 you're feeling your oats and you're not sure who you are and you're testing new identities and you're also testing religion and that's the time you say, "I don't believe in any of this stuff and I'm a pure searcher," and so on. How do we reach that group? That's the real missionary group.
- Tom Fox: In another part of your writing, you speak about different kinds of religion. I read that you wrote that there is pseudo religion, quasi religion, and real religion. Do you want to help explain that?
- Ron Rolheiser: Actually, I wish that were mine. I stole that from Paul Tillich, but I really like that because people today are, "What's real and what isn't?" Paul Tillich once made the distinction on what he called pseudo religion. "Pseudo religion," he says, "it uses the language of religion."

So you talk about God and you talk about sacred things, but in essence you never get there. God becomes your own higher consciousness. You never get outside of your own higher self, really, even though you're using the language of God. You have the language of religion but in the end it's about human [narcissism].

Tom Fox: It's narcissistic.

Ron Rolheiser: Yes, well, I was being more gentle. Yes, you're right, but at the end it's still ego. It's narcissism recycling itself. But then he said, "Quasi religion will not use the language of religion but will actually take you beyond yourself." For an example, like a true doctrinaire Marxist, or an ideologue in Greenpeace or whatever, they'll die for an ideology.

Notice it's taking them beyond their own personal....it's not just about me. It takes you to some of the collective ideals of humanity, but you're still only recycling human error. You're still not to the transcendent. It doesn't use the language of religion but it gets close to real religion because it creates martyrs and people sacrifice and so on.

Then you have real religion. He said real religion is defined by you might use the language of religion, you might not, but however you do it you end up attaining a consciousness and to a power beyond us that doesn't just come from yourself or even from the collective ideals of humanity.

We used to say it's a revealed religion. It's a religion that gets outside. It gets outside of the cycle of human consciousness. You bring in outside air.

Tom Fox: Doesn't this kind of thinking, though, lead us back into a heavy dualism that separates human activity from the work of God?

Ron Rolheiser: Put it this way, for a classical Roman Catholic, or even a mainstream Protestant, particularly for a Catholic that wouldn't be a problem because of our theology at the incarnation and our theology of creation. Remember we used to have an old [edict] and we said, "Grace builds on nature."

In fact Karl Rahner, who's maybe still my favorite systematic theologian, says, "There's no such thing as something that's purely natural." The supernatural's already there, so in your human efforts

and stuff, they're not just human efforts. You're already a creation of God.

Grace just takes it further but it's not like you have this purely humanistic, natural thing going and at a certain point you superimpose grace. Grace is already there from the beginning.

Tom Fox: That's one of the things that I really appreciate about Catholic tradition is the sacramental vision where you cannot separate the sacred from the natural. It's all part of this grand mystery.

Ron Rolheiser: You can really see the contrasting when you take Christianity, particularly Roman Catholicism, and world religions. In so many world religions, the whole idea of salvation is to escape from the world. You need to somehow get off the wheel of life and escape from the world.

In Christianity, God comes into the world. God takes on flesh. God sanctifies flesh. You don't have to escape from anything. Now, where it varies between Catholics and Protestants is our theology of original sin. The classic reformed theology of Luther, Calvin, and [Swingley], they accept this except Luther would say original sin corrupted human nature so much that it's not in line with grace anymore, whereas Roman Catholicism never bought that.

They said original sin flaws us but we're still good. Grace is still building through nature. In Roman Catholicism, it's less from the outside.

Tom Fox: This is a moment to enter the conversation of incarnational spirituality and from incarnation spirituality go into the whole sexuality. How is it that a religion that is incarnational gets our sexuality so wrong, in my opinion?

Ron Rolheiser: No, and you don't have to apologize. You know why?

Tom Fox: Go ahead.

Ron Rolheiser: Because everybody gets it wrong. Because sexuality is so powerful, there are no healthy places. If, say, Christianity or Roman Catholicism, if we were just a bastion of corruptness and we got it wrong...it's just so powerful. Everybody gets it wrong. It's this overpowering thing.

We get some things right. We get some things wrong. Invariably what happens—because sexuality is so powerful, it's divine energy

inside of us—is that we either overprotect it and we get rigid and frigid and neurotic and all kinds of things because we’re so afraid of the sacred power or we go the other extreme and there’s just no responsibility.

There’s coarse acting out. It’s really hard to get that thing in between—I put it in one of my books—passion and purity. They go together. Some people protect purity but they can’t be passionate. Some can be passionate but they can’t be pure. Sexuality—it’s both. It’s so hard for somebody to get that middle line.

I want to throw you a little curve on this. Catholic cultures, for all our uptightness about sex, and I’ll be the first to say we are really uptight about sex. There’s an interesting thing and your listeners can pick this up. Notice it’s only in Catholic cultures that we’ve developed carnival. Notice the carnival—New Orleans, Rio, all those places—they only come in the Catholic cultures.

Carnival is really a celebration of flesh, sometimes not all that healthy, but there’s a powerful irony, but there’s some linkage in there. Why do carnival? Why does that develop inside of Catholic cultures? Why are Catholic cultures the only who could ultimately celebrate the flesh?

Tom Fox: Isn’t it the forbidden fruit tastes the best, is that it? Is it that the power that is repressed explodes forth in another way?

Ron Rolheiser: Partly. That’s part of it. That’s part of an unhealthy expression. For instance, that’s somebody who celebrates carnival wrongly and irresponsibly. There are a lot of wonderful Catholics who can celebrate carnival in a true sense where we can enjoy the flesh. Notice that, not just with sexuality, but Catholics, for instance, have the most ease about liquor and food.

We’ve never turned Jesus into teetotaler. Other religions have. We’re like, “No, Jesus liked wine.” There’s a certain freedom. I want to agree with you, Tom, that we haven’t got it right. We’re a long ways from being healthy. My consolation is: so is everybody else. I don’t see a healthy theologian’s sexuality anywhere on this planet. I see it in individual people. I see it in very mature people, but I don’t see it in a culture or a religion that’s somebody’s, “Here we can emulate. They have it.”

Tom Fox: Right. In some Buddhist cultures, the sexuality is not that much of a, how do you say it, a boogey man. It’s maybe neither good nor

bad but it's maybe not as dynamic or unpredictable as in Western culture. That's been, at least, my experience.

Ron Rolheiser:

I don't doubt that but then I could also protest. Let me make a protest here for the pagan inside of us and say, but it's also not as enjoyed either. There is a repression or a suppression, which you don't want either. See, we would be healthy sexually if we could thoroughly enjoy it as the greatest pleasure and wonderful thing on Earth and at the same time keep it sacred, keep it pure, no guilt around it.

We'd have powerful passion and powerful purity and powerful enjoyment and powerful responsibility all at once. Usually everybody falls off one side or the other of that equation. We're overprotective and there's some denial, there's rigidity. Often again with people who challenge me and say, "You make too big a deal about it.

"Sex is not that big of deal." You might want to get hormone shots or something. It is a big deal. It's meant to be a big deal. Somebody can turn off your sexual thermostat, but that's not where God wants us. At the same time, we can overturn it up too much.

Sometimes in our culture we live in a sexually charged culture. That isn't healthy either. How to find that balance, you can go biblically to the garden. It's beautiful. Sex is the greatest thing on the planet, but at the same time we're responsible.

We handle it well. We honor it sufficiently. At the same time, we keep it in check. I see individuals doing that, but I don't see a culture or a religion that I can look to and say, "I wish we were like them."

Tom Fox:

You write about intelligence. One of the things that jumped out at me was you say, "We seldom speak about moral intelligence and trying to raise the level of our intelligence morally." Would getting it right or getting that balance right be part of what you're talking about?

Ron Rolheiser:

Very much so. I like a quote from Jim Wallis. I think you're very familiar with him and your readers would be too in terms of the *Sojourners* man, who is one of my mentors. It may be simplistic but it's a good sound bite. He says, "The right gets it and gets it wrong and the left often times doesn't get it at all."

Sometimes that's also true in moral intelligence. The right, say with sexuality, they get it. They get it this is sacred and so on. Invariably we get it wrong and there's rigidity and frigidity and uptightness and so on. Too often, in liberal circles, we don't get it. You get the liberal argument, "There's nothing wrong with pornography."

"Sex is the most beautiful thing God ever created so we should be able to watch it." That's interesting. Why not? Because there's powerful naivety in that. A scripture says, "Nobody can see God and live." Sex is part of that. How to get that balance, there needs to be a certain moral intelligence.

Moral intelligence you don't get from a book. I'll quote Jesus. "You get it from suffering." Remember when James and John came up to Jesus and they said, "We'd like to sit on your right hand and your left and your glory," and one time they brought their mother along to do the asking.

Jesus says, "Can you drink of the cup?" The cup means suffering, the chalice of salvation. They say, "Yes, we can." Jesus says, "Well, you will. In fact, everybody will but you may not get the glory." The idea being one thing can make you deep and that is suffering, but the trouble is it can also make you deep in terms of bitterness and anger and imbalance just as easily as it can make you deep in terms of compassion, forgiveness, and love.

Jesus says everybody's going to suffer, but it's not always going to lead to moral intelligence and moral insight and moral goodness. It can sometimes also lead to the sniper who killed all those students at Virginia Tech or al-Qaeda or whoever.

Tom Fox: In your thinking, this is not peripheral. This is core. You write that "the secret to life is the cross of Christ." The secret to life, that's the core. Secret is confronting suffering, accepting suffering? I don't understand suffering. How does one then finally come to terms with suffering if this is indeed the core secret?

Ron Rolheiser: I'll quote Mark who was quoting Jesus. Mark has Jesus saying, "To you is given the secret of the Kingdom," the deep secret, but to everybody outside it's in riddles or parables. Who's "you"? Who's the inner circle and who's outside? For Mark's Jesus, it's quite simply those who get the cross.

The secret is the cross. Some scholars say it's the wisdom of the cross. I love an expression by John Donahue. He says, "It's the

brokenness of Jesus on the cross.” Inside of brokenness, inside of pain, inside of humiliation is the key to understand life. It can also be the key to destruction.

Mark has Jesus saying if you get that you’ll get the rest of the Gospel and understand the rest of life. If you don’t, so much of the Gospel life is just a riddle. It doesn’t make sense. That’s the core, the inner light, the hermeneutic, or somebody would say to you that it’s the key to open up everything else.

I see that in great people. You look at a person like Mother Teresa. They understand the deep secret of life, and look, they’ve suffered a lot. They’ve come out serene on the other side. There’s a certain glory. They’ve got it. They make sense out of everything.

I see so many sincere people and friends of mine and so on; it’s still so much a riddle. “I’m upset. I don’t know why. I don’t know why this is happening. How do I explain this cancer? How do I explain this other thing? I’m angry at the church and I’m angry at this,” and so on. There’s no inner core to bring it all together and the cross does that.

Tom Fox: So the cross becomes a final teaching tool?

Ron Rolheiser: In the end, it’s the symbol of everything. That’s why it’s also today the most universal symbol in the whole world. It’s interesting, you see crosses everywhere, in non-Christian cultures. You’re at an airport and you see everything from a cross on Paris Hilton’s earrings to some tattooed street person.

You all say, “What does it mean?” It means a lot of things. It’s a symbol for depth, for meaning, for suffering, for love, for something beyond. We don’t always know what it means but we have a sense. This is the secret somehow. That’s why so many people where crosses.

Tom Fox: Yes. Ron, before we quit is there anything that you feel you want to say that we’ve just missed?

Ron Rolheiser: No, Tom, I just want to thank you for the interview. I very much enjoyed your questions and the way this conversation went. I really think that there’s such a search and sometimes people can’t even articulate the search. There’s such a search for this kind of language and this kind of spirituality.

People need that. People are going to their churches, and I don't want to fault their churches, but often the churches are serving them sacramentally. They've serving them catechetically, and that's wonderful, but often times aren't able to meet their spiritual questions, their spiritual hungers, their spiritual searches. Then often times I think people even feel guilty about having them.

Your good, wonderful parishioner feels guilty that he has this restlessness stirring down there and isn't quite fully satisfied with what he's hearing and then he swallows hard and that kind of works. I'll give my own experience. I think since the first time I read Henry Nouwen and started reading people like Henry Nouwen or even Karl Rahner, I'd say, "This guy's introducing me to me."

These people, they introduce you to yourself. They say, "Wow." They shine a flashlight inside of you, inside of your experience and so on, and that's so helpful, and it sets loose things inside of yourself in terms of the spiritual quest. A lot of times you don't even know you need that. You just feel dissatisfactions and restlessness. We need the sacraments and the catecheses. We need all of that stuff. That's the basis, but you need something else too.

Tom Fox:

This concludes an interview with Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate Father, Ron Rolheiser, the author of *The Holy Longing* and most recently *Secularity and the Gospel: Being Missionaries to Our Children*. This is Tom Fox and this has been an NCR podcast.

* *

Transcription Services Provided by: Transcription-Team.com