

Susan Muto and Adrian van Kaam

# Am I Living a Spiritual Life?

Questions and Answers  
for Those Who Pray

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## Foreword

by Adrian van Kaam

All people are called to discover the unique form God wants to give to their lives. For Christians this means that they have to find their unique life form in Christ. It's not only a question of gradually discovering the form my life has to take but of allowing my daily existence to be an answer to this call.

My deepest desire is to be someone unique who lasts forever. A secret yearning for eternity wells up from the core of my being. I seek something lasting amidst the transitoriness of my countless self-expressions. What lasts is my spiritual or fundamental self. This core self isn't of my own making; it's God's gift to me, not a gift that I have but the gift that I am. God first loved me into being as a new emergent self, unique on this earth. He continues to call me lovingly to the unique-communal life form meant for me from eternity. I must answer this call to be myself by commitment and ongoing self-formation, by a life that offers to God a wholehearted yes. This yes to the gift and burden of ongoing self-formation is the foundation of my spiritual life.

For most of us the formative meaning of life reveals itself only bit by bit in the act of living. As I ponder in prayerful presence what happens to me, in me, and around me, slowly a certain direction

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might emerge. I see a line; a hidden consistency makes itself known. The more this direction clarifies itself, the more I become aware of what kind of self-formation is in harmony with the heart of my existence.

In the center of my being, God keeps communicating to me in love the true form he wants my life to take. He speaks mainly through the circumstances he allows in my life. This book is meant to help you remain in dialogue with this voice of the Lord. Its aim is to assist you in finding the thread that holds the events of life together in this graced disclosure of what God calls you to be. I'm not forced to say yes to this gift of disclosure. God's call in the life situation doesn't compel a response. He waits with infinite gentleness and patience for my reply.

The mystery of my deepest identity can't be found by means of a test or a clinical interview. The ultimate guide I have is the underlying consistency of my life and its harmony with scripture, Church doctrine, and the wisdom of the spiritual masters. As I discover increasingly who I am before God, my life becomes more consistent. In the light of doctrine, the scriptures, traditional wisdom, and personal inspiration, I can come to see what is the best option among the different life choices offered to me. This book illustrates this path by reflections on the many questions people ask themselves while seeking their way in the situations they face daily. We hope these questions and answers will help you to be more in touch with yourself and your hidden calling.

I might not always be able to defend my options with arguments that can't be refuted by the rational mind. It might be impossible for others to understand that a choice I made can be right for me. It's only in the long run that a chain of inspired decisions might begin to make sense. They become meaningful in the total formative orientation that my emergent self begins to manifest.

It's often only in retrospect that people discover the hidden consistency of the many seemingly disparate choices they've made over a long period.

One condition for the ongoing discovery of the form my life should take in the eyes of God is the ability to distance myself from the circumstances in which I find myself or from the problems or tasks in which I'm involved. I must grasp who I'm called to be both in and beyond my actual life situation. The responses in this book to similar questions by believers and sincere seekers can help you to gain this ability for distancing in service of deeper self-formation. If there are apparent changes in my life, it isn't because God's call has changed but because my knowledge of this call has expanded and deepened during the history of my self-formation. Since I can't know and en flesh my call at once, formation is ongoing; it's never achieved but is forever being achieved.

To find the life form that best expresses the call of the Lord, I might have to go through the way of trial and error. Before I commit myself to an answer to the question any life situation poses, I have to ask what answer is really the best one for me. The necessity of wise questioning can lead to a crisis. All commitment evokes the fear of making a mistake. Because of this fear, I might get stuck in an excessively prolonged period of trial and error. In that case I might not come to an answer at all. The impulsive attempt to end the period of doubt prematurely by a sudden willful decision only makes matters worse.

Both excessive delay and impulsive decision might imply unfaithfulness to our unique-communal life call. This book presents responses based on universal human experience so that you may neither delay your answer to the situation nor respond impulsively without sufficient prayerful reflection and the graced guidance of the Holy Spirit.



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Part 1

## Developing a Spiritual Life



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*In living a spiritual life, there are so many obstacles to avoid, so many conditions to fulfill, so much trust in God to maintain. What assurance is there that I'm approaching God more closely and not merely deceiving myself?*



How easily we can slip into self-satisfaction in our spiritual growth! I remember that morning after Mass and prayers when I had been so devout! My meditation flowed so smoothly! Surely these were signs that I must be growing in the spiritual life. But later that morning I barked at my secretary and didn't apologize when I realized I had been in the wrong. That made me stop and think. If I were growing closer to God in prayer, wouldn't I manifest the power of this growth more regularly in daily life?

There can be no complete assurance that we're approaching God more closely. However, reflection on the way we live can give us an indication of whether we're trying to develop a spiritual life or only deluding ourselves.

Our Lord reminds us in the Gospel that we can tell a good tree from a bad tree by the fruit it produces (cf. Matt. 7:17-20).

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Keeping this text in mind, we can appraise our life by asking, “Does it bear fruit spiritually?”

What I do in my life is an indicator of whether I live for God or for myself alone. If Christ, not I, is the center of my life, one effect will be compassion for my neighbor. Neighbor means not just the person next door but the members of my family, students and co-workers, even strangers. At home with Christ, I feel more at one with others. They see in me a witness of God’s love for them.

Despite my efforts I might fail time and again, but if I live for him, I can overlook these stumblings. With his help, love becomes the source of my spiritual life, the light of my service.

Growth is difficult to measure because it can’t be seen. At the start of each new season a mother stores the clothing worn in the summer or autumn just ended and brings out items for the season at hand. She exclaims with dismay that last season’s clothing doesn’t fit the children anymore. Yet she was scarcely aware of how much they had grown during the past several months.

What a surprise when I notice the ivy on my windowsill. On a Tuesday it might look like a struggling twig, but when I water it on Friday I’m surprised to see the beginning of several new leaves. Growth has occurred silently, imperceptibly.

The growth that can be seen by trousers that are too short or by a new leaf ready to open is apparent only after it has happened. Although we might speak loosely of seeing something grow before our eyes, we’re talking about what has happened as a result of growth rather than about the process of growth itself.

In both examples, there are certain conditions that have fostered the development we behold. Balanced diet, freedom from illness, and sufficient sleep and exercise help children to grow; sunlight, water, and fresh air foster the ivy’s blooming. Growth is a mysterious process we can facilitate but not control.

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Growth in the spiritual life is in some ways like the growth that we experience physically and mentally. In the life of the spirit too, certain conditions foster nearness to God, such as inner silence, fidelity to prayer, recollection, and ascetical practices. All of these ordinary spiritual exercises occur within the confines of daily life.

We might be aware of alterations in our relationship with God — for example, a movement toward more reposeful prayer, a dryness and absence of delight, or a truer charity in service of others. We might experience the mysteriousness of this growth and realize that no amount of desire, willing, or manipulating can do more than prepare for the gift of further unfolding.

Growth in the spiritual life wells up from within. It can't be felt or seen. We'll never know with certainty that we're becoming spiritually mature. Uncertainty shouldn't cause us anguish; it should be an occasion for trust in the Lord alone. He who sees my heart's desire, who loves me more than I love myself, will give me the grace of growth in his own way and time.

Unlike temperature, spirituality resists measurement. For example, my room feels frigid, so I consult the thermometer. Sixty degrees. I return to my desk and try to study. Although the crackle of the radiator tells me that the heat is coming up, I still distract myself by again consulting the thermometer. Sixty-five. Seventy. Now I feel comfortable, although all I had accomplished when altering this device was to compound my uncomfortable feeling.

In fact, preoccupation with the progress I might or might not be making in the spiritual life can be a hindering rather than a facilitating factor. When I attempt to measure the degree of my spirituality, I become introspective. My "executive will," not the Divine Will, becomes central. I want to know how I'm doing. The emphasis is on me, not on God. Spirituality is seen not as a gift but

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as a project. I look backward to the ground I've covered and try to measure the distance already traversed.

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* tells us the opposite: Look ahead, he says, not behind. See what you still lack, not what you already have; this is the quickest way of gaining humility. Our whole life must be one of longing if we're to achieve union with God.

God wants us to take the simple reality of every day and believe in it. Spirituality is true if it emerges from the context of living my daily situation as God's will for me. This everydayness, commonplace as it is, is the truest measure of the spiritual life.

Prayerful reflection is necessary so that we won't confuse growth with activity; intimacy with fantasy; openness to the Spirit with self-induced placidity.

In prayer we come to recognize Christ as the Source of our life. He radiates his mercy through our actions. Our life is his gift. Day by day we try to live in grateful awareness of this gift, letting each situation bring forth a new opportunity for love.

During moments of meditation, we might not "feel" our rootedness in the Lord. We might be unsure whether we've prayed or not, but we believe Christ dwells in our hearts, even in dryness.

To be on the way toward him is to live in faith even when I'm not feeling anything, to obey his will even when everyday routine seems disappointing. The uncertainty I feel is precisely what calls me back to him again and again. Rather than become overly concerned with progress in the spiritual life, I choose to let this uncertainty be, understanding it as God's will for me at this time — as a message inviting me to return to his presence in faith.

An old priest was once asked the same question: "How do you know when you're coming closer to God?" He chuckled. "You know it when you're doing his will. You just know it."

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“You just know it.” His reply came without hesitation and with the confidence of a lifetime of experience. He didn’t stop and think, nor did he enter into a lengthy discussion. His simple answer reflects a personal understanding of the spiritual life, one that we, in our competitive, data-conscious world, tend to forget.

There are various ways of knowing, including the knowledge of intellectual certitude, of logical, cause-effect principles, but it fails when we try to use such techniques to evaluate our relationship with God.

The phrase “coming closer to God” means “becoming aware of God,” for we are already close to him. St. Paul tells us, “. . . he is not far from each of us, for in him we live and move and have our being . . .” (Acts 17:27-28). Becoming a more spiritual person means becoming aware of our rootedness in God, of our dependence on him for every breath we take, every thought we have.

Daily concerns draw our attention away from this reality. We have to prepare classes, plan meals, look after business and family dealings. Behind and supporting all of these involvements is the spiritual reality that these people, events, and things are maintained in their existence by a loving, caring Father. Since the immediacy of daily life tends to hold our attention, we need to increase our awareness of Christ’s presence, of his secret plan for us behind all our human projects.

The effort isn’t easy. Only the “little ones of God” seem to be graced with an ability to be busy with daily cares while being fully attentive to God’s presence. The rest of us are usually absorbed by immediate involvements. To set aside special times each day, each month, each year to recollect ourselves in meditation and reflective reading is our only alternative. Such times help us grow attentive to God’s loving will. We become more aware of the closeness that’s already there.

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Gradually our fidelity to these exercises moves us nearer to finding God's plan for our lives. Although our daily involvements still demand attention, they're no longer isolating and fragmenting. In them we see God's love for us and an opportunity to grow in loving response to him. The people we serve, the dreams we dream, the relaxed and anxious moments we have still remain in the foreground of our experience; but we can, with God's grace, see them in a new light.

This encounter of the soul and God is comparable to the mutual loving awareness of bride and groom. As they plan their life together, the values, preferences, and interests of each of them form the backdrop against which both of them make decisions that are mutually beneficial.

God, far more than any earthly love, wills our good. He is the source and support of our whole life. He is always close to us, closer than we can imagine. We need only become attentive to this closeness, given to us gratuitously. Our yes to this gift is the measure of our becoming spiritually mature.