

Sunday, May 22, 2016  
EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

## Two Worlds

Christianity – and Islam too – have been plagued by a two-world heresy. This basically means that the physical, material world in which we actually live is by and large considered corrupt and sinful, and that the spiritual world, either heaven or some other remote ivory tower or monastery, is holy and good. This dualistic interpretation preceded Christianity. The Greek philosopher Plato divided reality into a sensible world and an intellectual world, the first being visible and physical, relating to the body, and the second being invisible, relating to the soul. Only this intellectual or so-called World of Ideas, he believed, was substantial and pure. In variant forms, Gnosticism in the first and second centuries AD and later Manichaeism maintained similar concepts. St. Paul exhibited the same tendency. He never lost his Pharisaical distrust of pagan culture which he considered a real threat to Christian faith and morals. St. Augustine, influenced by both Plato and Manichaeism, created a City of God and City of Man interpretation, de-valuing the earthly and elevating the spiritual. The Desert Fathers, toward the end of the 200s, and then communal monasticism, founded by St. Basil the Great in the middle to end of the next century, continued the same divide, making the spiritual seem more Christ-like than living in the regular world. This monastic spirituality has been the dominant model of prayer and holiness ever since, even for the laity for whom it is not practical. A retreat from the world, however, is the antithesis of the Incarnation, “for God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son” (John 3:16).

The Creation spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi is a much more suitable model because it is grounded in Nature and the physical world, readily understood and appreciated by the ordinary person. This, of course, is perfectly in sync with the environmental issues of our times. The traditional model of spirituality, however, and its escape from reality approach, can easily avoid or even deny such real-life dilemmas. Indeed, this separate- from-the-world spirituality may be a strong disincentive for many contemporary individuals, especially the young, who don't find religion helpful in melding the spiritual with every-day concerns. The Church, I believe, must develop a new approach if it wishes to influence the direction of the future. The spiritual and the normal every-day life must inter-relate and not run side side by side in parallel realities. This unnecessary separation can be held somewhat responsible for the failures and tragedies in our present world. If faith and religion were grounded in reality, then war, prejudice, and injustice would immediately be perceived as contrary to religious and ethical principles. If piety was consistently joined to practice, not a devotion distinct from the plight and hardships of people, then the world would be a safer, happier, and more loving environment. The world needs a dynamic, not a distant, spirituality.