Father Benedict J. Groeschel has spent most of his priestly life guiding others who want to orient their lives more and more toward God.

Through his books, retreats and speaking engagements, he has worked to open the spiritual life to a world that is in danger of losing a sense of the holy, a world that has become uncertain about God but yearns for God nonetheless.

I have worked for Father Groeschel for several years and found his many insights to be of enormous help. This article is based primarily on my understanding of ideas he has expressed in the following books: “Spiritual Passages,” “Praying Constantly: Bringing Your Faith to Life” and “I Am with You Always.”

OK, what should every Catholic know about spiritual growth? For that matter, what is spiritual growth?

At first glance, it seems that these questions should be fairly easy to answer. In fact, they resemble those short, concise questions from the old Baltimore Catechism, the ones that had wonderfully brief and to-the-point answers. But as we attempt to contemplate spiritual growth, we might be surprised to discover that questions concerning it are not so easily or quickly answered, after all.

In our contemporary culture “spiritual growth” is a term that has become not only ambiguous but annoyingly vague. Used in various ways by people of different faiths (and sometimes by people of no faith), this is a term that conjures up a multitude of images: Eastern meditation, vision quests in California, a variety of New Age explorations and all the rest.
Some of these, we suspect, are quite different from and opposed to our Catholic faith. Perhaps this might make us shy away from this term, to look for another that seems more solid or has a more overtly Catholic ring.

But that would be a mistake, for the life of a Catholic makes no sense unless it is a life of constant spiritual growth. To cease to grow in our spiritual lives is to become indifferent to God, deaf to Christ’s constant loving call to us. It is our duty — and it should be our joy — to strive to grow toward Christ in the way that a flower grows toward the sun.

So, it is not only good but necessary to contemplate spiritual growth. As we do so, however, we are faced with the need to discover this term’s uniquely Christian and specifically Catholic interpretation. We must make sure our understanding of it is not unduly influenced by ideas that are foreign to Catholic thought.

**Eastern vision**

All religions have some concept of spiritual growth. All religions see human existence as a journey toward a transcendent, eternal goal. That goal, however, is understood differently by different religions. In the Far East, for instance, the goal involves an acceptance of the idea that earthly life and even the universe, itself, are illusions. In fact, all multiplicity is illusion. All things are believed to be actually one, and all being is divine — God. This concept of God perplexes us, however, for it is impersonal, an abyss of pure being, a consciousness that is conscious of nothing but itself.

In such an understanding, the ultimate goal — union with God — involves the inevitable extinction of our uniqueness, a merging with pure being. We have only to think of what happens when a teaspoon of water is poured into the ocean to understand what Eastern religions believe happens to the human
soul when it achieves union with God. In such religions, spiritual growth may involve withdrawal from life, repudiation of all desire, and a progressive disengagement from things and people. At times it may involve what seems to us an indifference to suffering; for suffering, like everything else, is considered a transitory illusion – but one that may be necessary for the suffering soul as it makes its slow, inevitable progress toward union with the Divine.

Spiritual practices in such religions may involve mediation, an emptying of the mind of all thoughts so that the unchanging divine reality beneath the outer surfaces of things may be experienced.

As Catholics, we may find Eastern spirituality impressive in certain ways. We do not find in it, however, what we believe we truly need when we try to grow spiritually. For all its accomplishments, Eastern spirituality seems incomplete to us. It ignores the love that we know to be at the heart of all being, the love that rejoices in our uniqueness, that preserves our individuality. Everything we know of our lives, of our faith, of our souls, tells us that there is more to spiritual growth, that there is more to God and more to us than an ultimate relinquishment of self.

**Law of God**

Our monotheistic brothers, Jews and Muslims, have their own concepts of spiritual growth. Of course, these are closer to our own, but there are still great differences.

For both Islam and Judaism, God is the omnipotent sovereign of the universe. The sense of the transcendence of God in these religions is great. Here God is unimaginable, ineffable, beyond all human understanding. In both Islam and Judaism, God loves his human creation (we see in the Old Testament the great love story of God for his Chosen People), yet this love is somehow remote.
In Islam God’s love is really the mercy of a king for his subjects, not the love of a father for a greatly yearned for and deeply cherished child. In Judaism, the love of God is strong yet lacks the human face of Christ and thus remains a distant love.

Judaism and Islam are religions that express themselves primarily through law. In Judaism it is through the fulfilling of God’s many intricate commandments (mitzvot), enumerated in the Torah and developed in the Talmud, that the devout Jew endows his life with holiness and grows closer to God. These commandments affect every aspect of his life, reminding him that every act can be sanctified and offered to God. He grows spiritually by a progressively more complete fulfilling of the Law. It is through the prism of the Law that he comes to see God.

The Muslim, too, sees the relationship with God as completely circumscribed by laws which he may not understand but must not question. The word “Islam” derives from a root word that means submission, and the goal of the devout Muslim is to submit in every way to the inscrutable will of Allah, the God who will be forever beyond his imagining.

Again, we can find much to respect in the life of the devout Jew or Muslim. We see their constant yearning to do the will of God as something to be admired. We agree with them that the world that God has created is one of laws, that there are some things that we must do and other things that we may never do, that our spiritual lives are intimately affected by our actions. Yet, as Catholics, we are still sure that to grow spiritually we need more than law, more than our own deeds, more than our will’s own compliance with God’s law.

**Turning toward Christ**

Ultimately, as Catholics, we must realize that if we wish to grow spiritually, we cannot follow the paths or the ideas of
others religions. No amount of mediation or renunciation of the world, no amount of right living or the following of laws, will achieve for us the spiritual growth we yearn for.

We must understand that our spiritual growth comes from one source, that we grow spiritually in one way alone: by accepting the infinite outpouring of love and grace offered to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

For the Catholic, spiritual growth can be nothing but a continual turning to Christ. In this we come to understand an astonishing truth, that spiritual growth is really a growth in relationship, a constant deepening of our relationship with Christ.

Father Benedict Groeschel has recently completed a book titled “I Am with You Always” (Ignatius, $37.95), which is a study of devotion to Jesus throughout the history of Christianity. Here he discusses spiritual growth, telling us it comes from “a powerful awareness of our longing for Christ’s presence, accompanied by a trustful surrender to him of our personal needs.

“To this is joined a willingness to do his will and a sense of repentance for any previous failure to do so. We must trust him not only with our present need but also with the salvation of our souls and those we care about.”

And here we have spiritual growth in a nutshell. We grow through our awareness of Christ’s constant presence, of his constant love for us. We grow as our trust in him grows. We grow as our will becomes one with his. We grow as we repent the many little ruptures in our relationship with him that our sinfulness has caused. Spiritual growth becomes spiritual surrender — a surrender to infinite love. We surrender to the One who gave himself for us out of love. We grow through becoming closer to him.
Profound encounter

Christ offers us many paths to meet him, many means to grow closer to him. Primary among these, of course, is faith itself. Then come the sacraments.

And among the sacraments there is the Eucharist in which “heaven and earth meet.” The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that the Eucharist is “the source and summit of Christian life,” and this is certainly so.

The Eucharist is Christ’s love made manifest. It is the ultimate offering of intimate relationship to sinful man. In the Eucharist, Christ comes to us under the appearance of bread and wine, entering our bodies and our souls. Here we encounter him in a way that is infinitely more profound than any other meeting we will have in our earthly lives. In the Eucharist, Christ offers us the intimate relationship that causes spiritual growth, that should make us yearn to be in unbroken intimacy with him.

It is up to us only to turn to Christ, to accept the gifts that he offers us. If we do, if we turn to him and away from sin we will find that we no longer need to worry very much about spiritual growth, that such growth will become an integral part of our lives. Spiritual growth will turn out to be simply our earthly journey to God.

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Essential Catholic pathways toward spiritual growth

Human life is imperfect. Human will is weak. Human beings are hopelessly divided creatures. If this is so, how can we hope to turn to Christ constantly? In fact, how can we hope to do anything constantly?
The short answer is that we can’t. We must face the fact that we really are imperfect and will fail over and over again as we attempt to grow in our spiritual lives. We will backslide, and we will have dry periods during which we may feel absolutely helpless and hopeless. So what? That is our earthly lot, and, like it or not, we must accept it.

The full answer is that our inevitable backsliding really doesn’t matter, for Christ has none of our imperfections. It is he we depend on, not us, and he is always ready for us to turn to him again.

Through his Church, Christ offers us many ways to deepen our relationship with him. It is up to us to take them seriously. We have the sacraments, of course, each one of them a unique and inexhaustible fountain of graces. We also have the sacramentals and the many prayers of the Church. They will bring us into deeper intimacy with Christ. It is sad but true that many Catholics today do not really understand this. As they strive to grow spiritually they ignore the most important pathways to the only One who can offer them true spiritual growth.

If we want to grow in our spiritual lives we must do the following:

**Truly participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass:** Many people attend Mass in a distracted frame of mind. Yet in the Mass we encounter Christ in a unique and unsurpassable way. We must be fully present and prepared. We should not rush into Church thinking of a thousand things. We must enter Church filled with joy and gratitude, knowing that we go to meet our great love. Our time at Mass should be suffused with prayer. It should also be filled with anticipation, for during Communion Christ comes to us and lives with us and offers us infinite love. After Mass we should linger before the tabernacle filled with thanksgiving for what we have so graciously been given.
**Take advantage of confession:** Sinfulness is part of the human condition — one that separates us from Christ. Christ offers us a way to put our sins behind us and to experience once again his loving embrace through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. What possible reason can there be for ignoring this? If we stay in our sins we push Christ away from us and we have no hope of growing in the spiritual life. Our sins should weigh heavily on us; we should yearn for confession, which offers us Christ again.

**Learn to love our Blessed Mother:** Through Mary we meet Christ; through Mary’s prayers we are brought closer to Christ. The Blessed Mother is our mother. She should be our constant companion in the spiritual life.

**Develop a life of prayer:** Every moment is an opportunity for prayer. How often do we take advantage of these opportunities? Read Father Groeschel’s book “Praying Constantly: Bringing Your Faith to Life.” Here Father Groeschel shows that prayer can pervade our lives, that it can come in many different and unexpected forms, that we never have to be far from a moment of prayer. Each time we pray we draw closer to God. Every moment of prayer, whether it involves the Rosary or the Liturgy of the Hours or simply a few spontaneous words of our own is a conversation with Christ.

**Encounter Christ in the Scriptures:** Reading the Scriptures meditatively can be of enormous help in coming to know Christ. Here we find his earthly words, his actions. Here we see again and again his enormous love for us, his great sacrifice for us. Through the Scriptures we come to know Our Lord in a deeper and deeper way and thus our relationship with him grows.

**Learn from those who came before us:** The Church has canonized innumerable saints. These are our examples. They have walked the road of holiness, and their lives show us the many ways that closeness with Christ can be achieved. We must learn
about the saints; we must study their lives, read their writings and pray for their intercession.

**Improve our relationship with others:** Spiritual growth transforms the outer life. There are some people who pray regularly, who go to Mass nearly every day, who are punctilious about every religious rule and regulation. At the same time they are indifferent to the needs of others. At times they may even be cruel. This is a tragic failure. Their relationship with Christ is damaged. Perhaps they only believe it exists. When we are in real relationship with Christ, we come to see that each human being is created in the divine image and is of infinite value. To grow in the spiritual life is to grow in the love of others – to find Christ in them and to serve Christ in them.

These are only a few of the most obvious ways for a Catholic to deepen his spiritual life, yet many of them are not thought to be very important today. For the Catholic they are essential. Your spiritual life is not truly Catholic if such things do not play a large part in it.

**The psychology of spiritual growth**

Forty years as a clinical psychologist have made Father Benedict J. Groeschel acutely aware that the whole person must be involved if we are to grow spiritually. God creates us as a unity of body, mind and soul. We must not attempt to separate these things as we strive to grow in the spiritual life.

The angels are pure spirit; we are definitely not. We must not try to ignore the many appetites that are part of our physical nature – this will inevitably lead to problems. Neither should we attempt to ignore the impact that our psychological natures will have on our spiritual growth. We also should not forget that as we progress through the various stages of our lives we develop psychologically as well as spiritually.
Psychological stages

It is important to understand the stages of our psychological growth as they relate to our spiritual growth. Here we will take a glance at these stages using Father Groeschel’s book “Spiritual Passages” as our guide.

Religion of the child: In the early stages of human life, religion is experienced on an emotional level. This is because children depend on their emotions rather than on rational thought in interpreting their encounters with the world outside themselves. The religious response of a child springs out of the same sources that produce primitive religion. It is a response to the awareness that there are forces (some of them very powerful) that are totally beyond the child’s ability to control. Such religion has much in common with superstition. It is, as Father Groeschel writes in “Spiritual Passages,” “a matter of attempting to control or manipulate the Divine Being by prayer, supplication, and good works.”

Religion of the adolescent: By the time of adolescence, the human psyche can distinguish between reality and fantasy. No normal 13-year-old believes in Santa Claus, even though such a belief may have been unshakable for him only a few years before. Abstract reasoning develops quickly at this stage. God is no longer conceived of as an old man in the sky. The concept of God as spirit becomes understandable. The religion of adolescence thus becomes intellectual and speculative. This is the moment when doubt enters the spiritual life. This is the time of questioning and a reliance on one’s own mind. If this stage is not transcended, religion will consist of little more than questions, sometimes stale and pedantic ones.

Religion of the adult: Father Groeschel writes that mature religion involves the “giant step to … the transcendence of self, or … the death of self. The latter phrase frightens many and it is not currently in vogue, but it comes from the words of Christ himself. The childish impulse to control God by
prayer and works and the attempt of the adolescent mind to control him by speculation and understanding must come to an end. The fundamental anxiety expressed by these two attitudes must be rooted out.”

**Spiritual maturity**

These words give us much to think about, for many people have not outgrown certain aspects of the psychology of their childhood or adolescence. Elements of superstition still linger in our minds and our souls. Elements of doubt that include a demand to know the unknowable often remain with us, as well. We must take stock of ourselves to determine if our faith is really a mature faith or not. It is adults who form permanent and meaningful relationships, and it is only a spiritual adult who can form and maintain a deep relationship with Christ.

Christ calls to us constantly, but he calls to our higher selves. He offers us everything. It is our duty to meet him as the most mature person we can be – the person God meant us to be. If we hope to grow spiritually, we must strive to root out the ideas and emotions of our past that prevent us from meeting and seeing Christ as he really is. We must let all the parts of us that keep us from Christ fall away, so that our spiritual lives will grow unimpeded, so that we may know Christ now and in eternity.

**Friendship with Christ leads us to a truly mature faith**

“Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,’ seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and
desires.

“We, however, have a different goal: the Son of God, the true man. He is the measure of true humanism. An ‘adult’ faith is not a faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty; a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to all that is good and gives us a criterion by which to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth.

“We must develop this adult faith; we must guide the flock of Christ to this faith. And it is this faith — only faith — that creates unity and is fulfilled in love.”

— Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, during a homily on April 18, 2005, on the eve of his election as pontiff.