

# CONNECT! SUNDAY REFLECTION

5th Sunday of Lent | For Sunday, March 21, 2021

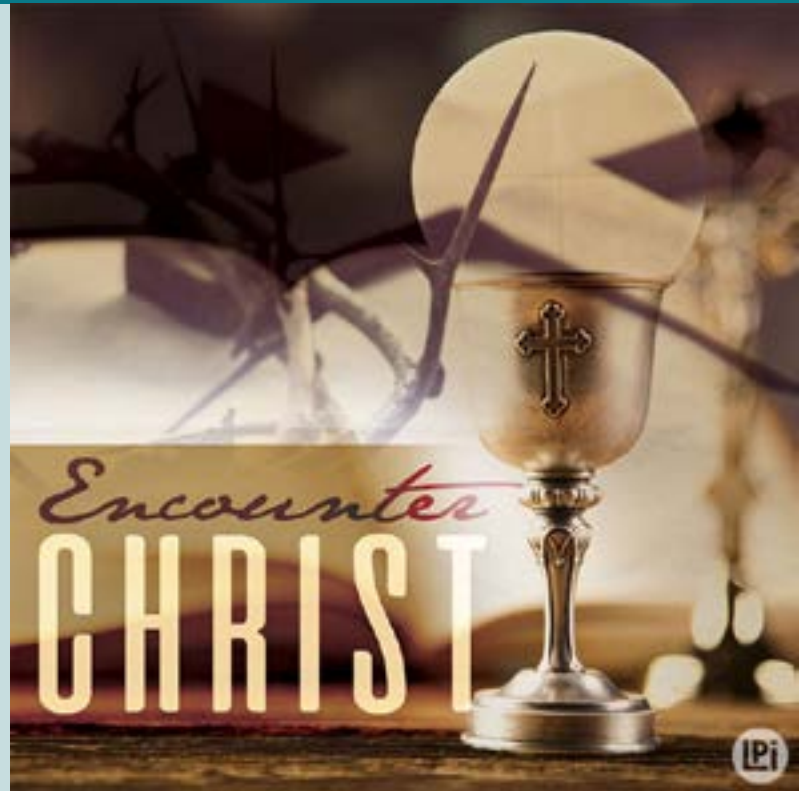
## Spiritual *and* Religious

*Written by Douglas Sousa*

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

**Hebrews 5:7-9**

**John 12:20-33**



Many people say they are “spiritual but not religious.” Generally, they mean that they believe in a “higher power” without belonging to a church or adhering to dogmas. They claim to have respect for all religions, picking from each the teachings that suit the “god of their understanding.” For them, religion is not a communal reality, but a personal, interior experience.

There is some truth in what self-described spiritual people believe. Religion is a matter of the heart and spirit. We all carry within us the ability to hear God’s voice speaking to us through our consciences. Our hearts were made to love God above all things. When we look within, we already find a basic understanding of God and His plan for our lives. God created us to be spiritual.

In [this Sunday’s first reading](#), God announces that He is about to establish a new covenant. Unlike the old covenant written on stone, this covenant will be written on the heart. As Jeremiah describes it, no one will need to be taught the ways of the Lord because God will reveal Himself to the heart of each believer. This is what we commonly mean by the word “spiritual” — to have an interior relationship with God.

However, God is talking about something more than a natural desire or ability to know Him. Rather, this personal relationship with Him is a gift. It is not ours through birth, but through baptism. God’s Spirit who writes this new covenant in our heart, who speaks to our spirit about the ways of truth and love, is given to us through baptism and faith. The

Holy Spirit is not something we can receive just through personal reflection or meditation. We receive the Holy Spirit when we become members of a community of faith. We receive the Holy Spirit by practicing religion.

Jesus gives us more insight into what it means to be genuinely spiritual in this Sunday's gospel. The "hour" of Jesus' death is near, so he takes the opportunity to instruct his disciples about what it means to be his follower. Jesus says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." Just so, the spiritual person is willing to follow Jesus when it's inconvenient, painful, and costly. The truly spiritual person will follow Jesus even to the cross. The person with genuine insight into spiritual matters realizes that Jesus cannot be separated from his cross nor can eternal life be separated from death to self.

The words of Jesus are very different from what we typically hear from people who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." For them, being spiritual is not about dying to self but of enriching oneself. It is not about knowing God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture and in Church teaching so that we can humbly serve others, but about having secret knowledge that gives one a sense of superiority over others. This so-called "New Age" spirituality is really something very old — trying to achieve the glory of heaven without the shame of the cross.

Jesus invites us to be both spiritual *and* religious. He wants us to worship him in a community of believers. He wants us to gain wisdom by drawing on the words of Scripture, the teaching of the Church, and the insights of the believers who have gone before us. Most of all, he wants to encounter us in the Eucharist. This abundance of spiritual riches is ours through baptism and faith. It is a taste of heaven given to those who have decided to pick up their crosses and follow Jesus.

Douglas Sousa

## PRAYER

Lord Jesus,  
Sustain us on our Lenten journey  
Give us the courage to follow you  
To pick up our cross and die to self  
So we can encounter you in the  
suffering of others.  
Open our eyes to the treasures  
that are ours  
Through the Church you founded  
So that we may draw on  
the wisdom of the ages  
On our way to the heavenly inheritance  
You have in store for those  
who believe in you.  
Amen.