

# **Spirituality – The Religious Dimension**

## **Tracing the spiritual journey of Sonas aPc**

**By Mary Threadgold RSC**

I would like to give you the background to our work in the area of spirituality over the past number of years, effectively tracing the spiritual journey of Sonas aPc.

It began with Ciúnas in 1993. Ciúnas (an Irish word that means quietness) is the title we gave to a recording of a selection of hymns and prayers, which we put together in response to a request.

### **1. Ciúnas**

Ciúnas consists of a double CD with an accompanying video based on the CD soundtrack. The first CD includes two prayer sessions and hymns. The first session lasts about twenty minutes and includes a space for spontaneous intercessions. The second, slightly longer, session includes a reminiscence element, which names the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary and fourteen Stations of the Cross and a recitation of a decade of the Rosary. Both sessions include a selection of hymns and prayers.

The second CD has six segments with prayers for the morning and night, for those who are sick, for a Communion service, devotions to Our Lady and Latin Benediction hymns, to be used appropriately.

Ciúnas serves several purposes as an aid to prayer. Various rituals can enhance the value of Ciúnas. Ritual is defined in the dictionary as “a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order”. In discussing the meaning of ritual, Elizabeth MacKinlay says that ‘effective rituals capture the meaning of events and help us to celebrate and/or grieve. [A ritual] will increase the impact without needing explanation’.

We make several suggestions for the enhancement of the use of Ciúnas, including the following:

- gather a group of residents together
- play the right segment of the CD at the appropriate time
- set up a centrepiece/altar
- invite local people to participate
- use holy water, rosary beads, candles, cloth for altar, statue of Our Lady, picture of the Sacred Heart, incense/frankincense and a printed copy of words of hymns and prayers.

We are currently drawing up a booklet, entitled “Making the Most of Ciunas”. The contents may include:

- words of prayers and hymns
- most suitable contexts/ surroundings (elaborated)
- suggested enhancements (as above)
- ways of praying individually or in group
- singalong hymns and listening to sacred music
- helps to quietness – creating the right atmosphere

We stress that Ciúnas CDs/videos should not be overused as this decreases its effectiveness. At the other extreme, when merely played in the background, its value is also limited.

Data from questionnaires completed by people who have used Ciúnas show that it should be part of a larger resource/approach that might include the following: old Latin and Irish hymns; Mass/Rosary/Holy Hour; celebration of feastdays; knowledge and respect for individual prayer habits; reconciliation regarding past hurts; respect for individuals; short retreats; opportunity to join in the Prayer of the Church; cassettes and videos/DVDs; daily Communion. We are fortunate in the Catholic tradition to have such an extensive repertoire and accompanying rituals (Mass, Sacraments, feastdays/Liturgical Calendar, prayers, devotions, hymns, pilgrimages, movements).

## **2. Broadening the Understanding of Spirituality and Religion**

The writings of Ronald Rolheiser 1999 were quite instructive in broadening my own perception of spirituality. In his book *Seeking Spirituality*, Rolheiser says that:

- Some see religion in terms of private prayer and piety (i.e. spiritual practices) while others see it as the quest for justice
- Spirituality is the search for the meaning of life; religion is one way of conducting the search

As an aside, an unlikely and recent quote which is also of relevance in this regard was made by Taoiseach Bertie Ahern at a meeting regarding structured dialogue between religions and the State: “human beings have a deep need for what religion offers, and the right to practice is therefore a fundamental human entitlement”. In a subsequent column in the Irish Times on the 5<sup>th</sup> March this year, John Waters stated: “the world on its own does not offer sufficient hope to carry the average human being through an average life... Increasingly our society manifests an erosion of hope, a misdefinition of freedom and a collapse of meaning, and all of these phenomena are directly related to the disappearance from our culture of what we know of as religion.”

To return to Ronald Rolheiser: “The soul is the glue that binds our persons together; it is not something we have but something we are. Spirituality is about what we do with our unrest; it is about desire and longing; it is about energy; it is what we do with the Spirit that is within us”. He makes a biblical reference to Jesus’ prescription for a healthy spiritual life, as:

1. private prayer and private morality

2. social justice
3. mellowness of heart and spirit
4. community as a constitutive element in true worship

I attended several courses in the Milltown Institute in 2003. One of the key concepts that was highlighted there and had been almost absent in the secular sphere was Grace. A useful contribution is offered by Bible Alive, which states that: “the life in the Spirit is the life of grace”.

Some ideas that emerged for me during the course of my studies included the fact that spirituality cannot be defined, it can only be described. It is about the kind of energies that are operating in our lives. For a healthy state of affairs, energies change into serenity. Spirituality is a way of perceiving and living all that is intangible in life. It is the bridge between the human and the Divine. It includes beliefs and values. Perhaps most importantly, spirituality is about relationships with God, myself, others and the created world.

Michael Downey, whose book *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (1997), was one of the texts used in the courses, proposed three ways of looking at spirituality:

1. spirituality involves being true to yourself (whether God is in the equation or not), i.e. non-religious spiritualities
2. when this human quest involves an explicit reference to God, then the spirituality is religious e.g. Jewish, Muslim.
3. when the ultimate values perceived and pursued are rooted in the God disclosed in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit active in the Church, we are speaking of specifically Christian spirituality

In her book, *Illuminated Life* (2001), Joan Chittester has the following to say: “Religion is about ritual, about morals, about systems of thought, all of them good but all of them incomplete. Spirituality is about coming to consciousness of the sacred. It is in that consciousness that perspective comes, that peace comes. It is in that consciousness that a person comes to wholeness.”

### **3. Linking Sonas aPc and Spirituality**

Sonas as it already exists has a strong spiritual orientation. We can see this in some particular aspects of the training we offer: communication, activating potential, retained abilities, hierarchy of needs (Maslow) and the Spiritual Care Focus Group.

#### **(a) Communication – the key to relationships**

Rosemary Lubinski, an acknowledged expert in the field of communication and dementia states that “communication becomes the crucial difference between social isolation and social connectedness, between dependence and independence, between withdrawal and fulfillment”. It touches into the essence of the person.

Communication enables people to say how they feel, to ask questions, to express preferences and choices, to share their worries and their joys, to greet and take leave of others, to say when they have had enough, to ask for more, to refuse something when offered, in other words to be somewhat in control of their world. The list could go on and on.

Since Sonas aPc aims to activate potential for communication, we will look briefly at how this can be achieved spiritually, describing spirituality as ‘relationship’: relationship with God, with self, with others and with the created world.

### **(b) Activating Potential**

A link can be made between a concept at the heart of Sonas, namely activating potential, with the ways in which potential for spirituality can be activated. The following outlines some of these ways:

- (i) God            We can help others to activate their potential for communication with God which is at the heart of spirituality through:
  - prayer/gratitude (Rolheiser links sanctity with gratitude)
  - harvesting
  - reflection on scripture and on life
  - Sacraments and the life of grace
  - Mass and other rituals
  
- (ii) Self            Self relates to:
  - reminiscence
  - life story
  - reflection
  - role of suffering and its meaning
  - reconciliation
  
- (iii) Others        This refers to:
  - respect
  - humour
  - non-verbal communication
  - sharing common concerns
  
- (iv) The Created World  
The numinous sense refers to the capacity to be open to something or someone greater than oneself. It includes wonder and curiosity. Quietness (Cíúnas), attention/mindfulness and beauty may all help us to be in touch with our numinous sense.

### **(c) Retained Abilities**

In 1991, the early days of Sonas, Winifred Bligh of the newly formed Alzheimer Society said that as memory fades, both religion and response to music are invariably retained.

The following are ways in which Sonas taps into retained abilities, in a general sense by lifting people's spirits, and in specifically spiritual terms:

- long term memory (life story/reminiscence)
- learned material (prayers, hymns, poems, tables, proverbs, rhymes)
- senses (trigger memories, gateways to communication)
- humour (gives perspective, laughter, feelings of well-being)
- movement (gesture, body language, dance)
- rhythm (routine, patterns, security)
- emotions (touch into the essence of the person)
- musicality (listening to music, hymns, singalongs)
- social interaction (to combat loneliness)

#### **(d) Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow)**

A leader in the development of humanistic psychology, Maslow (1908 – 1970) proposed his Hierarchy of Needs in 1954. Sonas taps into these above the physiological level. Using this model, Sonas:

- provides security and safety through the reassurance of repetition
- offers belongingness through providing communicative partners and social identification.
- helps self-esteem by accepting people as they are and recognising what they offer.
- stimulates the brain and therefore enhances cognitive ability.
- draws attention to beauty through the senses cf. numinous sense. This is also where spiritual values come in, starting with the sense of well-being, joy and contentment that is generated by the Sonas , Anam and SIMS sessions
- activates potential for relationships, for interaction and communication.

#### **(e) Spiritual Care Focus Group**

This group met six times between October '04 and May '06 with the particular focus of identifying and finding ways of meeting spiritual needs of older people with cognitive impairment. Attendance varied from five to eleven people. It represented a developmental process in which we were finding our way towards developing a number of approaches starting with the identification of relevant needs and then building up a resource bank of useful reading references and materials. Sonas aPc acquired a number of text books on spirituality during this time. Those we found particularly useful were by

Albert Jewell and Elizabeth MacKinlay. We also considered ways of enhancing the use of Ciúnas.

The writings of Albert Jewell and Elizabeth MacKinlay are worth sharing. Although there was no one agreed definition of spirituality, among the key words that struck me in a book called *Ageing, Spirituality and Well-being*, edited by Albert Jewell, were meaning, process, relationship, values, listener and flourish:

(i) The concept of *meaning*: In later life, the spiritual dimension offers a source of meaning and has the potential to make life meaningful and productive for many.

(ii) Ageing and its spiritual component are seen as a *process*, not something finite and achievable like an outcome or goal.

(iii) *Relationship*, connection and belonging are themes echoed in many of the essays: relationship with a transcendent source (for many that was identified as God), with oneself, with others and with the universe.

(iv) *Values*, and continuity in values, was highlighted as an element of integration in later life, and values were often expressed as reminiscences, for which there needed to be an empathic listener.

(v) *Listener*. As one of the writers noted: “in order to discover the meaning of my life, I need to express myself, to talk about it with someone” (L. Missinne). The more the above concepts are in place in the life of the older person, the more they are in a position to flourish as human beings.

(vi) *Flourish*. In flourishing, humans achieve well-being, as indicated in the title of the book and a conference held in the UK on which the book is based.

Jewell (2004) lists spiritual needs as follows:

- to receive and give love
- to sustain hope
- to have faith and trust in someone/something
- to be creative
- to experience a reasonable sense of peace

Elizabeth MacKinlay. Who is she? An Australian nurse, Anglican priest, writer and Director of a Centre for Ageing and Pastoral studies as well as being Associate Professor of a School of Theology. Her two published books are called *The Spiritual Dimension of Ageing* (2001) and *Spiritual Growth and Care in the Fourth Age of Life* (2006).

I was lucky enough to attend a workshop she gave last year on spiritual reminiscence. She maintains that: ‘telling one’s whole story in later life can be enlightening, affirming and healing’. She suggests questions for reminiscence groups:

- what gives meaning/purpose to your life?

- what are the good things in your life?
- looking back over your life what do you remember with joy? With sadness?
- do you have any regrets or guilt?
- tell me about the emotional and spiritual supports you have. Are these from family, friends?
- what things do you worry about? Do you have any fears?
- what are the hardest things in your life just now?
- do you have an image of God? If so, what is this image like? What do you think God is like?
- do you go to Church? What are your earliest memories of Church, Sunday School ?
- as you get to the end of your life, what do you look forward to?
- what gives you hope?

She suggests that the skills that are needed to lead reminiscence groups effectively are no different to the skills used in helping professions, e.g. listening, time, feedback. She talks about younger carers and their lack of familiarity with the spiritual culture of older people. There is a need here for education and training.

She names the fourteen spiritual needs which are based on Koenig (1994). They are the need:

- for meaning, purpose and hope
- to transcend circumstances
- for support in dealing with loss
- for continuity
- for validation and support of religious behaviours.
- to engage in religious behaviours
- for personal dignity and sense of worthiness
- for unconditional love
- to express anger and doubt
- to feel that God is on their side
- to love and serve others
- to be thankful
- to forgive and be forgiven
- to prepare for death and dying

She gives an excellent format for assessment of spiritual needs in the appendix of her book published in 2006 and which she was promoting during her visit to Ireland last year.

#### **4. Other relevant points**

To return to the topic of spirituality and the religious dimension, Elizabeth MacKinlay states that “religion is a part of spirituality and not distinct from it. Religiosity (i.e

outward formulas) is not enough. As well as going to church [and saying prayers] there needs to be a relationship with God.”

In another context where religious practice is considered, a PhD student writing on successful ageing and quoted in Gerry Burke’s recent Age Concern newsletter on spirituality and ageing says that “it would appear that for some, spiritual values are expressed as a belief in God or a Higher Power, or a growing humanitarian attitude to life and other people. Religious practices such as attendance at a place of worship and prayer, may contribute to successful ageing”.

Many older residents come from other Christian traditions and a CD of well known hymns produced by the University of Stirling will equip us to have something to offer older people from other traditions. The CD is called *Restoring the Soul*. It consists of twenty hymns, recorded in Edinburgh in 2004, many of them familiar in the Catholic repertoire e.g. Be Thou My Vision, The Lord’s My Shepherd, How Great Thou Art, Amazing Grace. Others are familiar from *Songs of Praise* e.g. All Things Bright and Beautiful, Will Your Anchor Hold?, What a Friend We Have in Jesus. The CD is available from Stirling University (DSDC) at £6.25 (approx €10), plus post & packaging.

## **5. Conclusion**

Where to next? As Sonas aPc is a training organisation and the Spiritual Care Focus Group has run its course as a pilot project, it would seem that thought needs to be given to providing basic training in spirituality, both for the wider population of older people and staff who are caring for older people. Much of what we are about is equally relevant to those older people who are not cognitively impaired. Sonas is all about wellbeing, joy and contentment, which effectively means happiness. In our approach we aim to apply the benefits of Sonas sessions to the rest of the day, so that the experience of wellbeing does not end when the sessions are over. By way of a seeming contradiction, I would like to finish with a Spanish proverb that says: ‘There is no happiness, but there are moments of happiness’.

There are two points worth noting here. So often we miss out on moments of happiness by being unaware of them: the fact that we caught the bus or train, that the traffic wasn’t too bad, that we met an old friend unexpectedly, that the sun was shining, that the rain had stopped etc.

For those of us who are believers in being fully alive in this world and in the next, I would suggest that, in that ‘entirely new dimension of life’ that we look forward to, the constant happiness that eludes us in this world will be our uninterrupted experience. That is my wish for all of us.