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**Reflections on Spiritually Sensitive Social Work for Caritas  
Seoul**

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I would like to thank Caritas Seoul and Ms. Soo Kyung Wie for inviting me to offer some insights about spiritually sensitive social work. I enjoyed my presentation and meetings with members of Caritas in Seoul last year, so it is a pleasure to connect again.

I received a set of seven questions (with many subquestions) and an essay by Senior Researcher Chae Won Lim (National Leadership Center at Seoul National University) entitled, "Rethinking Catholic Spirituality and Social Welfare in the Third Millenium." I was asked to respond to the essay and the questions.

In this paper, I will offer some insights that are stimulated by contents of the essay. Most of the questions that were asked will be taken into account, though it is not possible in this limited space to address all of them. In order to respond to all the questions thoroughly, I would need to conduct 1 or 2 days of workshops. I will probably be in Korea in June 2016, so perhaps I could meet with interested persons at that time to discuss in more detail.



## **Overall Reflections**

The essay on Rethinking Catholic Spirituality and Social Welfare provides a call to action for addressing urgent social welfare needs related to the current global situation and to demographic and social changes in the Republic of Korea, such as income inequalities, aging populations, rapid changes of technology and social media, climate change, and various risks to well-being.

In view of these challenges, within the profession of social work in the USA and internationally, there are many scholars and practitioners who are advocating for improvements of social policy, social welfare systems, and human services based on Catholic social ethics, other religiously based approaches to service, and many nonreligious social development perspectives.<sup>12</sup> My remarks are intended to reflect social work values in a way that is inclusive of these diverse religious and nonreligious approaches that share concern for peace and justice and also that is congruent with the spirit of Catholic social ethics, given the commitment of Caritas Seoul.

I believe it is important to find humane ways to respond to challenges that promote the full dignity and worth of all people and that enhance harmonious interrelationship between humans and the total planetary ecology. Please note that I do not claim to represent or to have adequate understanding of official Catholic theological positions. I am simply a social work professor who shares a commitment to the virtue of *caritas*. Also, I wish to encourage you to critically examine my suggestions for whether or not they are truly workable and congruent with the Korean cultural context and the mission of Caritas Seoul.

During Pope Francis' recent visit to the United States, in a speech to the US Congress, he praised four people whose ideals also shape my values: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day (who was

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<sup>12</sup> 1 For example, the capabilities approach to social policy and social development can be compatible with spiritually sensitive social work yet is not reliant on any particular religion. See the 2012 article by Mahasweta Banerjee and myself, "Comparing Rawlsian justice and the capabilities approach to justice from a spiritually sensitive social work perspective," in the *Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 31, 9-31.

founder of the Catholic Worker movement), and Thomas Merton (who was a Catholic monk). Only two to these were Catholic, but they all shared a commitment to spiritually informed peace, justice, and social activism. He said of Thomas Merton: “Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.”<sup>13</sup> Merton was especially notable for his blend of contemplative prayer, social activism, and interreligious learning, especially between Christians and Buddhists. I mention this because it sets a context for my suggestions.

I imagine that Merton’s spiritual way can be very relevant to contemporary Korean society, which now includes people of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives who must learn to live and cooperate for the general benefit of all. Traditional Korean worldviews rooted in Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and shamanism all have had significant influences on formal and informal social welfare and mutual support systems. In particular in the current age, some denominations of Buddhism (such as jogye jong) and also Won Buddhism are active in social service provision. Many denominations of Christianity are of course prolific providers of social services in Korea. And these religious perspectives, and others including Islam, and many nonreligious views, are present among the Korean population and social service clientele. Perhaps the power of helping could be much magnified if all these perspectives could come into cooperation for the relief of suffering and the promotion of wellbeing. This essay about Rethinking Catholic Spirituality and Social Welfare points out that *caritas* is a core theological virtue that is significant for Catholics and in particular for Catholic social welfare services. Yet (I paraphrase from the essay) this virtue needs to be re-interpreted for contemporary Korean society, so that Catholic social services can provide care in a way that both honors this Catholic virtue commitment and also does not violate legal restrictions on imposition of religion in government subsidized social services.

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([http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/09/24/when\\_pope\\_francis\\_mentions\\_thomas\\_merton/1174418](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/09/24/when_pope_francis_mentions_thomas_merton/1174418))



I expect that accomplishing this re-thinking requires creative, careful, and heartfelt consideration of how *caritas* can be expressed in an inclusive way that honors Catholic faith and also honors the particular beliefs of the client and the social welfare workers. As Professor Heinrich Pompey, a leading proponent of Caritas Theology in Europe, said "...the ministry of charity is basic evangelization, even if a direct recruitment of new members through these ministerial-charitable services is not intended by the Church. It is exclusively about letting others participate in the real present love of God, namely in an altruistic way and not pursuing any other goals."<sup>14</sup> I expect that for some dedicated people, this phrase "not pursuing any other goals" (including proselytization) may be especially challenging. Yet this view of *caritas* may often call us to simply serve in a spirit of love, without egoistic or ethnocentric agendas, even those that are rooted in personal devotion. This challenges us to work on our own personal and professional spiritual development, in order to reach a level of maturity that the Christian developmental psychologist James Fowler names 'universalizing faith': the capacity to be true to one's own faith or worldview at the same time as respecting and embracing others in their different faiths and worldviews.<sup>15</sup>

This observation about spiritual development may be relevant to the observation from the Q-methodology study of Catholic social welfare workers, as mentioned in the Rethinking Catholic Spirituality and Social Welfare essay. Although this is an exploratory study, it makes an interesting observation that many of these Catholic social welfare workers who participated in the research have an orientation that is characterized by ego-based courage and pride, as well as some with anger. People who are in leadership positions and more years of

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14 "Caritas Church Ministry in the Perspective of Caritas-Theology and Catholic Social Teaching" by Giampietro Dal Toso, Heinrich Pompey, Rainer Gehrig, and Jakub Dolezel; published in 2015 by Palacky University, Olomouc, Czech Republic. Available as ebook at: <http://flexibooks.cz/church-caritas-ministry-in-the-perspective-of-caritas-theology-and-catholic-social-teaching/d-74169/#.VkedHeJEzT8>

15 See "Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Post-Modern Life", by James W. Fowler, published by Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996.

experience seem to have stronger rooting in love and rationality based orientation. The summary of the study that I read does not indicate how many of these workers have professional human service training (such as social welfare, pastoral counseling, or psychology) or how many have had educational support and preparation for how to express their spirituality and to how to address the diversity of clients from a spiritually sensitive approach.

My impression is that many workers in social service settings in Korea do not have substantial professional education. Further, the topic of spiritual diversity and spiritually sensitive practice is rather new in Korea.<sup>16</sup> It is not typically included in social welfare education. My expectation is that the more social welfare workers receive such professional education and also ongoing supervision in the workplaces, the more likely they can practice in a spiritually sensitive manner. I hope that my remarks in this paper can encourage this further development

The efforts of the Korean Society for Spirituality and Social Work might be helpful in this regard.<sup>17</sup>

### **A General Principle for Addressing Diversity from a Root in the Virtue of Caritas**

I suggest a general principle for expressing caritas in the contemporary increasingly diversified context of Korean society. I am not sure of the details of current Korean law, so you would need to determine whether these suggestions are applicable.

When providing services to clients who explicitly indicate that they wish to make use of Catholic support systems (such as parish ministry, sacraments, lay and clergy outreach, liturgy, mutual social support among fellow Catholics), then ethical social work practice would require that the client's wishes are taken into account in the helping plan. The same is true if the client prefers Buddhist, secular, or any other kinds of beliefs, activities, and support systems

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16 See the 2009 article, "Spirituality and social work scholarship in Korea: A content analysis," in the Korean Journal of Social Welfare Studies, 40(2), 203-225, by Professor Kyung Mee Kim and myself.

17 <http://www.kassw.net/?c=intro/30>

(assuming that these are not injurious). The priority is always on the client's goals, comfort level, and cultural and spiritual orientation.

This also means that if the client does not wish to have any kind of religious approach or even any discussion of spirituality, then those wishes need to be respected. This is a basic principle of professional social work practice and it is strongly emphasized in the strengths perspective and in spiritually sensitive social work.

A practical example of such a challenge for Catholic auspice social service agencies is how to take into account the varied possible reactions of non-Catholic clients who come to the place. How might a client react to Catholic symbols (such as the crucifix) and other Catholic elements that are commonly present in Catholic social service agency settings? If a client is comfortable and familiar with that, then this might even enhance a feeling of rapport and trust. But if the client is someone who is a former Catholic or is not Catholic, simple exposure to these cues can sometimes generate discomfort and anxiety. It is natural and coherent for such Catholic elements to appear in explicitly Catholic settings. But care should be taken so that all clients feel welcome and affirmed, whether or not they are Catholic.

In a related matter, professional social work ethics (at least as understood in the USA) indicate that provision of service should not be dependent on the client participating in prayer or other religious activities. This is because clients are often in a vulnerable position in need of resources from the agency, or are fragile due to stress and crisis. When they are mandated to engage in religious practices in such a situation, they may feel duress and worry about losing services if they do not comply. Professional social workers are not to engage in coercion or to violate the right of self-determination.

In order to apply this general principle to professional social work practice, I have developed a framework of knowledge, values, and skills for spiritually sensitive practice in my co-authored book, *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice*.<sup>18</sup> (Oxford University Press, 2010). The first edition of that book was translated into Korean and published by Sungkyunkwan University Press, with Professor Park

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18 "Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping (second edition)" by Edward R. Canda and Leola D. Furman; published by Oxford University, New York, in 2010.

Seung-Hee as the lead translator. I recommend that book for more details than I can write here. Also, many helpful resources can be found online at my website for the Spiritual Diversity and Social Work Initiative.<sup>19</sup> But I will here offer the example of spiritual assessment as a concrete illustration of spiritually sensitive practice.

## **Spiritual Assessment in Social Work**

In order to determine the client's goals, interest, comfort, and readiness, and whether spirituality is relevant, an assessment process is necessary, just as in any social work assessment. This assessment process should not bias or push the client to any predetermined outcome. It should invite a dialogue with the client that opens up possibilities stated in terms that he or she understands and supports. (The only general exception is when a psychosocial assessment reveals that the client poses an imminent danger to oneself or others. Then, of course, protective measures must be taken.)

Regarding spirituality, assessment can explore the client's possible interest in a way that fits the previously stated principle. One way to do this is to conduct a spiritual strengths assessment. I am adding a pdf file copy of a brochure that explains in clear terms how that can be done, in a separate attachment. This is geared toward adults with serious mental illness. But it can easily be adapted to other settings, at least for adults. You can obtain this brochure for free online. If you find it useful, you could translate it into Korean language.<sup>20</sup>

This brochure is intended to provide clear ethical and practical guidelines for how potential spiritual strengths and resources of the client/consumer might support her or his mental health recovery goals. The purpose is to determine, within a holistic assessment of various life domains, whether and how spirituality might be relevant and how any relevant strengths and resources can be practically connected into the service plan. Although this is based on a mental health practice setting, the guidelines can be adapted to many social

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19 <https://spiritualdiversity.ku.edu/resources>

20 [https://spiritualdiversity.ku.edu/sites/spiritualdiversity.ku.edu/files/docs/Mental\\_Health/spiritual%20strengths%20assessment%20for%20mental%20health%20recovery%20brochure.pdf](https://spiritualdiversity.ku.edu/sites/spiritualdiversity.ku.edu/files/docs/Mental_Health/spiritual%20strengths%20assessment%20for%20mental%20health%20recovery%20brochure.pdf)



service settings with adults.

We offer a nontechnical, easy to understand definition of spirituality to provide an orientation to the mental health worker: "Spirituality relates to sources of life meaning, purpose, hope, and connection to what has greatest importance to the person." Certainly there are more scholarly and detailed definitions and measures available, as can be found in my Spiritual Diversity book.

But for the situation of direct practice, there are two very important points: first, to provide a starting point for the helper to engage with the client on this topic; and second, for the helper to discover the client's own terms and understandings related to spirituality (if any) and to move forward or to discontinue moving forward based on that. The assessment interview questions are suggested as examples to adapt in particular situations. They include an indirect approach, which does not use explicit terms like religion, faith, or spirituality; and a direct approach, which does use such terms if relevant to the client.

### **Some Other Thoughts about the Questions Provided**

Question 1 points out that there are many Caritas Seoul employees and clients who are not Catholic and asks how to explain spirituality to them in a way that does not force Catholic religion. The definition of spirituality that I gave regarding spiritual assessment might be a helpful beginning. The approach to caritas virtue informed spiritually sensitive practice might be a way to honor both Catholic values and to respond to the diverse religious and nonreligious views of employees and clients.

Question 2 inquires how to help prevent or respond to social workers' exhaustion due to work with clients and due to hierarchical work relationships. My previous suggestion that social workers (including direct service workers and administrators) receive educational preparation and ongoing supervision for spiritually sensitive practice can help prevent some of this exhaustion. The resources cited in this paper can assist; this also helps address questions 4 and 5. One important component is for the workplace to encourage workers to draw on their own practices for energy replenishment and stress

management, such as prayer, meditation, yoga, walking in the mountains, mindfulness, etc. Setting aside a room for quiet reflection and peace of mind within the agency building can be helpful. The key is to help the worker find the practices that fit his or her beliefs, comfort, and personality. Many of these practices are mentioned in my book on Spiritual Diversity. Another important issue is how the organizational culture of the human service agency can itself be spiritually sensitive. There are recommendations and an evaluation tool in my book for this also.

Questions 3 and 6 ask for case studies about spirituality in social work in the USA and examples of religious and nonreligious spiritual approaches. I recommend the examples in my book and also the many articles in the Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Social Work, sponsored by Catholic University of America's School of Social Service.

Question 7 asks about the most important thing in social work practice about spirituality. Perhaps the section of this paper about the main principle behind caritas virtue based approach to spiritually sensitive social work responds to that.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to thank you for your patient consideration of my suggestions. I very much appreciate your invitation to contribute to your valuable efforts to extend the services of Caritas Seoul to all people of diverse religious and nonreligious spiritual perspectives.

## **Questions**

### **Question 1**

What does spirituality mean to people who are not catholic (Shamanism, Protestant, Buddhist, etc.)? Caritas Seoul is composed

of many employees who are atheist or believe in other religions. Rather than forcing the catholic religion onto its employees, Caritas Seoul wants to work with them in the social work field. However, non-catholic social workers unfamiliar with the meaning of "spirituality" might misunderstand it to be a religious concept. Please explain to these workers in easy terms the meaning of "spirituality".

### **Question 2**

In the social work field, social workers are prone to experience exhaustion. Exhaustion sometimes arises in the process of meeting clients, but it mostly arises in the context of communication between co-workers in hierarchical relationships. In this situation, the individual social worker should try to equip himself with spirituality, but it is not easy to overcome these difficult situations through personal spirituality when exhausted by the surrounding environment. Do you think that enhancing personal spirituality is a good way to address difficulties that arise in social welfare organizations?

### **Question 3**

I wonder whether there are cases of social work practice based on spirituality in the United States. If you are aware of any anecdotes or case studies, please share them with us.

### **Question 4**

I think that regular education or training is needed to continue spiritual practice. What are some training methods that can be used within the social welfare organization context?

### **Question 5**

What role can employers play in encouraging social workers to practice spirituality in social work organizations?

### **Question 6**

What are some nonreligious spiritual approaches and religious spiritual approaches that can be employed in social work practice? How are they different?

### **Question 7**

What is the most important thing in practice spirituality in social work organizations? What is easy to overlook in practice spirituality in social work organizations?