



Carmelite Spiritual Center

7/9/04

8433 Bailey Road * Darien, Illinois 60561 * 630-969-4141

Life is Worth Giving

WHAT IS A PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE FOR CHRISTIANS?

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

It is seldom that a book with a religious theme makes it to the best-seller list in the "New York Times." It is even more of an accomplishment when such a book — entitled "The Purpose Driven Life" — remains on such a list for months on end, and sells over 10 million copies!

But this is exactly what the Rev. Rick Warren, founding pastor of the gigantic Saddlebrook Church in Lake Forest, Calif., has accomplished. Many have already asked: How is it possible that such a book with an almost threatening title can have such an impact on millions of Americans and others? And this in an era when organized religions are considered outdated at best, and dysfunctional at worst? Many churches, especially the Catholic Church in America, are undergoing stressful times because of scandals and other problems. Empty pews, falling enrollments, and declining income have forced the closing of parishes and curtailing of various ministries.

But here is a topic about purpose in life for a Christian which bucks current trends greatly. Part of the explanation of this Protestant pastor's success in writing a best-seller comes from his emphasis on the importance of each individual and his or her relationship with a loving, caring and forgiving God.

People are not just insignificant cogs in some cosmic universe moved at times by forces beyond anyone's actual control. And the author strongly states that individuals are not accidents and are in God's mind and purpose before our universe was actually created, and that each person has a specific purpose in life. And this purpose extends beyond our relatively few years on earth into eternity itself.

This is a great ego-enhancing idea for most people, especially those concerned with doing God's will here on earth. When a person looks to God for his or her reason for being, the perspective changes radically from a self-serving, materialistic, pleasure-filled existence to one that will bring peace, happiness, contentment, and a true sense of purpose to each of God's creatures. People then become, indeed, God's incredible creation for both time and eternity.

In this quick-paced but profound book, the author guides the reader through a personal 40-day religious journey not unlike the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, but with a greater emphasis on Scripture.

But the major point of Warren's book is that life makes sense if people truly understand that each person is made by God and for God for a distinct and individual purpose. In the book's spiritual journey, the reader is asked to focus on the important question of being: "What on earth am I here for?"

In simply seeking an answer to this question, each person begins to know God's purpose in human creation, and thereby helps to reduce stress, focus both physical and spiritual energy, simplify decision making, and give meaning to life and eternity.

In a very real sense, the best-selling book is a direct contradiction to the current cultural lifestyle of many Americans and others around the globe. In addition, the book challenges some of the long-held definitions and understandings of worship of God, ministry towards others, Christian fellowship and true discipleship, and evangelism.

Even though the book seems to be written from a distinctly Protestant perspective, it can provide knowledge and inspiration to Catholics and many others. It is truly a book of hope and challenge for all readers. In the book's journey, the author wisely points out that the reader must try to see life from God's view. He points out that God tests faith through problems, hope by how an individual handles possessions, and love through other people. An important test of a person's relationship with God is how one acts when he or she can't feel God's presence in life. In life or death, each person needs to believe that he or she is at home with God.

An unusual perspective on the author's part is that bringing enjoyment to God, living for his pleasure, is the first purpose of human life. When this truth is fully understood, people will begin to understand their true significance in life. And in a section about being best friends with God, the reader learns that mulling over a problem — that's worry. But when a person reflects on God's word — that's meditation, and it brings about a closer relationship with God.

The author also points out the need for authentic worship which engages the emotions. There are many ways to draw near to God, but all of them include sincerity. The book also deals with the feeling that all experience in some way when God seems distant. A more important section deals with God's love for all people, and their love for each other. Life without love is worthless, and the greatest gift people can give to each other is their time — in loving kindness.

All of this reflects a person's relationship to a worshipping community. The difference between being a church "attender" and a "member" is simply commitment. Attenders are simply spectators; members get involved in ministry. And the authentic Christian life is not only a commitment to Christ but also to other Christians.

(Fr. Kevin Shanley)