

Spiritual Awareness is the Cornerstone of an Authentic Religious Life

Why is interior awareness important?

How aware are we of our own interior spiritual experience? How habitually are we aware of it? Do we ever consciously stop to become aware of what is stirring spiritually within? This is a major question of the spiritual life, and it cannot be emphasized too much.

What interferes with our interior awareness?

“Behold, you were within me, while I was outside: it was there that I sought you, and a deformed creature, rushed headlong upon these things of beauty which you have made. You were with me, but I was not with you.”

-- St. Augustine, Confessions. Book 10. Ch. 27.

Too often our awareness is focused outside ourselves on the people, events, activities that are impacting us, without an awareness of our interior response or what is going on inside us. The rush of exterior sensations and demands draw us outside ourselves and lose touch with our genuine thoughts, feelings and values. We can start to live our lives “from the outside in” rather than “from the inside out.” Sometimes we call this “codependence,” or people-pleasing. We can lose touch with what we think, feel and believe and act based on external rather than internal realities. Our lives cease being authentically ours and become false theater performances to conform to the world as it is around us.

Why is awareness difficult?

Sometimes, the outside is louder than the inside. St. Thomas Aquinas saw a difference between what gives delight on the level of the senses and what give delight on the level of the intellect. Goods of the senses are more visible, more tangible, and more readily apparent to us than those of the mind and of the spiritual order.

Much is also said of the impact of contemporary culture in diminishing interior awareness. Thoreau’s world that “lives too fast,” lives even faster today. A secularized worldview questions faith and the reality itself of an interior spiritual life. Accordingly, the value of noticing different spiritual voices in our hearts is simply unrecognized.

In addition, it can be very uncomfortable to turn our attention inward if we are not in the habit of interior examination. We may encounter past unresolved pain, conflicts, primal emotions, confusion. All this can cloud clear perceptions of our interior awareness and tempt us to find distractions.

What are the levels of awareness?

In the 16th century, Spanish mystic St. Ignatius distinguished among three levels of awareness: psychological, moral and spiritual.

Awareness of our own thoughts from our conditions and experiences: The first type of interior awareness is the *psychological awareness* of our human conditioning. Psychological awareness comes from our own *personal thoughts* that are *self-engendered*. They reflect the reality that we are independent beings with free will and choice. Our psychological awareness focuses on understanding our patterns of thinking, feeling and acting from our conditioning during our lives. These can be past experiences from childhood, family dynamics, and adult transitions. They may be

events of joy and events of trauma. We can develop psychological awareness through the professional counseling process and through many channels in daily life: feedback from friends, our own effort to notice the affective states we experience in the events of the day, reflection on our interactions with others, and similar means. Thus we may discover that in certain situations we habitually become angry or fearful, feel more or less secure, find ourselves uplifted or discouraged, and tend to act accordingly. This greater awareness regarding our individual psychological patterns and their causes leads to a greater clarity and freedom in making emotionally healthy choices, with increased energy for the tasks of life. Such psychological awareness is obviously an extremely valuable resource for living. This, however, is not the specific awareness that we call *interior spiritual awareness*.

Awareness of the virtues and vices reflected in our thoughts: A second kind of interior awareness permits us to grasp the *moral quality* of our lives. Have our actions followed our highest beliefs? Are we living out virtues we believe in or are we making compromises with vices? This is the *moral awareness* we seek at the beginning of each Eucharist, or when we approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or when we seek God's correction. It is of great value in the spiritual life, but it is not *interior spiritual awareness*.

Awareness of the deepest inner feeling that rises up from our center: The third kind is an awareness of *our spiritual response* to thoughts, feelings and events outside us. These are *subtle, pre-moral, spontaneous movements in our soul* and contain a message for us in where God is leading us in life. Interior spiritual awareness does not happen in a vacuum. There is an essentially religious dimension to this awareness. It depends on our decision to seek God, our understanding of faith and religious life, our moral understanding and values, as well as our psychological maturity. In this, there is a close interconnection with the other two types of awareness. The developed or undeveloped quality of each will strengthen or slow the growth of the others. Psychological awareness increases the space for spiritual awareness; spiritual awareness presupposes a solid moral awareness. At the same time, effective spiritual awareness will assist a person in making psychologically healthy choices and wise moral decisions.

Interior spiritual awareness is an awareness of movements of "spirits" that draw us toward or away from God. Initially, these spiritual movements may feel similar. A thought or idea of an action may engender in us delight, interest and energy. But if we sit with the thought of action for a period of time, it may lose its luster. We may feel *dry, dissatisfied, restless* and even "*thirsty*" and "*hungry*." Or it may gain in appeal. We may feel *deeply contented, satisfied, nourished* and *at peace*.

Interior spiritual awareness directly influences our religious life and our relationship with God. If we act on the movement toward nourishment and peace, it can draw us to an increase of our *faith in God*, our *hope* and optimism, and our *charitable generosity* of spirit and self in our daily lives. It draws us closer to God and strengthens our relationship. At the same time, if we act on the movement that leaves dry, empty, and restless, it may increase our *doubt*, tempt us toward *cynicism* and *negativity* and cause us to become more *self-protective*, defensive and focused on our own *self-advantage*. It draws us away from God and weakens our relationship.