BY R.W. DELLINGER
Staff Writer

Father Richard Rohr: Crossing into the second half of life

In his 2011 Religious Education Congress workshop, as well as in his just-published book of the same title, "Falling Upwards: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life," Franciscan Father Richard Rohr pointed out the two very different tasks and goals people have in their lives — and how to cross from one to the other.

As the titles suggests, it’s only through the paradox of “falling upwards” that human beings come to fully realize the reign of God. The first half of life, up until the 40s or so, are all about achieving order, structure, predictability, safety, pleasure, control and success, he said, what the psychologist Herbert Maslow called the basic hierarchy of needs. In essence, he explained, it’s forming the “container” or “crucible” of life, which is necessary for growth and development.

“But we have to be careful,” Father Rohr cautioned. “If we get so used to the container and maintain our container by building up walls of our container, they totally take over, and by the second half of life they become all-controlling needs. These are the rigid people we all know: ‘It’s either my way or the highway.’ And they have the same response over and over again. So a lot of them are boring people or control freaks.”

But the noted author and speaker stressed that life is not supposed to be that way. He said that while the first half of life is the container, the second half is the more vital “content.” And the only way to cross over is through what he called “necessary suffering,” or the moment that people in 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous call powerlessness.

“I can’t do it! I can’t do it!” Now that’s where God has to lead us all, maybe not in a completely desperate way,” he acknowledged. “But brothers and sisters, there has to be one issue, and usually there’s more than one, that you cannot fix, you cannot control, you cannot understand and you cannot explain: ‘It just is. And there’s nothing I can do about it.’ That’s when you’ve hit bottom.”

Because the crossover involves such powerlessness, suffering and pain, many people, Catholic Christians included, never make the transition from the first to second “sacred” half of life, according to Father Rohr, where there is more compassion and wisdom separation and condemning. Instead, they often try to relive the first half over and over instead of trying to experience the seeming contradiction of “falling upwards.”

“The soul has many secrets,” said Father Rohr. “They’re only revealed to those who really want them. They’re never forced on you. And one of the best kept secrets, and yet one hidden in plain sight, is, ‘the way up is the way down.’ The pattern is so obvious in all of nature, in all mythologies and stories of the world. Something always has to die or be sacrificed or let go of for something new to happen.”

“And we Catholics call it the Paschal Mystery: ‘Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.’”

So what looks like going down is really up, he stressed, calling it the “bright sadness.”

“There’s a kind of calmness, security, foundation and ground that we should be coming to by the second half of life,” the Franciscan said. “But it’s been hard won. You don’t laugh at everything. You can see the beauty of things, but always putting the dark and the light together. It’s a kind of nobility of sadness, a kind of nobility of purpose that, frankly, is much more sober.”

“And it can’t be gained just by studying or thinking books,” he added. “I think it’s gained by loving and losing, loving and losing and loving and losing — and the learning that comes from that. That’s what the middle of life is supposed to be about. And then you redefine what success is. You redefine what union is. You redefine what love is. You redefine, I think, what life itself is about.”

Compiled by Doris Benavides, Paula Doyle and Mike Nelson.

"BRIGHT SADNESS" — Only by going through some suffering does a person learn “what life itself is about,” says Father Richard Rohr.

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