

# Catholics be careful with Oprah's spiritual course

By Joe Paprocki  
CONTRIBUTOR

Since early March, over a half-million people have been logging on to Oprah Winfrey's Web site to participate in the 10-week course "A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose." The course is based on a book of the same name by Eckhart Tolle, Winfrey's co-host for the 10-week class, who describes himself as a contemporary spiritual teacher who is not aligned with any particular religion or tradition.

Let's give Winfrey credit for attempting to do such a positive thing, especially when so many other TV programs offer us so much negativity, violence and drivel. Clearly there is a hunger for spirituality as evidenced by the incredible numbers of people participating in this course. For her noble efforts to respond to this hunger, we say, "Thank you."

On the other hand, Catholics who are seeking to deepen their spirituality should say, "No, thank you," to Winfrey's doctrine. On the surface, it would seem that what Winfrey and Tolle are promoting is compatible with not only Christianity but with any religious tradition. In fact, they were quick to assure their first caller — a Catholic woman from Alton, Ill. — that this was indeed the case.

However, a closer examination of the foundations of Tolle's and Winfrey's spirituality reveals some significant conflicts with Catholicism. Let's take a quick look.

■ Winfrey's course encourages viewers to pursue a more contemplative life. For Tolle and Winfrey, contemplation is directed toward what they call the "great consciousness." In other words, their contemplation is directed to an impersonal force of energy. For Catholics, the object of our contemplation is a person: Jesus Christ, the human face of God. Catholics can learn a great deal more about contemplation by reading "The Cloud of Unknowing" (anonymous) and the works of St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila and St. Ignatius of Loyola.

■ Winfrey's course encourages viewers to discover their life's purpose. They explain that we achieve this by asking life what it is saying to us. The problem is, life does not speak to us. Rather, God speaks to us through our life experiences and through revelation: Scripture and tradition. Life is an impersonal reality. God is personal. For Catholics, our life purpose is found in God as revealed through Jesus Christ.

■ Winfrey's course encourages viewers to rise above dysfunction. Sounds a lot like sin and examination of conscience. Listen closely, however, and you'll hear Winfrey and Tolle explain that we can overcome

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dysfunction through our own efforts. Catholics recognize that we are incapable of saving ourselves. It is only through God's merciful grace that we are saved. For Catholics, it is through the sacraments that we encounter this saving grace.

■ Winfrey's course encourages viewers to recognize the divine within themselves. The problem with her formula for discovering the divine within is that it can ultimately be reduced to equating oneself with God. According to Winfrey, you are your own best authority. As a result, she detests any kind of dogma. Of course, Catholics also believe that we can find the divine within. However, we recognize that Catholic dogma, which flows from God's own self-revelation, helps us to recognize the God who dwells within us.

■ Winfrey's course encourages viewers to appreciate the present moment. Appreci-

ation of the present is intimately tied with one's view of the future. For Catholics, our confident hope in the resurrection of Jesus and in eternal life transforms the often-mundane and sometimes painful present moments of our lives into moments of simple pleasure and quiet joy. (See "The Little Way" of St. Therese of Lisieux) Without hope in the resurrection, Tolle's and Winfrey's advice is little more than "don't worry, be happy."

Finally, Tolle insists that "how spiritual you are has nothing to do with what you believe." The fact is, however, that we need to know with what or whom we are reaching out to commune. This is why we Catholics state firmly in the Creed that, "We believe in one God..." We know that being spiritual has everything to do with what we believe and in whom we believe.

We can't blame the Catholic woman from Alton who called in to Winfrey's class for seeking answers to her spiritual questions. What is disconcerting is that she did not recognize Catholicism as possessing the guidance needed for her spiritual quest.

As a Church, we need to do a better job of making the spiritual wisdom of our tradition more accessible. We need to teach Catholics how to, as St. Ignatius of Loyola taught, find God in all things.

*Paprocki is managing editor of parish life resources at Loyola Press in Chicago.*