

HEART-TO-HEART

May 1997

A Pastoral Letter from Richard J. Foster



Dear Friends,

The interest in Spiritual Formation is growing rapidly. We can now say that the topic is “popular.” I knew this day was coming, and now it is upon us. For some time our theological seminaries have been establishing programs in Spiritual Formation; some on the M.Div. level, others on the D.Min. level. Christian colleges too have been starting up Spiritual Formation courses and integrating the concern into various aspects of their curriculum. Endowed professorships have been set up specifically to teach Spiritual Formation. Various institutes and centers of Spiritual Formation have been popping up around the country. The number of those who are trained to do Spiritual Direction has been growing steadily. The term—if not a clear understanding of it—has now come into the mainstream of Protestant language. (Spiritual Formation has been in Catholic circles for a long time, but it has been confined mainly to Religious orders. All that is changing rapidly, and today it is common to see Spiritual Formation concepts adapted to reflect lay and married life concerns.)

Now, religious publishers are getting into the act, scurrying about to acquire books in the field, even establishing whole lines in Spiritual Formation. Perhaps the surest sign that this is indeed a hot topic is that soon yet another specialty Bible will be available to us—“The Spiritual Formation Bible.”

The Up Side and the Down Side

This heightened interest in Spiritual Formation has both an up side and a down side. The down side first. To begin with people *are going* to write about it and teach on it and set up centers in it regardless of whether or not they know anything about it. Publishers, too, *will publish* in the field irrespective of whether they know what they are doing or whether they don’t have a clue. In addition, the constant pressure to make the concepts understandable *will lead* to a “dumbing down” process. Those at the forefront of this process will be sorely tempted to reduce Spiritual Formation to little more than a variety of “simple steps to blessedness.” Even more, the economic boon of all this interest *will result* in strategies for marketing Spiritual Formation. Here the perpetual tendencies will be to claim more than is the case, promise a quick fix, and mask the cost of discipleship.

But the up side should not be forgotten. Many today are simply no longer content with either “spiritual goose bumps” or a cerebral religion divorced from life. They are looking for—and expecting—a faith that will substantively transform their lives. Alongside this is the potential for Spiritual Formation to breathe new life into religious experience by reconnecting theology to practice. A *theologia habitus*, if you will, a theology which produces habits. If such a “practiced theology” is, in fact, developed (and many things can keep this from occurring), it will swing open new doors onto spiritual growth. This will, in turn, give renewed hope to hosts of people that it is actually possible to grow in grace by experiencing an ever fuller conformity to the way of Christ.

Yet another plus: many are studying the historical roots of Spiritual Formation and are thereby looking to the past with a view to learning better how to live in the present. This is a huge change over even a few years ago. This, in turn, reenforces the long view in people so they can see their formation as a life process containing highs and lows, sprints of growth mixed with disconcerting setbacks, loneliness, struggle, hopes dashed and revived again, and more. This is (and always has been) the

process of growth in the Spirit, and we do not help people by hiding this reality from them. Another fallout to this reconnecting to the past is that many are searching for new forms of community life that are adequate for the loving accountability inherent in Spiritual Formation.

On balance we can be encouraged by the new interest in Spiritual Formation because of the possibilities it affords many more people to see discipleship to Jesus as both the norm and the normal way of life for the Christian. At the same time we should be forewarned that in the days ahead many things will be passed off under the rubric of Spiritual Formation that will not even be close to its central concern.

Formed, Conformed, Transformed

Hence it is all the more critical that we be clear about what we mean by Spiritual Formation. When Paul said to the Galatians, “I am in the pain of childbirth until Christ is **formed** in you” he was speaking of Spiritual Formation. When he told the Romans, “Those whom (God) foreknew he also predestined to be **conformed** to the image of his son,” he was speaking of Spiritual Formation. When he reminded the Corinthians that “All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being **transformed** into the same image” he was speaking of Spiritual Formation (Gal. 4:19, Rom. 8:29, 2 Cor. 3:18; emphasis added in all three). So what is Spiritual Formation? **Spiritual Formation is the continuing process of life and experience through which we are progressively formed, conformed, and transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.**

Now, the truth of the matter is that everything we come in contact with forms our spirit, rightly or wrongly. Whether we like it or not, all of us are being formed in one way or another. In fact, in many cases the word “deformed” would be more accurate—the “Heaven’s Gate” group being a recent tragic case in point. Where this is true, we must add the crucial aspect of “re-formation.” (Which, by the by, is what concerned Martin Luther and the other reformers.)

Christian Spiritual Formation is intentional formation. We purposefully seek formation of a particular kind which will lead us in a particular direction. The particular kind of formation is the ancient *imitatio Christus*, the imitation of Christ. The particular direction this leads to is the Christian virtues—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and the like. (See Gal. 5:22-23 and many other similar passages, e.g. Romans 5:1-8, 8:1-39, 12:1-21, 1 Cor. 6:1-11, 2 Cor. 4:16-18, Eph. 4:1-3, 5:1-15, Phil. 4:4-8, Col. 3:12-15, 1 Tim. 3:1-13, 2 Tim. 20-26, Titus 1:5-9, James 3:13-18, 1 Peter 3:8-15, 4:8-11, 2 Peter 1:3-9, 1 John 3:11-24, 4:7-12.)

The reason we do these things is so that we may become a certain kind of person; a person who is “response-able,” able to respond to the demands of life appropriately. That is to say, a person who is growing in Christlikeness.

And the wonder in all this is that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and is present among his people as our everliving Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend. He has agreed to be yoked to us, as we are yoked to him, and to train us in how to live our lives as he would live them if he were us. As this occurs, we increasingly come to share his love, hope, feelings, and habits.

Growing in Grace

How do we begin to move into this way of life? Fully answering that all important question demands a full-blown theology of growth which would take far more space than I have here. But for now let me give one of Jesus’ great summation statements of this life and three practical suggestions that can get us moving forward.

Do you remember Jesus' astonishing words, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7)? "Abide in me . . . my words abide in you." This "abiding" is everything. In John 15 Jesus uses the word "abide" eleven times in ten verses. Nothing is more fundamental, more central, more pivotal than abiding in Jesus and allowing his words to abide in us. But how do we do this? Here are three simple beginning steps.

1. Begin with a simple, straightforward reading of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If you have a red letter Bible, you may want to start by soaking in those words the Gospel writers give us as coming from Jesus himself. Don't worry about redaction criticism or those few passages that are confusing to you. Initially, I suggest you not even worry too much about historical and contextual considerations. Later these matters can enhance your understanding considerably, but the first need is simply to lean into these wonderful words of life. Let them form you, shape you, challenge you, comfort you. As you allow the words to percolate in your consciousness, you will memorize many passages without ever trying to memorize them. Let the phrases seep below the conscious level of your mind until you dream about them. Don't rush this process, thinking that you already know Jesus' words. The key is not "knowing" the words of Jesus but allowing them to abide in you. If you have never done this before, I suggest you stay with this step for six months or so, say until Christmas.
2. As you are soaking—abiding—in Jesus' words, you can begin praying the Scripture. "Festooning" is what C. S. Lewis called it. Take, for instance, the words, "Your kingdom come" and pray that reality into your place of work, your home, your family relationships, your dreams for the future. You do this not primarily by saying the words "Your kingdom come" but by taking up specific individuals and situations and attitudes and praying the kingdom life into them. Again, take Jesus' words, "pray for those who persecute you" and allow them to saturate your heart, your mind, your feelings. In time you will find yourself spontaneously praying for those who persecute you—not because you are supposed to pray that way but out of deeply ingrained habit. And much more.

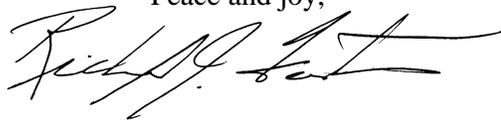
OUR FINANCIAL GUIDELINES

- We urge everyone to give first to their local church (or wherever they are being nurtured spiritually) and to the poor before ever giving to RENOVARÉ.
- An accountant oversees our financial records in accord with accepted accounting procedures and the highest professionalism.
- We will live within our means. One thing we refuse to do is overextend and overspend ourselves and then beg for God's people to bail us out. We believe that God will give us the money to do what we are being called to do. We feel it involves just as much faith to trust God for the money before a purchase as after a purchase. In fact, one way we discern God's will for the ministry of RENOVARÉ is through the financial support of his people.
- We believe in full disclosure at all times. Our financial reports are available to anyone upon request.
- We will receipt all donations.
- If we offer books, tapes, or other materials for a suggested contribution, we will receipt the amount given above the retail price of the product plus shipping and handling costs.
- When we make a purchase, we will pay the bill within thirty days. We refuse to subsidize this ministry on the backs of vendors.
- We will never sell or rent our mailing list.
- We are primarily a voluntary organization and as such we depend in large measure upon the sacrificial labors of many. If, however, we employ paid staff, they will receive equal pay for equal work.
- We will communicate our financial needs to our constituency as clearly and as truthfully as possible. We will not inflate or overstate our situation, nor create a crisis to boost income.
- We believe RENOVARÉ was initiated and continues to be sustained by God. While we are eager to follow the Divine whisper at every turn and work with all our might, it is God's business and not ours to prosper or end the work of RENOVARÉ. We rejoice either way.

3. As this prayer experience becomes natural (that is, it becomes more and more a part of who you are rather than what you do), I suggest you extend your time a little through a listening silence. Remember, Jesus Christ is active among his people today. He has not contracted laryngitis. His voice is not hard to hear. His vocabulary is not difficult to understand. He will speak to you and teach you and guide you as you grow in attentiveness to his living Presence. His teaching will never be contrary to what you have already been experiencing by having his written words abide in you. In fact, it will have the same tone, the same quality, the same weight. For example, it is in the nature of Jesus to draw and encourage rather than to push and condemn. If you have any questions about the guidance you are receiving, you can bring it to mature sisters and brothers in the faith for corporate discernment. In fact, this work is always done best in the context of a loving fellowship of other disciples of Jesus.

In the fifteenth century Thomas à Kempis wrote in *The Imitation of Christ*, “we must imitate [Christ’s] life and his ways if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do, then, to reflect on the life of Jesus Christ. . . . Anyone who wishes to understand Christ’s words and to savor them fully should strive to become like him in every way.” And so we do.

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

P.S. As always we depend upon your generous support. The last four Regional Conferences, while wonderful spiritual feasts, were a drain on our financial resources rather than replenishing them. Out of a thankful heart will you give liberally, joyously, and sacrificially? Thank you.

RJF

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