

HEART-TO-HEART

November 1999

A Pastoral Letter From Richard J. Foster



Dear Friends,

As the end of the century—and the millennium—approaches I am often asked about the theological and spiritual significance of this milestone. My answer is simple and straightforward: **absolutely nothing!** The end of the millennium is a human calendar invention (and an imperfect invention at that) and it has nothing whatever to do with the march of Holy History or the economy of God. So, please, for God's sake (and your own) simply ignore all the hysterical millennial hype that is going on these days. And this includes the Y2K issue. Y2K is merely a computer defect that will get worked out by those who deal with such things; and whether it is worked out with ease or difficulty is of little consequence to those whose lives are hid with God in Christ. In fact, inordinate attention to these matters only distracts us from the far more substantive issues of ongoing character formation into Christlikeness and faithful obedience to Christ in the midst of a society that is indifferent—even hostile—to Christian things. I regret even having to devote one paragraph to so trivial a subject. Enough said.

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

While focusing on millennial madness is a waste of good time and energy, careful and prayerful attention to what the future may look like is of immense value. Where is our contemporary culture headed? What influences for good can we have in this regard? And what about the community of faith, the Church? What will the Church of the future look like? What *should* the Church of the future look like? These are the kinds of questions we do well to ponder. Thus, as we stand on the cusp of a new (humanly calculated) century and millennium, it is worth our best efforts to consider together the future of our society and the role of the people of God in that society.

At the mid-point of the twentieth century philosopher D. Elton Trueblood dubbed Western Culture a "cut-flower society"; that is, while we still exhibited a certain cultural strength and power, it was a passing beauty because our spiritual roots had been severed. In the years since that perceptive—even prophetic—characterization we have witnessed the flower wilt and dry up. As a culture we have sown the wind and we are now reaping the whirlwind. Anyone who does not recognize this is simply ignorant of the harsh realities of modern life. (I need not enumerate these realities—you see them every night on CNN or the BBC.) Now, I know that in saying this I am not sounding wonderfully positive and optimistic. But, friends, this is what has happened to our society and we might just as well own up to it.

The catch-word people use for this sweeping change in our cultural landscape is "post-modernism," and it simply means that we have cut ourselves off from all the ancient anchors of reality, truth, and virtue. For the post-modernist "reality" is what we are making up as we go along, "truth" is what we decide it is, and "virtue" is reduced to being politically correct. (Post-modernism has also served the positive role of undermining the arrogance of scientific naturalism commonly called modernism.)

So we live in a post-modern world. We also live in a "post-denominational" world. We are at the tail end of a major form of Christian expression, an expression we have known for nearly half a millennium. Many reasons account for this change. One positive reason is that the old (and important) theological battles that gave rise to the denominations have been substantially resolved: witness the dramatic joint Lutheran/Roman Catholic declaration on justification by faith that was signed on Reformation Sunday (October 31) in Wittenberg, Germany. Space hinders me from going into other reasons, many of them not

nearly as positive. Suffice it to say that denominational loyalties no longer define the religious landscape. Now, if this fact of modern life concerns you (and we should have many concerns about it) I do want to give you this word of encouragement: the people of God did quite well long before the rise of denominations and they will do quite well after they are gone.

THREE DRAMATIC SHIFTS

In light of these matters I see three dramatic shifts occurring in the twenty-first century.

First, the Church's privileged position in Western society will end. The preferential treatment many have come to expect is fast disappearing and we are being pushed to the margins of society. I expect this trend to continue on many fronts, up to and including the removal of tax exempt status for church properties in the U.S.

Now, I actually view this loss of preferential treatment as an advantage. Instead of the Church desperately trying to elbow her way up to the tables of power, we can instead turn our attention to becoming—by our life and witness—an alternative voice to the madness around us. Since, in Christ, we have been reborn into the new reality of the kingdom of God, we can become ambassadors of peace in the midst of a violent world, models of civility and grace in the midst of a competitive society, conveyors of faith and hope in the midst of a cynical culture, and the embodiment of *agape* love to all peoples in the midst of an adversarial society.

History teaches us that the Church has always been at its best, thrived the most, had its greatest beauty and power, and its most sterling witness when it stood on the margins of society. And, besides, I'm only talking about the loss of privileged position, not outright persecution which so many of our brothers and sisters in the faith must face day in and day out. "In your struggle . . . you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (Heb. 12:4). So let's quit sniveling and feeling sorry for ourselves and take up our rightful place as a pilgrim people whose real inheritance is in the kingdom of God. Then we can, as one of the Desert Fathers Abba Joseph admonishes, "become totally changed into fire," and the world in awe can watch us burn.

Second, we are, most likely, in the beginning stages of a third great reformation . . . a reformation that will intensify throughout the next century. The first great reformation came in the early centuries of the church under the leadership of church fathers like Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, and it hammered out our understanding of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The second great reformation occurred in the sixteenth century under Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and others and it clarified our understanding of saving faith: by grace through faith alone.

This third reformation is focusing upon sanctification, to use a theological term. It is taking with utmost seriousness how the soul grows in grace. The love of Jesus is the magnet that is drawing people together—a love that transforms the human personality by the power of God.

Changed lives is the hallmark of this reformation. The potentialities of change as well as its limits are all being explored extensively. How we are formed in God, conformed to Jesus, and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit is being studied and experienced carefully . . . prayerfully. Its growing theological rigor will increasingly interact with the complementary disciplines of Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, and medical research. I expect this reformation to become vastly deeper and broader as the century progresses.

Third, the twenty-first century will witness one of the greatest harvests of Christian mission ever. I concur with John Paul II that in the next century we will see a "new springtime" for the gospel message. Much of the energy for this will be centered outside the West. Africa, south of the Sahara, will become *the* Christian continent—that is if (and it is a big "if") they can successfully overcome the triple threat of

Muslim suppression, the AIDS epidemic, and internal tribal wars. The Americas south of the U.S. border will show the world how evangelism is really done. Both Africa and Latin America will intensify and expand their evangelistic efforts in the West.

The really pivotal continent (and the one that will determine whether or not this third projection will actually come to pass) is Asia. Throughout the twenty-first century Asia will be the rising culture, no doubt about that. The real question is whether the Christian witness in Asia is strong enough to ride the rise of Asian culture, or whether Buddhism—which is also a missionary religion—will win the day. I believe the Christian witness *is* strong enough. Chinese Christians have suffered tremendously and are deeper and stronger for it. They will teach the rest of us how to live for God. Korea (south *and* north, although the north has yet to experience its day of divine visitation) will teach the entire Christian world how to pray. And the signs of spiritual vitality in the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, India, and numerous other places are so encouraging that I believe the twenty-first century will be viewed as “the great century” of advance for Christ and his kingdom. Let us pray that it may be so.

STEPS TOWARD RENEWAL

In light of these dramatic shifts which will be occurring throughout the next century I want to suggest several “steps toward renewal” for our life and faith before God.

1. Let’s become ever more intentionally Godward in our orientation. Not self-oriented, not success-oriented, not church growth-oriented, not seeker-oriented, but God-oriented. May we be known as a passionate worshipping community—adoring God, lifting up Jesus, praying and preaching and offering up sacramental gifts to one another in the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. Let’s stop using a marketing approach to church life. The Church is *not* a vendor of religious goods and services but the Community of Faith, living in faith and through faith and by faith alone. We do not need to mimic the entertainment industry of our culture. We win people to Christ not by entertainment but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

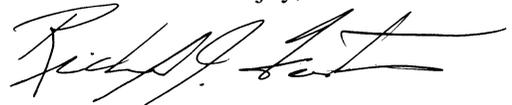
OUR FINANCIAL GUIDELINES

- 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. Let's become intentional about learning the "habits of the heart" for biblical holiness. We need daily spiritual disciplines rather than sporadic bursts of inspiration or enthusiasm. We need to provide the space, the time, and the resources for people to unlearn old patterns of sin and take on new patterns of "righteous and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17).
4. Let's quit using the strutting peacock CEO of contemporary culture as a model for Christian leadership. The work of Christian leaders is hard work, grimy work, humble work. Christ's disciples are the servants of all, and status seeking and privilege have no place among us.
5. Let's make certain that our Godward orientation is always for the sake of the world. The Church exists for the sake of the world—which at the very minimum means less stress on preserving our institutions and more stress on serving the poor.
6. Let's get rid of our god-awful "edifice complex." Buildings are not bad, but neither are they the sum total of everything important either. Let's use buildings to help and serve people and not as monuments to our own egos.
7. Let's engage in vigorous, culture-sensitive evangelism. All peoples need to hear the good news of Jesus and his love. They also need to be respected as persons. Under the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit we can do both.

Welcome to a new millennium!

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

P.S. In this brief, unobtrusive postscript we try to let you, our friends and supporters, know our financial needs. We see vast opportunities before us but they all need financial undergirding. A small group of "friends of RENOVARÉ" have joined together to set before us a \$30,000.00 matching challenge gift. Hence, every dollar you give to this ministry in the days ahead will be matched, thus doubling the good you do. Will you consider a generous, sacrificial gift to RENOVARÉ today? Thank you.

RJF

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