

# ***HEART-TO-HEART***

June 2000

A Pastoral Letter From Richard J. Foster



Dear Friends,

In the first year of the new century and millennium I have been writing to you on the issue of the **Reformation of the Heart** which focuses upon a vital, daily obedience to Jesus Christ as the result of transformed personality. The transformation of personality is essential, of course, otherwise we will lack the power, the moral habits, and the inclination to obey Christ in all things and at all times. There are many facets to such a transforming work, but from a human standpoint it always involves both affirming action (things we do) and abstaining action (things that we do not do). Over the years a large percentage of my writing and public discourse has worked on the affirmative side of this equation, and it is well that it should. But in this pastoral letter I want to work on some of the abstaining action we must undertake if we are to prepare ourselves for a Reformation of the Heart.

I am concerned that we think together about **the idols of our day**. Now, I know that this is not a feel-good topic, and yet if we do not clearly identify the reigning idols of contemporary culture we will forever be at their mercy and unable to obey the very first of the Ten Commandments, namely, “you shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3).

The idols of modern society are legion, and in this brief letter I must not even try to touch on them all. But I do want to think with you about three of the most pervasive in the hope that this will enable us to look at the world with a view to naming the many modern idols that vie for our allegiance. And once the reigning idolatries of our day are named (and thereby identified) we can, in the power of the Spirit, defeat them in the Name that is above every name, Jesus, the Christ.

## ***THE IDOL OF PERSONAL AUTONOMY***

For vast numbers today the ultimate goal in life is personal autonomy: the power to do my own thing, define my own future, determine my own fate. “I’ve gotta be me,” “I did it my way,” “watch out for number one,” “if it’s gonna be, it’s up to me” all characterize this idolatry. The driving impulse of this unholy trinity of Me, Myself, and I is freedom without responsibility. It spreads throughout the land by means of the numerous miniature, self-idols that people carry with them every day: self-indulgence, self-promotion, self-will, self-sufficiency, self-preservation, self-gratification, self-service, self-aggrandizement, self-righteousness, and more.

The idolatry of personal autonomy pervades our entire culture: from the New Age mumbo jumbo that “I am God” to the self-help books that assure me I can be and do anything and everything. (Which brings to mind a corrective jingle: “They showed him the thing that couldn’t be done,/ And with a smile he went right to it./ He tackled that thing that couldn’t be done./ And found out he couldn’t do it.”)

How very different the biblical and Christian vision of personality and self-hood. Here we are called to deny ourselves and take up our cross, to seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness, to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit” (Mark 8:34, Matt. 6:33, Phil. 2:3). Here we are called into a community life of mutual-love, mutual-care, and mutual-responsibility.

Our good friend and counselor, the Apostle Paul, puts it well, “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). Dietrich Bonhoeffer gives us a contemporary

commentary on this reality when he speaks of Christ as the “man for others,” the One in whom all deliberations, all decisions, all actions are based on relationship to others. And we are called to be “people for others,” to live in “existence for others through participation in the being of Jesus. The church is the church only when it exists for others.”

We defeat the idol of personal autonomy by **compassion** and **service**. Compassion turns us toward the good of others. Service allows us to enter the many little deaths of going beyond ourselves. Together they draw us into the gospel paradox of finding our life by losing it.

### ***THE IDOL OF PLEASURE***

Closely tied to the idol of personal autonomy is the idol of pleasure. Pleasure, of course, has to do with good feelings and there is nothing wrong with feeling good, but that has to be brought to an easy place in our life where it does not control us. Pleasure becomes an idolatry when it becomes an absolute right, demanded at all times and under all circumstances. “I want what I want when I want it” becomes its trumpet call.

In Western culture (strangely enough) pleasure is intimately connected with material possessions. The irrational belief of modern society is that masses of things will produce pleasure, and so the pleasure god and the consumer god are found to be two heads of the same idol. Our attachment to things fuels in us an endless appetite for more: more money, more power, more toys. More. More. More. We can never get enough. Never.

This lust for things has reached the level of psychosis in contemporary culture. It is psychotic because it has completely lost touch with reality. We crave things we neither need nor enjoy. “We buy things we do not want to impress people we do not like,” writes Art Gish. Where planned obsolescence leaves off, psychological obsolescence takes over. We are made to feel ashamed to wear clothes or drive cars until they are worn out. Our lust for affluence has convinced us that to be out of step with fashion is to be out of step with reality. It is time we awaken to the fact that conformity to a sick society is to be sick.

In large measure the pleasure impulse is linked to the consumer impulse because of our deep-seated feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. Surely a little more of this or a little more of that will give us the security we desire or the status we crave. But, of course, things can never deliver, because insecurity and inadequacy are matters of the heart and the soul, and we simply cannot cure the heart or the soul by an ever increasing accumulation of things.

We defeat the idol of pleasure by **sacrifice** and **simplicity**. Sacrifice empowers us to surrender our rights for the greater good of the kingdom of God. Simplicity ushers us into a way of living that is free from the passion to possess. Together they are able to dethrone pleasure and put it, along with material possessions, into proper perspective as simple goods to be enjoyed, never demanded.

### ***THE IDOL OF EFFICIENCY***

Of the three idols I am discussing with you I view efficiency as the most entrenched and pervasive of the modern era. And the most destructive. The engine driving this particular idolatry is modern technology. And the technological advances of recent years are impressive indeed: cell phones, laptop computers, the world wide web, palm pilots, and much, much more. And all these technological advances are aimed at our hankering after efficiency.

Please don't misunderstand. It is good to do our tasks in a timely fashion, and advances in technology have been extremely helpful in accomplishing many tasks. (I am, after all, composing this letter to you on a PC and you can even download this *Heart-to-Heart* from [www.renovare.org](http://www.renovare.org).) But we

have created our technological society at an enormous human cost. Jacques Ellul, perhaps the most astute contemporary observer of technique, efficiency, and technology, writes, “the technological society requires order and efficiency. Even people must be reduced to being only machines . . . in order to be treated technically by the hundreds of techniques which converge on them.”

This is the great danger of technology—and the reason it must be viewed as a contemporary idol. By its very nature it dehumanizes people, turning them into objects to be managed and controlled. In the end it signals the triumph of means over the end. All in the name of efficiency.

Also dangerous are the excessive, god-like claims made for technology. We’re told that, given time, technology will surely solve every problem, restore every loss, deliver every good. The claims for the Internet, for example, exceed all credibility—it is, in fact, the new utopian movement of contemporary culture.

Now, I admit, it is nice to travel along “the information super highway,” as we call it. But I would like to put in a word for “the information country lane.” The super highway does give us information by the ton, but that does not particularly translate into insight, discernment, or wisdom. In fact, the sheer volume of information often mitigates against insight, discernment, and wisdom. Sometimes, instead of zipping along an electronic super highway we need to meander through some of wisdom’s back roads, pausing now and then at a phrase from a John Milton (“They also serve who only stand and wait.”) or an Evelyn Underhill (“Being, not wanting, having and doing, is the essence of a spiritual life.”)

Then, too, instant accessibility is not always what we need. A day of quiet reflection is often far more productive than a constant bombardment of on-line services, e-mails, and faxes. If we want to be genuinely helpful to people, we need the perspective that can only come from solitude and silence.

Another caution I have about all this amazing technology—and it is truly amazing—is that its very amazingness can easily distract us from

## **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.

thinking. We can get so intrigued with the process of information communication that we miss the information, not to mention insights from the information. As a result many people never even ask the question of what information is worth communicating. Again, all in the name of efficiency.

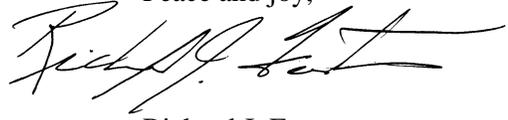
The kingdom of God, on the other hand, operates from a pattern exemplified by Jesus on the cross. From a human perspective the vision of life that Jesus gives us is one of inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and ultimately, irrelevance. After all, would an efficient kingdom welcome in strangers and seek out prodigals? How effective is it to preach good news to the poor or to search for one lost sheep? And would a relevant pastor really spend time listening to individual human pain and sorrow when mass media technologies that could reach multitudes await?

Friends, it is time to say, "No more!" No more time-saving technologies, no more revolutionary ways to prioritize our day, no more habits for highly effective people. Rather let us give sustained attention to life-giving relationships: relationship with God, relationship with other people, relationship with all of creation.

We defeat the idol of efficiency by **holy leisure** and **spiritual friendship**. Holy leisure tempers our everlasting itch to get ahead. Spiritual friendship helps us to value people for who they are rather than for what they accomplish. Together they dethrone efficiency and free us from "an intolerable scramble of panting feverishness."

Autonomy, pleasure, efficiency—these are the three unquestioned assumptions of our day. God give us the wisdom to see through their idolatrous tendencies *and* the strength to place them in their proper role as servants rather than masters.

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster

P.S. Special thanks to Lyle SmithGraybeal for his creative contribution to this issue of the *Heart-to-Heart*.

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June 2000



Dear Friends,

I hope the enclosed *Heart-to-Heart* pastoral letter will help you in thinking carefully and prayerfully about the idols of our day. Such work is truly necessary if we are to enter fully into the Reformation of the Heart.

I am taking the unusual step of writing you this cover letter because I want to make you aware of our **financial picture** as clearly as I can. Frankly, we need your help and we need it *now*. Without a generous response to this letter we will not be able to meet our payroll obligations to our office staff through the summer months. Like most non-profit ministries the summer is our most lean period and we always try to have reserves to take up the slack. This year, however, our reserves have been depleted through numerous ministry obligations and opportunities. This means that we enter the summer months with very little money in reserve. Right now I estimate we will be able to meet our day-to-day commitments only through July. To meet our obligations through September we will need \$50,000. This is why I say we need your help *now*.

Beyond the present need, we see exciting ministry opportunities for the days ahead. We have been meeting regularly and dreaming about the future—a future which potentially includes a major outreach work into Great Britain, expanding the RENOVARÉ Resource line of books, extending the RENOVARÉ message into video and audio, and much more. For now, we are still in a discernment process. You see, we never want to initiate anything on our own. We only want to go where God is sending us. We only want to do what we see the Father doing. We only want to speak when the Father gives us the word. So, for now, we are waiting and seeking divine guidance. And even in this your financial support is an enormous help, for the giving of God's people to this ministry is part of our discernment process.

I have always promised to let you know our financial picture in as straightforward a manner as possible without overstatement or exaggeration. I have tried my best to do that in this letter. You can be sure that RENOVARÉ is a lean operation and that every dollar spent is carefully monitored. For some people twenty-five dollars is a generous, even sacrificial gift. Others are able to give several thousands of dollars. In each case we thank God for you and for the sacrificial way you are helping us. We treat each gift, whether large or small, as monies that have been placed in sacred trust.

Will you help us? Thank you.

Peace and joy,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard J. Foster', written in a cursive style.

Richard J. Foster