

INTRODUCTION

Spiritual Formation:

The Way of the Heart

After many years of seeking to live a spiritual life, I still ask myself, "Where am I as a Christian?"—"How far have I advanced?"—"Do I love God more now than earlier in my life?"—"Have I matured in faith since I started on the spiritual path?" Honestly, I don't know the answers to these questions. There are just as many reasons for pessimism as for optimism. Many of the real struggles of twenty or forty years ago are still very much with me. I am still searching for inner peace, for creative relationships with others, and for a deeper experience of God. And I have no way of knowing if the small psychological and spiritual changes during the past decades have made me more or less a spiritual person.

In a society that overvalues progress, development, and personal achievement, the spiritual life becomes quite easily performance oriented: "On what level am I now, and how do I move to the next one?"—"When will I reach union with God?"—"When will I experience illumination or enlightenment?" Many great

saints have described their religious experiences, and many lesser saints have systematized them into different phases, levels, or stages. These distinctions may be helpful for those who write books for instruction, but it is of great importance that we leave the world of measurements behind when we speak about the life of the Spirit.

Spiritual formation, I have come to believe, is not about steps or stages on the way to perfection. It's about the *movements* from the mind to the heart through prayer in its many forms that reunite us with God, each other, and our truest selves.

The Russian mystic Theophan the Recluse wrote:

I will remind you of only one thing: one must descend with the mind into the heart, and there stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all seeing within you. Prayer takes a firm and steadfast hold, when a small fire begins to burn in the heart. Try not to quench this fire, and it will become established in such a way that the prayer repeats itself: and then you will have within you a small murmuring stream.¹

All through the centuries, this view of prayer has been central in the spiritual traditions. Prayer is standing in the presence of God with the mind in the heart—that is, in the point of our being where there are no divisions or distinctions and where we are totally one within ourselves, with God, and with others and the whole of creation. In the heart of God the Spirit dwells, and there the great encounter takes place. There, heart speaks to heart as we stand before the face of the Lord, ever present, all seeing, within us. And there, in the place of the heart, spiritual formation takes place.

FORMATION OF THE HEART

The word *heart* is used here in its full biblical meaning of that place where body, soul, and spirit come together as one. In our modern milieu *heart* has become a soft word. It might refer to just feelings or the seat of the sentimental life. We think of the heart as the warm place where our emotions are located, in contrast to the cool intellect, where our thoughts find their home. But the word *heart* in Jewish-Christian tradition refers to the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional, and moral energies. It is the seat of the will; it makes plans and comes to good decisions. Thus the heart is the central unifying organ of our personal life. Our heart determines our personality, and the place where God dwells, but also the place to which the Evil One directs fierce attacks, causing us to doubt, fear, despair, resent, overconsume, and so on. Thus to live the spiritual life and to let God's presence fill us takes constant prayer, and to move from our illusions and isolation back to that place in the heart where God continues to form us in the likeness of Christ takes time and attention.

I like the following story of the sculptor, which expresses in a simple but powerful way the importance of ongoing spiritual formation:

A little boy was watching a sculptor at work. For weeks this sculptor kept chipping away at a big block of marble. After a few weeks he had created a beautiful marble lion. The little boy was amazed and said: "Mister, how did you know there was a lion in the rock?"²

Long before he forms the marble, the sculptor must know the lion. The sculptor must know the lion "by heart" to see him in the rock. The secret of the sculptor is that what he knows by heart he can recognize in the marble. A sculptor who knows an angel by heart will see an angel in the marble; when the sculptor

knows God by heart he will see God in the marble. The sculptor certainly has to know the trade, because without skills and techniques the marble will not reveal the knowledge of the heart. But skills and techniques won't suffice unless the heart is formed by the right knowledge. The great question for the sculptor is, What do you know by heart?

The story of the boy and the sculptor helps us to see spiritual formation as formation of the heart. What is the value of well-trained and well-informed Christians and spiritual leaders when their hearts remain ignorant? What is the value of great theological erudition or great pastoral adeptness or intense but fleeting mystical experience or social activism when there is not a well-formed heart to guide a well-formed life?

Whether the knowledge of the mind leads to God or to despair depends on the heart. When the word of God remains a subject of analysis and discussion and does not descend into the heart, it can easily become an instrument of destruction instead of a guide to love. When our heart knows only evil or selfish thoughts it will evoke evil and selfishness, but when our heart is formed by the living word of God in Christ it will discern the face of God in all it sees. Theophan the Recluse also wrote:

When remembrance of God lives in the heart and there maintains the fear of Him, then all goes well; but when this remembrance grows weak or is kept only in the head, then all goes astray.³

When only our mind "sees" and our heart remains blind, we remain spiritually ignorant. Therefore, spiritual formation calls for the ongoing discipline of descending from the mind into the heart so real knowledge and wisdom can be found.

THE INWARD JOURNEY TO THE HEART

Spiritual formation requires taking an inward journey to the heart. Although this journey takes place in community and leads to service, the first task is to look within, reflect on our daily life, and seek God and God's activity right there. People who dare to look inward are faced with a new and often dramatic challenge: they must come to terms with the inner *mysterium tremendum*—the overwhelming nature of the inner life.⁴ Since the God "out there" or "up there" gets dissolved into the many social structures and theological constructions, the God within asks attention with a powerful force. And just as the God outside ourselves can be experienced not only as good and loving but as wrathful and demonic, the God within can be not only a creative source of a new life but also the destructive cause of chaos and confusion. That's why the greatest complaint of the mystics, like Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, was that they lacked spiritual guides to lead them along the right paths and enable them to distinguish between creative and destructive spirits. We hardly need to emphasize how dangerous experimentation with the interior life can be. Drugs as well as different concentration practices and withdrawal into the self often do more harm than good. On the other hand, it is becoming obvious that those who avoid the painful encounter with the unseen are doomed to live supercilious, boring, and superficial lives.

The first and most basic task of the one who takes the inward journey of the heart is to clarify the immense confusion that can arise when people enter into this new internal world. It is painful indeed to realize how poorly prepared we may be to walk this inner terrain. Most Christian leaders are used to thinking in terms of large-scale organization: getting people together in congregations, schools, and hospitals, and running the show as a circus director. They have become unfamiliar with, and even somewhat afraid of, the deep and significant movements of the

Spirit within. I am afraid that in a few decades the Church will be accused of having failed at its most basic task: to offer people creative ways to communicate with the divine source of human life.

But how can we avoid this danger? I think by no other way than to enter the heart, the center of our existence, and become familiar with the complexities of our inner lives. As soon as we feel at home in our own house—discover the dark corners as well as the light spots, the closed doors as well as the drafty rooms—our confusion will evaporate, our anxiety will diminish, and we will become capable of creative work and a spiritually informed life.

The key work here is articulation. People who can identify and articulate the movements of their inner lives, who can give names to their varied experiences, need no longer be victims of themselves but are able slowly and consistently to remove the obstacles that prevent the Spirit from entering. They can create space for the One whose heart is greater than theirs, whose eyes see more than theirs, and whose hands can heal and form more than theirs.⁵

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

What about the most central of all relationships—our relationship with God? Can that ultimate, unseen, and unproven reality be a source of guidance and formation? Is God really present and interested in the outcome of my individual life? That is the question many people are asking today, as they have through the centuries. Today many churches, seminaries, and theological schools are beginning to understand that spiritual formation is an essential part of their educational program. For many, spirituality has seemed too personal, too private, and too elusive to be considered a serious area of study and training. Yet it might well be that, like

clinical pastoral education in the 1950s and '60s, spiritual formation and spiritual direction are necessary correctives in theological education and formation in our new century.

Anyone who takes the spiritual life seriously and wants to enter more deeply into the encounter with God realizes immediately the need for formation and direction. Taking this inward journey demands looking at the movements of the heart with all its polarities, but taken in a time- and tradition-honored way. Just as we wouldn't set out on a long physical journey without planning for periods of rest and refreshment and checking our maps and directions, we can't expect to be formed in faith without committing to living a spiritual life with regular spiritual disciplines or practices.

Prayer and meditation—the central ways to develop the spiritual life—cannot be left to free-floating experimentation. The many new movements of our days are ample proof of how dangerous undirected experimentation with spiritual powers can be. When there is no one to help distinguish between the Spirit of God and the many ungodly spirits that haunt our souls, entering this precarious area might do more harm than good.

Although many people will agree with the need for spiritual formation, the question of its actual application remains for most people very difficult to answer. It is clear from the numerous "schools" in the history of Western Christian spirituality—schools represented by figures such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Benedict of Nursia, Francis of Assisi, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Ávila, Ignatius of Loyola, John Wesley, George Fox, Thomas Merton, and Brother Roger and the Brothers of Taizé—that there are many methods of spiritual formation. But it is possible to discover, underneath this great variety, a few practices that can be isolated as guides for all those who are concerned with their own and other people's spiritual growth. I will focus here on five practices that seem of special importance: *reflection* on the living documents of our own hearts and times, *lectio divina*, *silence*, *com-*

munity, and *service*. Practiced together, especially with a spiritual director and community of faith, these areas of discipline help fashion our hearts for God.