

## Introduction

John Westerhoff has described our time as one where people relate to God in two kinds of experiences: the pietistic and the mystic. The pietistic is characterized by an immediate, affective religious experience that typically comes in the form of a single, emotional conversion event. Born-Again Christians and the Promise Keepers are representative of this religious experience. The mystic, by contrast, stresses a long, slow journey into a union with God through spiritual exercises. Flourishing spiritual formation programs, a renewed interest in classical spiritual writers, centering prayer, spiritual direction, the success of books that detail the spiritual pilgrimage such as those by Kathleen Norris, all point to the popularity of the mystic way in our times.

This issue of *New Theology Review* seeks to explore the content and contexts of our contemporary search of the mystic through the theme of Spiritual Formation. As Bruce H. Lescher demonstrates in his article, “spiritual formation” is a slippery term to grasp. That is why his overview of the literature of spiritual formation makes a valuable contribution to the topic. Lescher provides a working definition that helps us connect faith with our daily lives. He also wisely challenges the simplistic separation some make of spirituality from religion.

That separation has been emphasized throughout literature. Emily Dickinson found God not in a church building and service but in her own private world of nature:

Some keep the Sabbath going to church;  
I keep it staying at home,  
With a bobolink for a chorister,  
And an orchard for a dome.

Robert D. Duggan, pastor of St. Rose of Lima Church in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., demonstrates just how foolish it is to make the simplistic separation between spirituality and religion. Duggan’s reflection shows how spiritual formation occurs or can occur in a Roman Catholic parish. His article provides readers with an exciting and practical blueprint for relating to God and one another in spiritual formation within the context of an ecclesial community.

In her article, Elizabeth A. Dreyer leads us through the historical spiritual traditions to help us understand that spiritual formation takes a lifetime: “one grows in one’s ability to recognize and respond to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit.” Her interpretation of the Spirit’s presence and activity helps us to understand that the process

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of spiritual formation leads to ever greater trust in God's love and an engagement in loving service to others.

Another context for spiritual formation is a school for ministry. In the past few decades courses in theological reflection have emerged which help students find connections between their ministerial experiences and their theological studies. Kathleen T. Talvacchia draws upon her experience in theological reflection at Union Theological Seminary in New York City to show how we can relate to God experientially in the theological tradition.

J. Michael Utzinger offers our readers a touching and enlightening example of theological reflection. His case comes not from a textbook but from the news he and his wife received that their first child had died.

Our November issue of *NTR* does not contain the usual column *Getting Down to Cases* since two thought-provoking cases are provided in the articles by Talvacchia and Utzinger. We hope the featured articles on Spiritual Formation plus our regular columns and book reviews will prove intellectually and pastorally helpful in your on-going journey with the Spirit.

R.W.