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Forming a People of the Spirit: What Are They Saying about Spiritual Formation?

Let's say it's fifty years ago—1948. Let's say you are a thirty-something parishioner at St. Mary's, an Irish parish in Chicago. This is the church of your grandparents and parents and will be that of your children. You go to Mass each Sunday, attend devotions to Our Lady of Perpetual Help on Tuesday evenings, say your Rosary before falling asleep. You scrap and save to send your children to the parish school. You help decorate the hall for the St. Patrick's Day dance each March 17, volunteer to work at the parish's annual summer bazaar, borrow funds from St. Mary's credit union to make a down payment on your home. You don't eat meat on Fridays; you fast and abstain each Lent. On several levels, your life is intertwined with the parish. You probably never hear the word "spirituality," but you certainly know what is expected of you as a Catholic.

But it's not 1948—it's 1998. You are a thirty-something parishioner at St. Mary's in Chicago. You moved here last year from Newark when your company transferred you. A typical Sunday finds a mixture of folk in the congregation: descendants of the old-time Irish families, Mexican-Americans, who began to move into the parish in the early 1980s, and, the newest arrivals, some young professionals drawn to the renovated lofts in the neighborhood. You get to Mass when you can but feel much closer to the members of your Adult Children of Alcoholics group than to anyone in the parish. A friend in ACOA has invited you to attend services at her nondenominational Church of the Living Word, with its new three thousand-seat worship space. You found those services speaking to you. You're taking an evening course in yoga at a local hospital, and last year you purchased a video introducing Zen meditation. You and your friends sometimes discuss "spirituality," and you are convinced that you are on a spiritual journey, but you are less clear on how St. Mary's fits in.

WHAT IS "SPIRITUAL FORMATION"?

Ministers develop new insights, plans, and programs as they listen to people and respond pastorally to changing contexts. Programs in "spiritual formation" constitute one pastoral response to the changed

contexts in the hypothetical situations just described. The fragmented, uprooted nature of contemporary society has given rise to a widespread sense of spiritual emptiness; this emptiness in turn fuels interest in “spirituality”; “spiritual formation” represents one way for ministers to respond to the hunger for “spirituality.” Yet “spiritual formation” is one of those terms, like “ministry” or “spirituality,” that can get slippery when one tries to define it.

A survey of the literature on spiritual formation reveals a wide diversity of perspectives. For example, the CD-Rom containing the Catholic Periodical Index lists 366 entries under this title, and the CD-Rom containing Religion Index One (which indexes Protestant publications) contains 648 entries. Many of these articles discuss “spiritual formation” without attempting to define it, apparently assuming that its meaning is self-evident. Those which offer definitions do so under a variety of rubrics: spiritual formation is alternately seen as character development, faith formation, a school of discipleship, an education in the spiritual classics of western Christianity.

For the sake of clarity, then, the following definition is proposed: Christian spiritual formation is a process of personal and spiritual maturation in which a person appropriates the image of Christ for the sake of others under the guidance of the Spirit mediated through an ecclesial community. This definition builds upon one offered by M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. (1993: 15–17). The last section of this article will provide an opportunity to return to this definition to clarify some points for further discussion.

THE CONTEXTS OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

“Spiritual formation” is not a univocal term which carries the same meaning in different environments. Rather, the context profoundly affects the perspective on spiritual formation which persons in that context take. “Spiritual formation” is likely to be understood differently in a novitiate, where novices are seeking to appropriate a community’s charism; a university divinity school, where persons from different denominations train for ministry; and a local parish, where parishioners seek to deepen their prayer lives in the midst of an increasingly hectic world. For the sake of simplification, the basic contexts of formation are here reduced to four: religious life, schools of ministry, spirituality programs, and local churches. Where applicable, these will be discussed with references to both Catholic and Protestant authors. This approach has no polemic intent, as if to point out differences between camps and claim that one is superior to the other. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that theological positions and church polity profoundly affect our efforts to appropriate the wisdom of the past.

A considerable percentage of Catholic writing about spiritual formation concerns the religious life. Religious congregations have always trained their members in the theories and practices of their traditions, although they more often use the vocabulary of “initial” and “ongoing” formation. During initial formation new members are introduced to an order’s charism, its customs and regulations, and those disciplines and practices conducive to growth in holiness. Ongoing formation, as the term implies, concerns the continuous process of conversion and renewal for all members. Religious communities provide perhaps the most obvious setting for spiritual formation. Persons who join a community consciously undergo a change of identity, leaving behind a “self” formed by their family and society in order to put on a new “self” rooted in the charism and traditions of the community. This change of identity, paradigmatic of the conversion process, necessitates some clarity about the goals and processes of formation. Thus, in the context of religious life, spiritual formation tends to be clearly spelled out.

Schools of ministry provide a second context for discussion of spiritual formation. In both Catholic and Protestant schools, classes and programs dealing with spirituality and spiritual formation have proliferated.

Catholic seminaries trace their roots back to the reforms of the Council of Trent. Since that reform the Church has emphasized that candidates for the priesthood should cultivate prayer and other spiritual disciplines apropos to a life of ministry. Priests were expected to be holy men as well as competent ministers. This concern for spiritual formation continues in the 1994 *Program of Priestly Formation*, the document of the U.S. bishops which governs seminaries. The bishops state:

Every seminary must provide a milieu of human and spiritual formation in which seminarians are encouraged to grow continuously and progressively in their personal relationship with Christ and in their commitment to the Church and to their vocation. A well-rounded and effective program of spiritual formation presumes and builds upon continuing theological and personal growth and character development consistent with a priestly vocation (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1993: 51).

Protestant seminaries face different issues. Language of “spiritual formation” is foreign to most Protestant denominations, whose members would more likely speak of “piety.” In recent years, however, many Protestants have taken a deep interest in the traditions of Christian spirituality. Baptists Dan R. Stiver and Daniel O. Aleshire, for example, comment:

Despite Protestant fears about all forms of works righteousness, an increasing number [of Protestant Christians] have discovered the necessity of disciplines that nourish the spiritual life. Glenn Hinson has suggested that it is time for us to be honest about the spiritual impoverishment of much of the Protestant tradition and, while clinging to what is good, also seek a corrective (1990: 28).

Thus many Protestant seminaries have begun classes or programs in spiritual formation. Even the Association of Theological Schools, the accrediting agency for schools of ministry, states that programs oriented toward ministerial leadership “provide opportunities for formational experiences through which students may grow in those personal qualities essential for the practice of ministry, namely, emotional maturity, personal faith, moral integrity, and social concern” (*Bulletin*, 1996: 42).

All schools of ministry, Catholic, Protestant, and those affiliated with universities, have experienced at least two significant shifts in their student population. First, candidates for ordination are generally less “churched” now than they were in the past. Many ministerial candidates come to seminary as spiritual seekers looking for meaning rather than persons whose faith is settled and who enter the ministry to share that faith with others (see Cunningham and Weborg). Seminary faculties can no longer assume that students have interiorized their denomination’s symbol system and spiritual practices.

Hence schools provide classes and pastoral training for disciplines, such as communal and personal prayer, that were once taken for granted. Second, the number of lay students, both women and men, has risen dramatically. What sort of spiritual formation is appropriate for these new lay ministers? Traditional spiritual disciplines often arose out of a celibate, monastic lifestyle. What spiritual practices are appropriate to a person whose commitments include marriage and children rather than celibacy and whose creativity is expressed in the world of work outside a monastic cloister? Lay spirituality ought to be honored in its own right rather than being a watered-down version of the spirituality of the contemplative or active religious life. A great deal of work remains to be done in achieving this goal, as the questions posed by lay seminary students are relatively new in the experience of the churches.

Spiritual programs, admittedly a catch-all term, constitute a third context in which spiritual formation occurs. These may be free-standing or sponsored by an ecclesial body. Some are residential while others are designed around people’s everyday lives. Programs provide a structure in which persons receive instruction and/or supervision in spiritual disciplines. Two examples provide a flavor of such approaches.

The United Methodist Church sponsors the Academy for Spiritual Formation, designed primarily for the renewal of persons in active ministry. The academy is a live-in program, removing participants from their normal daily routine so that they can re-evaluate their spirituality. The program is based upon three key elements: a regular schedule of prayer and worship, presentations on various aspects of theology and spirituality by an ecumenical faculty, and a communal life built around covenant groups. The program lasts forty days and is spread over two years; participants have assignments to do in between the residential segments (Clapper, 1991). Lay Spirits, an eighteen-month program sponsored by St. Francis Xavier Church in New York City, represents another approach. This program is not residential and assumes that people will continue participating in their day-to-day activities. Participants are broken into small groups which meet weekly for three hours. Elements of the program include presentations (sometimes by former participants), communal prayer, group meetings, optional spiritual direction, days of prayer, and an annual conference (Piccolino, 1992). These two examples are hardly exhaustive, but they do give a sense of how a spirituality program can be structured. Other programs provide variations on the components presented here.

Local churches provide a fourth and final context for spiritual formation. This context will not be examined at length here because it is the subject of another article in this issue; nonetheless, a few basic comments are in order. Christians in the first three centuries expected spiritual formation to occur through their involvement in their local church. In particular, the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist would nurture the Christ-life in believers. Throughout the centuries Catholic piety began to shift its focus from the sacraments to popular devotions. Vatican Council II sought to revive the patristic vision, as seen, for example, in the new Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and in the reforms of the liturgy and the *Sacramentary*. By and large, this vision of formation through liturgy, word, and sacrament has not yet taken root at the parish level. Thomas P. Sweetser, for example, observes: "Spiritual growth should be the essence of parish life. Should be but isn't. It takes a back seat to building projects, competition for limited finances, space, resources, personality conflicts among staff, council, ministries, and organizations" (1992: 5). Protestant authors, as well, are exploring the formative dimensions of corporate worship, both in ritual and in the singing of hymns. Stephen C. Hancock argues that "corporate worship is an essential element in the formation of personal spirituality" (1992: 115). Local churches, both Catholic and Protestant, can foster spiritual formation through classes, prayer groups, Bible study, resources for spiritual direction, opportunities for service, and most of all through preaching and worship.

COMMON ELEMENTS

Because “spiritual formation” is defined in a variety of ways and carried out in a diversity of contexts, the term is plagued with vagueness and diffusion. Nonetheless, some agreement about the elements which go into a program of spiritual formation undergirds the diversity of ways in which those elements are manifested at the programmatic level. Most programs include instructional content, some experience of spiritual disciplines, accountability to a group, and service.

Instructional content addresses people’s desire to know more about integrating spirituality into their lives. Instruction runs the gamut from formal classroom (as would be likely in a school of ministry) to workshops to presentations and discussions in informal settings. Many programs draw upon a variety of presenters, each speaking on a topic related to his or her competence, rather than relying on one or two experts. Input can cover a variety of topics: the implications of dogmas for spirituality, the spiritual teachings of world religions, explanations of the spiritual practices recommended in a given program. The literature on these programs indicates widespread interest in the writings of some of the great figures in Christian spirituality, e.g., Bonaventure, Julian of Norwich, Ignatius of Loyola, Thérèse of Lisieux. Holistic integration is another recurring theme: how to integrate the various elements comprising a program of spiritual formation into one’s daily life.

Spiritual practices comprise a second facet of many programs. Participants are introduced to various styles of prayer: traditional methods of mental prayer using one’s rational powers, centering, praying with one’s imagination, eastern styles of meditation. Spiritual reading, based on the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, is widely advised. Practices encouraging reflection on one’s experience are also popular. Journaling and spiritual direction (either individual or group) are two of the most frequently mentioned. This concern for experiential practice reflects a hunger for holistic knowledge, for the integration of theory and practice, for a way of knowing that becomes embodied and is not only a “head trip.”

Most programs also require that participants be accountable to a group. In a parish setting the group may well be the worship community. In many programs, including those based in parishes, participants are divided into small groups so that they can reach levels of sharing not possible in a large group. Michael I.N. Dash, in describing the spiritual formation program at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, speaks of “small group processes in which members developed in-depth relatedness, care for one another, trust, willingness to share. . . .” (1992/1993: 61). Such processes, when done well, inevitably enrich spiritual development. In addition, participants

become resources for one another and do not rely solely on the staff or speakers for enrichment.

Finally, many formation programs include a dimension of service. Both Catholic and Protestant authors recognize the tendency (widespread in North America) of spirituality to become privatized. In post-modern culture spirituality can be taken over by consumerism. The spiritual seeker becomes a consumer of spiritual goods, seeking those which meet his or her needs. As a guard against this tendency toward privatization, many programs of Christian spiritual formation include a service component. Participants are expected to embody their spiritual integration by serving others, especially the poor or those who are "other" or "different" from one's everyday world. Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:20). The Christian spiritual tradition has always affirmed that the test of a spirituality is how one lives out one's commitments to others. This wisdom is acknowledged across a diversity of programs.

TWO BASIC ISSUES

As ministers ponder the role of spiritual formation in the lives of those they serve, they may wish to clarify their stance on two questions implicit in much of the literature on spiritual formation.

First, what is the connection between spiritual formation and ecclesial communities? On the surface this may appear to be an odd question, but it is nonetheless very real. Increasingly, contemporary writers at the popular and even the academic level make a distinction between "spirituality" and "religion." "Spirituality" focuses upon peoples' inner spiritual search, whereas "religion" concerns institutions: dogmas, cult, polity, buildings. The inner quest is life-giving, but institutions, by and large, become self-serving and stifle growth. Comments like this become increasingly common: "I've never felt more spiritually alive, but I have stopped going to church."

Undoubtedly, persons who hold such views must be met with pastoral sensitivity. Many people have been injured and stunted as a result of bad experiences with organized religion. And churches have, at times, supported ideas, policies, or actions which foster racism, sexism, and homophobia. Nonetheless, the separation of "spirituality" from "religion" runs the danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water. The Christian tradition affirms the harmony of inner and outer, of personal search and ecclesial community. Polarizing these also opens spirituality to privatization and commercialization, since the seeker without a community of accountability is likely to become a consumer of spiritual goods. Incorporating the voices of those who have been hurt and alienated into the Christian community remains a daunting challenge, but one that is well worth the effort.

To return to the definition proffered at the beginning of this article: Christian spiritual formation is a process in which a person appropriates the image of Christ for the sake of others under the guidance of the Spirit mediated through an ecclesial community. Private spiritual formation is an anomaly.

The second question: assuming that Christian spiritual formation is connected to an ecclesial community, what is the place of spiritual formation in the life of a church? Is it a program which takes its place beside other programs, such as youth ministry, religious education, and liturgical planning? Or is it central to the identity of a church, so that other forms of ministry flow from it? Evangelical Protestants in particular render a service to all churches by raising this question. John M. Dettoni, for example, argues that

. . . the nurturing process of transformation lies at the very heart of the church's ministry. The programs of the church are outgrowths of this singular ministry, rooted and grounded in what the church is called to be: a nurturing, disciplining, equipping, renewing, and compassionate ministry of Christ in this world (1994: 13).

This approach echoes Sweetser's comment (quoted earlier) that "spiritual growth should be the essence of parish life."

This vision of "the nurturing process of transformation" as "the essence of parish life" places spiritual formation at the center of Christian ministry. Formation is not another church program; rather, a parish's programs are the outgrowth of the commitment of its members, all of whom are involved in a process of spiritual growth.

CONCLUSION

The term "spiritual formation" is occurring with greater frequency in books and articles dealing with Christian ministry. This article provided an overview of the literature of spiritual formation by looking at both the contexts and contents of formation programs. The contexts include religious life, schools of ministry, spirituality programs, and local churches. Common elements include instructional content, an experience of spiritual disciplines, group accountability, and service. This overview also surfaced two fundamental questions relevant to any minister who is interested in beginning a spiritual formation program: what is the connection between spiritual formation and the ecclesial community, and what is the place of such formation in the life of a church?

It's 1998. You are on the staff of St. Mary's in Chicago, an ethnically diverse congregation. Though bothered by the vagueness of such buzz words as "spirituality" and "spiritual formation," you know that your

parishioners are intensely interested in connecting their faith with their daily lives. You are especially concerned about those thirty-something professionals who speak to you of their desire for a deeper spiritual life. This article is written to encourage you to begin a program of spiritual formation. You've got a lot to think about as you do so, but you also have the experience and wisdom of many churches, schools, and freestanding organizations upon which to draw. You don't have to reinvent the wheel. You stand in the tradition of ministers down through the centuries, ministers focused upon the "cure of souls." You foster the formation of your people as a people of the Spirit.

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