

TOTALLY FIRE . . . WHY NOT?

By Jerry Flora*

One Person: The Reality

Her name was Alberta, and I called her my mystic. At ninety years of age she was attractive, bright, and vital. She spoke to the audience gathered from many miles to hear her for what would likely be the last time. When she had settled into the chair provided for her and gotten acquainted with the microphone, she began to talk in her still-rich, mellow voice.

She declared the ancient Christian truth that God is love and where love is, there God dwells. She spoke of life, reality, and mystery. She hinted at eternity, infinity, and mystery. She knew Christ, his Spirit, and Mystery. She had walked so far into the light that we knew none of us there could catch her. As she spoke it was with the authority and conviction of one who has peered into another world.

The Bible, the hymnal, the saints, the sacraments--they were her friends. In her home was a room dedicated to her work of prayer, filled with aids to prayer and mementos of teachers, colleagues, and pupils in prayer. Glenn Clark, Gerald Heard, E.

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Stanley Jones, Albert E. Day, Frank Laubach--she knew them, studied under them, or worked alongside them.

She was in love with Jesus Christ, filled with his Spirit, burning with the mystery that is God. She had served, suffered, and sung, and laughter or an open smile often lighted her face. She was on fire, quietly blazing with the light of eternal day.

When her talk concluded and the audience began to disperse, she asked for two women--both seminarians--to be brought to her. She had never met them, but something in their attention drew her to them. Quietly, unobtrusively she laid her hands on them, blessed them, and sent them away filled with awe.

I am writing this a year after her death, which occurred a few days before her ninety-second birthday. Those who knew her speak quietly of the wonder that was this woman. She was consumed with the reality that is God, the mysterium tremendum et fascinans. She was totally fire.

Alberta was one model of a Christian who has been spiritually formed. In the ten or twelve years that I knew her we saw each other only six or eight times. We corresponded fitfully and conversed by telephone on rare occasions. But the note of authenticity in her was unmistakable; the reality of God in her was undeniable. She was an athlete of the spirit, and I am a different,

better Christian for knowing her.

What is it that produces such a powerful individual? What forms, re-forms, and transforms followers of Christ like this? Spirituality is a hot topic in the closing years of this millennium. The marketplace of ideas and products is filled with a plethora of possibilities. Christian spirituality has become a major concern in churches and seminaries across the United States. Pastors and professors alike are seeking ways to know God for themselves, to experience and nurture ultimate reality as it is in Jesus Christ, and to lead colleagues and congregations to vital Christian living in a post-Christian world.

One Decade: The Resources

There is no single way to think about spirituality or spiritual formation. What has emerged as a congeries of concerns in the 'nineties brings with it a variety of conceptions as well. Let us take a quick look at some descriptions of spiritual formation that have surfaced in the past decade. This brief review only scratches the surface of the mass that remains below, but these soundings give an idea of what is being discovered.

In 1984 Susan A. Muto's Pathways of Spiritual Living was released. Author or co-author of twenty books on Christian faith and life, Dr. Muto is an acknowledged leader

in the field of spiritual formation, especially through study of devotional classics. "Though salvation is ours," she writes, "though forgiveness is ours, the reality of our fallen condition means that the quest for holiness lasts a lifetime" (Muto, 1984, 28). That is one excellent way of describing spiritual formation--the quest for holiness. This little book is an extended discussion of spiritual formation through the time-honored practice of lectio divina or sacred reading. As Dr. Muto develops it, the pathway to spiritual living includes solitude, silence, reading, journaling, meditation, prayer, contemplation, and serving God in the world. Her 190 pages provide meat for many miles. 1995 should see a new edition of one of her most acclaimed books: A Practical Guide to Spiritual Reading.

Calvin Miller is a popular name in some reading circles, especially well known for his Singer Trilogy. 1984 saw the release of his small work The Table of Inwardness, a book on "nurturing our inner life in Christ." This work is especially notable for its beauty of style and the breadth of its coverage. Chapter 1 alone contains references to Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Brother Lawrence, Malcolm Muggeridge, and Mother Teresa. Here is a conservative Protestant who casts his net widely.

Jerry R. Flora and Mary Ellen Drushal

of Ashland Seminary prepared a leader's guide for using The Table of Inwardness in church classes. That guide, Spiritual Formation: A Personal Walk to Emmaus (1990), opens with this definition: "Spiritual formation is the deliberate process of learning to love God completely; learning to conform ourselves to the image of Christ; and learning to walk in the Spirit, thus learning together to be friends of God" (Flora and Drushal, 1990, 3, altered). Here are elements of process, learning, deliberateness (both volitional and slow-paced), trinitarian orientation, and corporate experience.

Asbury Theological Seminary was the first Protestant divinity school to establish a department of spiritual formation (originally called the department of prayer). It was headed for a number of years by Steven Harper who now works with Shepherd's Care, "a ministry to ministers." Dr. Harper edited a series of class study guides on spiritual formation prepared by the Asbury faculty. In his foreword to the series he offers this description: "Spiritual formation blends the best of traditional discipleship concepts with the more reflective disciplines of an individual journey toward friendship with God. It is a lifestyle, not a program, a relationship rather than a system, a journey instead of a roadmap. It calls us into holy partnership with God for our spiritual development"

(Harper, 1987, 7). Each phrase in this excellent description deserves the most careful pondering.

Howard L. Rice, chaplain and professor at San Francisco Theological Seminary, has written Reformed Spirituality, which includes a commendatory foreword by Morton Kelsey, formerly on the faculty of Notre Dame University, an Episcopal priest reared in the Reformed tradition. Kelsey wonders why the riches of Reformed spirituality have been hidden or lost to so many for so long. Dr. Rice has rightly shown the way to recovering this treasure. The quantity and quality of his bibliography show that this is no soft-headed area when it comes to academia.

W. Paul Jones divides his year equally: for six months he is Professor of Philosophical Theology at a United Methodist seminary, and in the other half he is a Family Brother of the Trappist Order. This social activist father of five published The Province Beyond the River in 1981 to chronicle his experience as a Protestant in a Catholic monastery. In his 1992 work Trumpet at Full Moon, Dr. Jones conceives of spirituality and theology as two sides of a single coin: spirituality means living one's theology; theologizing, in turn, means articulating into self-consciousness one's spirituality (Jones, 1992, 8). His book, "an introduction to Christian spirituality as diverse practice," points consistently to

the rich resources available in Scripture, history, theology, literature, music, liturgy, and art.

Lutheran author Bradley P. Holt has recently given us an excellent survey in Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality. Here may be the ideal brief text for personal study and for class use. Professor of Religion at Augsburg College in Minneapolis and a former theological educator in Nigeria, Holt has prepared 150 pages packed with helpfulness. For him, Christian spirituality "refers in the first place to lived experience"; that is, "a particular style of Christian discipleship" lived out in the context of the community which is the body of Christ. Second, it is what might be termed "spiritual theology," an academic discipline alongside doctrinal or systematic theology (Holt, 1991, 6-7). Each chapter of Holt text concludes with discussion questions, exercises in spiritual disciplines, and suggested readings. This outstanding little book deserves to be within arm's reach of every alert pastor and Christian worker.

One of the best-known names in spiritual formation for the past fifteen years has been that of Richard J. Foster, who has recently moved to California where he heads Renovare, a new organization intending to highlight the best in five spiritual movements. His colleague James Bryan Smith has published A Spiritual

Formation Workbook in which he associates these five traditions with aspects of the life of Christ: (1) compassion for others--the social justice movement; (2) scriptural and evangelistic--the evangelical movement; (3) devotion to God--the contemplative movement; (4) virtue in all of life--the holiness movement; and (5) Spirit empowered--the charismatic movement (Smith, 1993, 16). Here is a reminder that true spiritual formation tends to broaden our awareness of Christ and his people. We discover kinships across what were thought to be forbidden zones or even enemy territory.

Invitation to a Journey is the title of a recent introduction by M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., provost and a New Testament professor at Asbury Theological Seminary. Known for both exegetical competence and concern for spiritual formation, Mulholland has produced an engaging text that moves from the nature of spiritual formation through personality, piety, and personal disciplines to corporate and social spirituality. He uses a fourfold definition: Spiritual formation is "(1) a process (2) of being conformed (3) to the image of Christ (4) for the sake of others" (Mulholland, 1993, 15). Along the way he anchors his discussion in the best of Scripture study, psychological discoveries, and the classic traditions of how Christians grow.

A final example of recent discussion is

The Upward Call, a work jointly authored by four leaders in the Church of the Nazarene. This book by and for believers in the Wesleyan-holiness tradition defines its subject as follows: Spiritual formation is "the whole person in relationship with God, within the community of believers, growing in Christ-likeness, reflected in a Spirit-directed, disciplined lifestyle, and demonstrated in redemptive action in our world" (Tracy et al, 1994, 12). Prepared for church study classes, The Upward Call discusses the path, resources for the journey, companions on the way, and how to serve others on the journey.

With such imagery as the pathway, the table, the thirst, and the call these writers of the last decade try to describe and interpret our human experience of interacting with God. This is focused for us in Jesus Christ our Lord who is both source, content, and goal. In spiritual formation we intend to nurture our relationship with God through him. We "are seriously committed to disciplines and practices required for growing in the mind and spirit of Christ" (Day, 1988, 184). We participate by the gift and power of his Holy Spirit on the basis of Holy Scripture in the community of the Holy Church. All this is both individual and corporate, theoretical and experiential, forming and being transformed. We engage in it for the glory of God, the good of our neighbors, and

the fulfillment of our own creation.

This quest for holiness, this call to commitment, is as old as the Christian movement. In the desert of fourth-century Egypt lived a famous spiritual guide, Abba Joseph. Believers sought him out for discernment and words of wisdom to direct their lives. On one occasion a visitor said, "Abba Joseph, I say my daily prayers, I fast, I meditate, I live in peace, and I discipline my thoughts as best I can. What more can I do?"

According to the story, Abba Joseph stood up, stretched his hands toward heaven, and his fingers became ten flaming torches. He said to his visitor, "Why not become totally fire?" (Ward, 1984, 103, paraphrased).

Both world and church today are desperate for leaders who will pay the price of such transformation. Alberta was one who did, and lived a remarkable life of example, instruction, and intercession. She modeled the reality; the writers above mention the resources. The rest is up to us.

Totally fire . . . why not?

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