

What is Spiritual Formation?

My children, I am again in the pain of childbirth, until Christ is formed in you...

— Galatians 4: 19

For God beholds with his merciful eyes not what you are, nor what you have been — but what you would be.

— The Cloud of Unknowing

In the writings of the Christian mystics we find several exciting ideas about humanity; ideas about our place in the cosmos and our relationship to the loving Spirit who created us. Spiritual formation is a process by which we allow the implications of these proclamations to become manifest in our lives. In doing so, we are formed — or perhaps, reformed — into the very image and likeness of God. Since “God is love” (I John 4:16), we could also say that the project of Christian mysticism (and, therefore, spiritual formation) is to become transformed into the image and likeness of Divine Love. In doing so, as the author of I John goes on to say, “the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”

Here are a few ideas that can help us to explore the mystery of spiritual formation:

1. We have been formed by the Spirit of God: “you sent forth your Spirit, and it formed them.” (Judith 16:14)
2. We are engaged in the process of having Christ formed in us by the Holy Spirit: “until Christ is formed in you.” (Galatians 4:19)

This first idea declares who we are. The second affirms who we are becoming. Spiritual formation dances in the tension of being and becoming: being absolutely and unconditionally loved by God, and becoming the full radiance of beautiful spirits God has called us to be.

Who we are...

We human beings have been formed by the radiant spirit of the Most High — therefore, we are the children of resplendent love; we the sons and daughters of light (I Thessalonians 5:5). God is not some otherworldly force uninterested in our lives, but rather is a continual source of intimate love, which is why Christ encouraged us to address God as “daddy” and several great mystics like Julian of Norwich point out that “mommy” works too. God is our loving parent, utterly in love in with us and deeply, compassionately concerned about our well-being. This is something worth meditating on each and every day: you are a child of Divine Love, you are a child of Light, you are a child of Heaven. Your breath has been breathed in to you by the Spirit of God. Your very life began with the kiss of love, and from there it will continue to unfold for all of eternity.

So now, it’s up to us (with God’s help and guidance, if we only accept it) what we do with this amazing potential that quivers within each of our hearts.

Sadly, we do not always live as if we are children of love. We know that our lives are not all we want them to be — not only do external forces sometimes stymie us, but even more heart-wrenching is the fact we make our own choices that prevent ourselves from fully loving ourselves, fully loving others, and fully loving God. Sometimes we make those choices unintentionally, but there are other times when with full knowledge and awareness we choose to turn away from the call of Love. So, while we are borne of Divine love, we also make mistakes, we miss the mark, we do things that cause pain and regret. This is what the Christian tradition calls “sin” — one of those religion-words that has been over-used and mis-used so much that maybe we should come up with alternatives. Here’s an alternative to the word “sin” that I think is particularly useful: “resistance to love.” We are born of love, and yet we resist the love which formed us.

Therefore, the process of formation — God’s formation of us, not our formation of ourselves — is not yet complete. Which is why spiritual formation isn’t just about who we are, it’s also about who we’re becoming.

Who we are becoming...

We still have growing to do, changes to be made, ways to become more fully formed, by Christ, into the image and likeness of Divine Love (God). The mystical tradition within Christianity proclaims that the Holy Spirit continues to form us, to shape us, transform us, heal us, unleash within us more and more capacity to receive and pass on the Love of God. Spiritual formation isn’t a blink-of-an-eye transformation; rather, it is an ongoing process which will continue until Christ is fully formed within and through us. In other words, it is a process likely to take the rest of our earthly lives (and perhaps even beyond). This is why there’s so much language in the tradition about living lives of “joyful repentance” or of “continual conversion.” To someone unfamiliar with the promise of mysticism, these terms might sound harsh, as if Christian spirituality is only about perpetual self-denial and resistance of life’s pleasures. And it has often been misinterpreted that way, by Christians themselves. But if the process of spiritual formation is a process of unfolding love, it’s not about what we deny ourselves — but rather about all that we embrace, and enjoy, and enfold within the blessings of our God-given potential.

Notice that I keep using plural pronouns here. Words like “us” and “our” and “ourselves” are important when discussing spiritual formation, for Christ is being formed in us not only as individuals, but also as a community. The community of the love of God is formed by the Holy Spirit to be the “body of Christ.” Yes, there’s a Trinitarian formula there. The mystery of the Holy Trinity lies in how One God, a Divine Unity, is revealed to us as Three Persons, each unique and distinct, relating to one another in wholly self-giving love, pouring out such love to one another and through one another and therefore irradiating all of creation with that same love. In spiritual formation we are called to become partakers of the Divine Nature (II Peter 1:4), which suggests that we participate in a similar dance of self-giving, overflowing love: God’s love flows to us; our love flows back to God and to one another and indeed to all of creation, in a lavish dance of grace and compassion and healing transformation; we are each unique and distinct and yet in our relations to God and one another by the economy of grace, we become the Body of Christ and therefore the Body of God. We become One in the Spirit. This process, traditionally known as deification, is the very heart of Christian mysticism — and of spiritual formation.

A few questions about spiritual formation...

What does this mean? Spiritual formation means we are called to celebrate both our holy origin and our holy destiny. We came from God, and to God we shall return. In the meantime, we have opportunities to live up to our radiant nature, by choosing to express love through our thoughts, words, and deeds — love for ourselves, love for our neighbors, love for all creation, love for the Divine. We do this not by our own efforts, but by receiving the love God pours into us, so that this love literally overflows into our inspired capacity to love God, self, others, and nature.

Do we choose spiritual formation? Yes and no. Just as we did not choose to be created, but received our life as a gift, so also we do not choose our destiny to have Christ formed in us. Remember, it is the Holy Spirit who is the active agent in the formation process. We are formed; we ourselves do not do the forming. However, we do choose whether or not we will cooperate with and support the formation process, or hinder it. We choose openness, cooperation, co-creation with God, as ways to enhance the process of becoming the full image and likeness of Christ. Because God is love, God will never force the exciting possibilities of deification upon us. We get to choose just how deep into the heart of Divine Love we wish to go.

Is it something we control? Oh, how we human beings love to be in charge! No, we do not control our formation — God does. Most of us will spend the rest of our lives trying to grasp that simple fact. This does not mean we are entirely passive about how the life of love grows within us. But think of the analogy of a couple dancing: the man may lead, but the woman doesn't just hang like a wet towel in his hands. She has an essential part to play in the beauty of the dance, just not a controlling part. With spiritual formation, God leads us in the dance of life, and we learn, with countless missteps along the way, how to gracefully follow that lead.

How long does it take? Considering that it will take us a lifetime to grasp even the basic ideas of the spiritual life, let alone their practical application, then it goes without saying that the entire process takes our entire lives and perhaps even beyond. But the answer to this question is really a paradox. How long does it take? Only an instant — for we are already the children of radiant light. Yet it takes an eternity — for the creativity of the Divine, at work in our souls, may never be fully exhausted!

What difference does it make? Spiritual formation makes all the difference in the world. Not only are we receiving Christ formed in us — in our cooperative efforts, we create and nurture a loving relationship with God. For me, and for most people I know who are intentionally pursuing spiritual formation, falling in love with God is the ultimate reward. There are other wonders, as well — seeing one's attitudes slowly become more radiant and open, noticing the growth of compassion toward others, starting to make decisions with a commitment toward justice and peacemaking, and most of all, learning to feel ever more deeply safe in the universe — safe because of a sense that we can never be separated from the love that powers the stars.

What's the next step? Thankfully, living as we do in the third millennium of the Christian era, we have tremendous resources available to us to aid and support our response to Divine Love. These resources include the sacraments (particularly the Holy Eucharist), the Bible (and the writings of the great saints and mystics), spiritual practices (like *lectio divina*, the Daily Office, and contemplative prayer) and mandates for growth in holiness (such as offering mercy toward those in need and treating all people with dignity, yes, even those who vote differently than we do). But all of these resources for the mystical life boil down to one

essential: prayer. Spiritual formation involves living a life of prayer. If we wish to cooperate with the Spirit of God in this project of having Christ formed in us, the first task we face is getting to know God better. Think of prayer as anything one does to nurture a deeper, more conscious, more intentional relationship with God. Spiritual formation means responding to the call to nurture a relationship with the Uncreated Source of life and love.