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Spiritual Formation for Children of Papa

I have been thinking about spiritual formation lately. If Papa has already fully embraced us in the Incarnate/Risen/Ascended Christ, what does spiritual formation mean? Within the embrace of the already-accomplished work of Christ, what does it mean for us to grow? I think the Ancient Church can help us here. They described the spiritual formation process as a “Threefold Way”:

1. Purgation. The Eastern Church called it *catbarsis*. The Western Church called it *via purgativa*. A.A. calls it ‘hitting rock bottom.’ Purgation is a time when old beliefs (and the behaviors that spring from those beliefs) are burned away. It’s a time of pain, anxiety, and disorientation. Generally, Purgation is triggered by external events (a.k.a., trials) that make it painfully obvious that our old way of life is not working, and that a new way must be found.

2. Illumination. The East called it *photosis*. The West called it *via illuminativa*. It’s a time when Reality is breaking through and re-shaping our minds. The dark pit of Purgation has demolished our old ways of hiding from the ever-present Light of the Spirit. We learn new beliefs to replace our old ones. The New Testament calls this repentance (*metanoia*: re- thinking). This is usually an anxious yet hopeful and exciting time. It doesn’t necessarily feel good, but we can see that the pain is taking us somewhere better than where we were. We’re not settled in our new life yet, but we’re tasting it and getting hungry for more.

3. Union. The East called it *theosis*. The West called it *via unitiva*. In Purgation, we see our false gods destroyed. In Illumination, we seek after God. In Union, we experience dwelling in God. We are aware of ourselves as participants in the Triune Life incarnate in the world. We see our Papa’s face through Jesus’ eyes, and that knowing becomes a stream of living water that bubbles up inside us and produces love/joy/peace in our life.

We walk in the valley of the shadow of death (purgation); then we realize that even in the presence of these enemies, the Lord prepares a banquet of life for us (illumination); and we learn to experience the overflowing of our cup as we dwell in the house of the Lord forever (union).

The Ancient Church often taught the Threefold Way as a linear process, a sort of spiritual “stages of life” theory where each stage happens only once. In my experience, however, it’s more of an ongoing cycle through which the Spirit continually educates my soul. Here’s how it seems to work with me:

First, I’m rolling along in life just fine, until WHAM!, a crisis/trial hits. I deal with it in whatever way I can, but sometimes I find it’s too big for me, usually because I’m relying on some false god—money, sex, power, take your pick. So the trial becomes an opportunity for Purgation. My idols have failed me and I’m crushed, unable to deal with life. I often stay in this state for a long time—feeling depressed, feeling like a victim, feeling like God has forsaken me.

Then after a long time wallowing in pain, I might realize a way in which I’ve been working out of sync with the Triune Life, and that I’m experiencing the natural consequences of driving the wrong way on the one-way street called love. Other times, I just realize that bad stuff happens in a universe

as messed-up as this one, and then I can grieve about it and know that God is grieving with me. The key to Illumination is usually that I face the pain and push through it. I process it and let it teach me to see things in a new way. This involves prayer, talking with wise friends, reading, and sometimes even professional therapy. That's a lot of work, which is why I often choose to reject Illumination because I think it will be easier to stay in denial about my pain and its source. I can live in denial very well, but it just means that the next time, the fires of Purgation will just be hotter.

But when I work through Illumination, feeling the pain and learning from it instead of avoiding it, I eventually get to a new place. I have changed, even if my trial situation has not. I haven't become a 'saint' who floats 2 inches off the ground, but I have become a person who sees God and myself a little more clearly and experiences more love/joy/peace because of it. The suffering has pounded me into a tougher yet somehow softer person. I'm more able to face difficult circumstances, and I'm more humble, less judgmental. My smile comes a little faster, and my mouth opens a little less often. I'm experiencing Union with Christ, incarnate in the real world. But I'm not "done"—far from it! I still hang on to various lies and idols that mar my experience of life with God. But I can take comfort in the fact that the Spirit will not stop purging me until all that crap is gone.

We don't need to wait for an external crisis or trial to initiate formation opportunities. Through disciplines like fasting, confession and solitude, we can step intentionally into the desert of Purgation; we can clear away the clutter and face our demons head-on. We can seek illumination through disciplines like study, meditation and receiving guidance. And like Peter stepping out of the boat, we can step out of our comfortable routines through disciplines like service, submission and celebration. When we do, we may find ourselves walking on water, experiencing the joy of self-emptying, the joy of Union. In our practice of spiritual disciplines, we are not earning Papa's acceptance. We're not manipulating Him into drawing nearer to us. We're not even earning a bigger mansion in heaven. What we're doing is exercising our vision. We are sensitizing ourselves to the reality of Immanuel. We are experimenting to see how life really works.

In the season of Lent, we enter as One Body willingly into 40 days of communal Purgation. We share in Christ's own 40 days in the wilderness, a place of wild beasts, demonic lies, and angelic care. May our fasting purge poison from our flesh, lies from our mind, and evil from our world. Count it all joy.

~ John Stonecypher