

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Spiritual Direction in the Benedictine Tradition

A N OPPORTUNITY TO undertake a fresh survey has been made available to me by the request to write an article under this title. Documentary material ought to be extensive because we are talking here about a tradition which reaches from the sixth century to our own days. As it happens, in reality such material is limited because spiritual guidance has not been a favourite theme of Benedictine spiritual literature. No extended historical study has ever been conducted on this material; any research that has been done has provided a few surprises.

In presenting the results of such research, this long past must first be briefly described. Then will it be possible to see if any particular themes stand out and what they are.

The source

A first point which may surprise us comes from the contrast between the importance attributed to spiritual guidance given by one person to another in monasticism before the middle of the sixth century and the lack of attention it receives in the Benedictine tradition, beginning with the text upon which this is founded: the *Rule of St Benedict*. Towards the end of this document, in chapter 73, in a passage where he uses the vocabulary and the notion of 'guidance' on the path that leads to God, St Benedict refers his reader to sacred scripture and to the tradition preserved in the writings of the ancient monks:

But for anyone hastening on towards the perfection of monastic life, there are the teachings of the holy Fathers, the observance of which will lead him to the very heights of perfection. What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and the New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life? What book of the holy catholic Fathers does not resoundingly summon us along the true way to reach the Creator? Then, besides the *Conferences* of the Fathers, their *Institutes* and their *Lives*, there is also the rule of our holy father Basil. For observant and obedient monks, all these are nothing less than tools for the cultivation of virtues.

Earlier in the text, in a few rather brief passages, St Benedict speaks of the relations the monk must have with one or two other people

concerning his progress to God, but he does not treat these in as much detail as previous authors had done before him. They are presented as though personal guidance had lost something of the importance it enjoyed in the lives of those who lived alone, now that the way to God is pursued in the common life. At all times this offers examples to be followed, just as conventual prayer and its readings assure constant teaching. The collective guidance of the community is further guaranteed by the doctrinal exhortations to be given by the abbot, who must 'direct souls' (*animas regere*). He is responsible for everyone and in this sense he is their father, their *abba*, according to a title which, in the New Testament, Jesus gave to his Father and which St Benedict applies to Christ and to the abbot who 'holds his place' (*agere vices*). He exercises this duty by handing on a 'teaching', the 'truth', also by 'warnings, precepts and orders'. He must 'propose' and 'demonstrate' God's way to his 'sons' and to his 'disciples' and, in order to do this, adapt himself to each monk's character. He has a role in discerning and restraining, illustrated by the admirable chapter on The Observance of Lent (chapter 49): in this penitential season, each monk will have 'something above the assigned measure to offer God of his own will with the joy of the Holy Spirit', but he must make this known (*suggerat*) to the abbot who approves it.

In two places, St Benedict speaks of opening one's conscience. Firstly in chapter 7: 'The fifth step of humility is that a man does not conceal from his abbot any sinful thoughts entering his heart, or any wrongs committed in secret, but rather confesses them humbly'. Then, in chapter 46, with regard to those who 'commit a fault while at any work': if this is a public offence, it must be manifested to the abbot and the community.

When the cause of the sin lies hidden in his conscience, he is to reveal it only to the abbot or to one of the spiritual elders, who know how to heal their own wounds as well as those of others, without exposing them or making them public.

From this last reference—but only from here—it appears that this kind of admission offers the opportunity for receiving private counsel and exhortation. Clearly everyone understood that this was not the same thing as sacramental confession.

Finally, in chapter 58, with regard to what we would nowadays call first formation, a sober text discusses the qualities required of the person in charge, his role and of the light which knowledge of the Rule will shed on this.

A senior chosen for his skill in winning souls should be appointed to look after them with careful attention. The concern must be whether the novice truly seeks God and whether he shows eagerness

for the work of God, for obedience and for trials. The novice should be clearly told all the hardships and difficulties that will lead him to God.

The Rule is then read three times to each novice.

II *Medieval interpretations*

These few, very beautiful, texts began to be analyzed in the two first commentaries on the *Rule*: in the ninth century, that of a certain Hildemar and that of Smaragdus, Abbot of the monastery of Saint-Mihiel, in Lotharingia. The first was known under different names from northern Gaul to South Italy. This range indicates its influence. St Benedict's thoughts on manifestation of conscience are usefully clarified: 'Why does he say that sinful thoughts are to be admitted and not good ones?' For two reasons, Hildemar replies: firstly because 'almost all' the monks' thoughts are good; secondly because what they are thinking about when they are contemplating is difficult to describe. But why does St Benedict speak of 'all sinful thoughts'? Surely it is impossible to ennumerate all of them? Not at all, because St Benedict has said elsewhere that what he means are those sinful thoughts which are entertained, that is to say, those which are accepted; where no consent is given, they are not accepted. It is not a matter of 'all those thoughts which come and go'—nowadays we would talk about fancies which run through our heads—but those which 'set up home in our hearts and stay there', which presupposes that we have consented to them. Hildemar refers to a contemporary controversy about what should be admitted to the abbot and what should be admitted to a 'spiritual brother'. He does not resolve the question and each monk remains free to choose his own confidant.¹

Smaragdus is even less definite. In his *The crown of the monks* as in his *Commentary on the Rule*, he is content to confirm St Benedict's sayings in the light of Old Testament texts and those Cassiodorus gave on the need to consult God, oneself and others.

He who is filled with compunction by the Lord and sent by him to the monastery desiring to live there according to the desires of his heart, which he believes to be good, will say to himself: 'Question your abbot and spiritual brothers about your intention, because it is written: Do nothing without asking advice. And if these men judge that your desire is good, if they consent to it, then fulfill it, because it is no longer your own desire but held in common by those who are in agreement with you. If they do not agree that it is good, you must realise that your desire is only a private one and that if you wish to be saved, you must flee from it as if from a serpent'.

In this text, as in St Benedict's on Lent, we can admire the harmony established between personal inspiration and initiative and the fact that these are submitted to the abbot and members of the community, who are to act as 'spiritual brothers': the expression 'spiritual father' is not used in the Rule.²

From the tenth century we have a Rule for nuns. St Benedict's text is abridged and adapted for their use. What Benedict wrote about 'thoughts' is applied to 'sins': these must be 'confessed to another person' whose identity is not specified; St James is quoted where he writes: 'Confess your sins to another and pray for one another that you may be saved'.³ Elsewhere we read that 'all should manifest their faults to the abbess; every Sunday they should be reconciled among themselves on account of their negligences and ask pardon one of another'.⁴ As to Lent, each one must submit to the abbess, who is called 'spiritual mother', whatever she wishes to offer to God.⁵ In the chapter which treats of the admission of novices, St Benedict's few words on formation are suppressed; but we are told that the abbess must warn the newcomer that she will be expected to 'keep the Rule carefully and with humility', as if the Rule alone were enough to bring people to God. And in the admission ceremony each time the abbess is mentioned so too are 'all the sisters'⁶—a fresh indication of the communal character attributed to spiritual guidance.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries a thorough-going renewal of monasticism aided the reform of the whole Church and the promotion of Christian values throughout society. Spiritual guidance was not one of the means which made a particularly useful contribution to this movement. In any case, it left few traces in contemporary writing. In the *Lives* of one or two saints we can find allusions to it. Thus of St Mayeul, who was Abbot of Cluny from 965 to 993, we read that by his sermons,

as spiritual father, he encouraged those of his sons who were tempted to discouragement. He led others imperceptibly to taste and see that the Lord is good by means of careful reading . . . By his example he filled his sons with joy.⁷

Preaching and good example: in each case the guidance is given to the whole community. Conventual life of its very nature, is a school of formation. The fact that one was conformed to the 'customs' which fashioned all attitudes, whether exterior or interior, was taken for granted. Hence the importance, in each period of history, of the custom books, which are sometimes called 'constitutions'. These describe the behaviour to be adopted, but never speak of any oral teaching to be given by one person to another; obviously this happened, but no prescriptions were laid down about it.

For instance, in the *Constitutions* Lanfranc wrote for Canterbury, there is only a description of the first discernment of vocation in the case of newcomers:

When anyone turns from the world to the monastic life . . . the abbot or prior or some other spiritual brother chosen for the purpose shall speak with him, and if he sees that the newcomer's desire is from God, the matter shall be made known to the brethren in chapter . . .⁸

Of the novicemaster, no more is said than: 'This master shall be such a one as may by the example of his life and by the words of his teaching give him good advice for his soul and teach him our way of life'.⁹ What is clear however, is that he should not receive any confession of sins.

As for the faults committed in the world, or occurring in the monastic life, he shall make frequent confession to the abbot, prior and spiritual brethren appointed for this purpose . . .¹⁰

They shall make their confessions to the abbot or prior or those whom the abbot has especially appointed in chapter. While one is confessing, the next shall sit on the footplace; their master meanwhile shall sit nearby outside the chapter-house.¹¹

The only work from this period which treats of the formation of adolescents, the *De ordine vitae*, written towards 1050 by John, Abbot of Fruttuaria in Piedmont, has one paragraph—only one but it happens to be beautiful—on the value for young people of not being 'without a guide' (*sine duce*): they need older men to instruct them, to lead them, both by their example and by their 'friendship'. But nothing is said about the way this 'teaching'¹² should be given. If monastic authors at this time practised spiritual direction in writing, this was given above all in letters addressed to bishops and to lay people—especially to great ladies: St Peter Damien (+1072), Jean de Fecamp (+1078) and above all St Anselm of Canterbury (+1109) made noteworthy contributions to this genre. To Ida, countess of Boulogne, Anselm wrote: 'I am quite certain that you still have me in your heart as your spiritual father . . .'¹³ But advice given in such letters remains very general. The public character of every letter at that time, dictated as they were to secretaries and read by several people, meant that any possibility of raising personal problems was out of the question.

In the twelfth century, the biographer of Peter the Venerable makes what he sees as an exceptional claim for him:

He exhorted his subjects to purity and to cleanse themselves by means of confession. In this art, he showed himself to be an

exceptional father and the gentleness of his own devotion outshone that of others. In accordance with the gift he held in God's Church, he taught of the benefits of confession as sanctifying the soul like a baptism of salvation. He had the grace of being drawn to love people who made their confessions to him, of embracing them and comforting them as a good counsellor. This explains why, and this did not happen with other superiors, everyone genuinely wished lovingly to make their confessions to him, because he knew, without the need for revelations, how to care for and heal his own wounds and those of other people, by using the medicine of his word and his consolation.¹⁴

In texts such as these which date from before the thirteenth century, at no time is the claim made that this is sacramental confession. Bernard of Ayguier's *Commentary on the Rule*, (he was Abbot of Cassino from 1263 to 1282) does perhaps refer to confession. He makes a distinction between the confession of thoughts, 'which require advice rather than authority', and the confession of sins which demands, 'both advice and authority and which, consequently, must only be made to the abbot . . . Because mortal sin offends the divine majesty, but also the Church and so calls for a confession made in the presence of God's vicar and of a minister of the Church'.¹⁵ It is not said here that the abbot is a priest and acts as such. But gradually we can detect a movement away from traditional monastic confession to sacramental confession made only to a priest.

Nowadays, the famous *Imitation of Christ* is attributed to Gersenio di Cavaglia, the Benedictine abbot of Verceil from 1220 to 1240. This admirable text which is so full of spiritual advice does not lay out any methodical system of guidance. The confession it speaks of is made to God.¹⁶ No chapter recommends the manifestation of conscience, nor sacramental confession, nor the benefits to be gained by taking advice. From start to finish the book describes the spiritual conversation of one individual with God.

The golden age of direction

With the Catholic Reformation of the second half of the sixteenth century and above all from the seventeenth century onwards, what was beginning to be called 'spiritual direction' achieved a certain prominence. One or two Benedictine authors used this kind of language. But the reality it described hardly featured in their writings. Cisneros of Montserrat (+ 1510) refers to it briefly, while sacramental confession gets full treatment and is recommended even as a daily exercise.¹⁷ In the three-volume *Works* of Louis de Blois (+ 1566), only this short extract can be found: 'Nevertheless enjoy asking a man who fears God and is enlightened to help you know the will of God, especially when this is

difficult'.¹⁸ Abbot Haeften (+ 1648) of Afligherm, whose *Disquisitiones monasticae* constitute a 'summa' of the monastic tradition, is even less explicit. He gives no treatment of direction. He speaks a little of the confession required by St Benedict, in order to show that this is not sacramental. He quotes this decree from a Council held at Aix-la-Chapelle in the ninth century: 'Let the abbot, as spiritual father, give an example to his spiritual sons by walking before them (*praeuendo*) and giving them religious instruction'.¹⁹ This adds nothing to what the middle ages had already handed on. Fine pages are consecrated to the model of novice master given us in the person of Christ as he appears in the gospels, especially that of Luke. What are treated here are the virtues the novice master should have rather than the formation he should give. His role is to discern vocations, to test them as much as to give any teaching, and nothing is said about any such teaching.²⁰

Out of the great fund of seventeenth-century spiritual writing, we will only look at two sources here, both of which are particularly representative. Dom Augustine Baker (+ 1641) in his *Holy Wisdom*, which is still a classical masterpiece, has a chapter with a promising title: *Of an external director*.²¹ By and large, however, this consists of a series of restrictions, as 'it is too general a humour in directors nowadays to make them seem necessary unto their disciples'. The director's role is limited both as to its object ('contemplative prayer, attending to divine inspirations etc. '); to its length ('teach the soul how to dispose herself . . . to stand in no more need of consulting her exterior director'); to the qualities he needs—deep spiritual experience rather than knowledge; as to his activities ('there will be little need for the soul to have recourse to her director. Neither ought he to examine her about her external exercises . . .'). His role should not be confused either with that of a '*confessarius*, that is only to hear the faults confessed, to give absolution, and there an end'. A good director is extremely rare; such a person can be lay, a man or a woman, and 'his necessity is not to last always'. 'Scarce any directors can be more improper (for those who tend to contemplation) than are religious guides of active spirits . . . In a well-governed monastery of women . . . it is very expedient that instruction . . . should rather come from superiors within.' In many cases, 'God will be the faithful counsellor'.²² In a previous chapter, on the Divine Spirit as 'internal guide', Baker had stated: 'God alone is our only master and director'.²³

Likewise, the Maurist Dom Claude Martin (+ 1696) warns against the indiscreet director who wants, 'as happens all too often, to reduce everyone to his own way of praying'.²⁴ Obviously one would be negligent were one 'not to listen as willingly as usual to the spiritual father's advice, and not to ask for it as usual, and only to be guided by the lights of one's own spirit'.²⁵ But once this danger of self-sufficiency has been avoided it nevertheless remains true that 'God is our primary director; it

is up to him to guide our steps and to put us on the way in which he knows that we must walk in order to please him more'.²⁶

In our own time

From the first half of this century, several great abbots remain famous on account of their spiritual teaching. Firstly, Dom Columba Marmion, the Irishman who became Abbot of Maredsous in Belgium, where he died in 1923. In his work on *Christ the ideal of the monk*, he says nothing about direction. He claimed that he was not a 'great partisan of a large amount of direction'. Nevertheless his biographer and admirer, R. Thibaut, was able to present him as an 'eminent spiritual director', above all on account of his vast correspondence, even while insisting that 'no director was less like a tyrant or an oracle'. Above all else Marmion recommended 'great fidelity to movements of the Holy Spirit'.²⁷

Paul Delatte, the Abbot of Solesmes (+ 1937), spoke more often in his numerous writings of the attitude of the directee who should 'open his soul simply',²⁸ rather than of the director. He made known his lack of interest in any method which, in monastic life, would enhance the paternal and filial relationships between the abbot and his monks, or fraternal ones between the members of a community. One of the texts which P. Delatte liked above all others was Paul's in Romans 8,14: 'Those who are led by the Spirit are children of God'.²⁹

Finally, John Chapman, Abbot of Downside (+ 1936), could claim: 'I have been my own director, and that is very hard'.³⁰ So he did not refuse to direct others as his *Spiritual letters* testify, though with two reservations. First of all, he said: 'I am not inclined to assume the role of a professional "director" to anyone'.³¹ As well, he thought of direction as leading to the moment when it would no longer be necessary. 'A good director must be a nurse, no more. He should confine himself to the task of teaching his penitent how to walk alone and unaided'.³² John Chapman's advice inclined to send people towards a contemplative and characteristically simple form of prayer. He willingly quoted St Ignatius, St Francis de Sales and particularly St John of the Cross and in this was very revealing: the Benedictine tradition has always been able to draw from the full spectrum of experts on prayer.

Limits and relevance of a tradition

During the last fifteen centuries, countless Benedictine monks and nuns have been guided by others from their immediate circle in words which have remained unrecorded in the texts. To go through the series of testimonies that did get written down has seemed to be the only way of seeing how they understood their task. The result of this inquiry could cause a certain disappointment which, in all honesty, has to be accepted. In comparison with what has been taught by other spiritual writers,

especially since the sixteenth century, and the material published so profusely nowadays, representatives of the Benedictine tradition have left neither copious or precise teaching, nor a detailed method. Whatever has been edited from certain of these authors tells us a great deal about what their commentators thought. Each tradition cannot illustrate all the charisms in equal measure; one is hard put to it to find evidence of a homogeneous teaching handed down through the ages in the Benedictine tradition. A great deal has been written, for example by V. Berlière (monk of Maredsous and historian³² who died in 1928) and C. Butler (Abbot of Downside, who died in 1934) about prayer, about mysticism even, the contemplative life, *lectio divina*, renunciation, work, obedience, but not about guidance.³⁴ This was considered to be a form of obedience and, as such, was to lead to docility, to the Spirit and to freedom.

The only common understanding which does seem to have remained intact down the ages is that found in Benedict's *Rule*. The evidence that can be discovered at different times in letters written to people outside the monastery demonstrates the same tendencies we discern in the guidance offered by people inside the monastery. This is the same whether it is given by monks or nuns. Such guidance is different from sacramental confession. It requires only the manifestation of those thoughts which can stir up the 'heart' so that they constitute an obstacle to progress towards God. This opening of conscience is either made to the abbot or abbess, or to members of the community. We may gather that in the past the situation was as has recently been described in these words:

No doubt St Benedict understood the monk's guide to be the abbot; nevertheless, he was well aware of the difficulties which can inhibit this; he knew about the 'superior syndrome' which can, from time to time, make it impossible to get to the man. In fact, the abbot must fulfill the same conditions as any other spiritual guide. Nevertheless, even if he is able to give direction, in big communities he must ensure that there are enough of the brethren available who know what it is to guide others.³⁵

Between a superior and his community there can be a communications problem, a form of inhibition which makes openness difficult.

Following St Benedict, the monastic tradition has always suggested that spiritual directors of whatever provenance should be kind, compassionate and full of 'mercy'.³⁶ This has been underlined in the case of, for instance, St Anselm.³⁷ Spiritual guidance has always been recognised as particularly useful in the first stages of monastic life; its purpose at that time being to help the newcomer to discern if he has a vocation. If this is the case, it will remain useful for the rest of his life and be received from the community as such or from one or other of the members.

Because of its empirical nature, which means that it has neither a theory nor a method, Benedictine guidance is an experiential affair rather than a science; it presupposes no special training, but rather a gift whereby those who are able to give it are designated as 'spiritual' without anyone being particularly clear about what that means. Obviously this will mean taking a few risks. On the other hand, the fact that there is no special teaching means that ideas can be used from other spiritual traditions both past and present. All of this is relevant nowadays, at least for people in monastic orders. For them what is missing in the way of theory and techniques is compensated for by this essential fact: conventual life with its daily observances is in itself a school of the spiritual life.

Jean Leclercq O.S.B.

NOTES

- ¹ Mittermüller, R. (ed.): *Expositio regulae*, (Ratisbonne, 1880), pp 242-245.
- ² Spanagel, A. and Engelbert, P. (eds.): *Smaragdi abbatis expositio in Reglam*, (Siegburg, 1974), p 83.
- ³ Linage Conde, A. (ed.): *Una regla monastica visjana femenina del siglo X. El 'Libellus a Regulo S Benedicti subtractus'*, (Salamanca, 1973), pp 38-39.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p 59.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p 55.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p 56.
- ⁷ Quoted in Leclercq, J.: *Aspects of monasticism*, (Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1978), p 220.
- ⁸ Knowles, David (ed.): *The monastic constitutions of Lanfranc*, (London), p 104.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p 106.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 107.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 116.
- ¹² *De Ordine vitae* n 10, P.L. 184, 566-567.
- ¹³ Schmitt, F.S. (ed.): *S Anselmi opera omnia*, Vol. IV, Epist. 167, (Edinburgh, 1949), p 41.
- ¹⁴ Radulfus: *Vita Petri Venerabilis*, 2, P.L. 189, 18-19.
- ¹⁵ Caplet, A.M. (ed.): *Bernardi I abbatis Casinensis in Regulam Benedicti expositio*, (Monte Cassino, 1894), p 154.
- ¹⁶ Lup, T. (ed.): *De imitatione Christi libri quatuor*, (Rome, 1982), 1. III, ch 20, p 185. I have studied these texts and issues that arise in 'Un jalon dans l'histoire de la confession dans la vie religieuse', in *Vie consacrée*, 57 (1985), pp 242-248.
- ¹⁷ Colombas, G.M.: *Un reformador benedictino en tiempo de los reyes catolicos Garcia Jimenez de Ciscernos*, (Montserrat, 1955), p 290.
- ¹⁸ *Oeuvres spirituelles du Vénéral Louis de Blois*, translated by the Benedictines of St Paul de Wisques, (Paris, 1913), Vol II, p 142.
- ¹⁹ Haeften, B.: *Disquisitiones monasticae*, tract V, disq. 1, (ed. Anvers, 1644), I, p 311.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 392-396.
- ²¹ *Holy wisdom or Directions for the prayer of contemplation*, (London, 1876), pp 73-86.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp 73-86.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p 68.

- ²⁴ Martin, Dom Claude: *Conférences ascétiques*, (ed. J. R. Hesbert, Paris, 1956), Vol I, p 196.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p 302.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 191.
- ²⁷ Thibaut, R.: *L'union à Dieu dans le Christ d'après les lettres de direction de Dom Marmion*, (Paris, 1941), p XIII.
- ²⁸ Delatte, P.: *Commentaire de la Règle de S Benoit*, (Paris, 1913), pp 87 and 342.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 51 and 343.
- ³⁰ Hudleston, R. (ed.): *The spiritual letters of Dom John Chapman O.S.B.*, (London, 1935), p 23.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p 84.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p 23.
- ³³ *L'ascèse bénédictine des origines à la fin du moyen age*, (Maredsous, 1927).
- ³⁴ Butler, C.: 'Benedictine monachism' in *Studies in Benedictine life and Rule*, (London, 1924). This formula at least should be quoted: 'The abbot is the father in a much broader and more real sense than is suggested by the somewhat technical and professional connotation of the term "spiritual father"' (p 193).
- ³⁵ Rosenthal, Anselm: '*Seniori spiritali patefacere*. Überlegungen zur geistlichen Begleitung des einzelnen in unseren Gemeinschaften', in *Monastische Informationen* Nr 42, 15 March 1985, p 15.
- ³⁶ *RB 1980. The Rule of St Benedict*, (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1980).
- ³⁷ Sainte Marie, H. de: 'Les lettres de S Anselme et la Règle de S Benoit', in *Mélanges bénédictins*, (Saint-Wandrille, 1947), pp 317-319.

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