

SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT AND DISCERNMENT

Dermot Mansfield

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT WE ARE CALLED to discernment all our life long. Although this statement may seem to be a truism, I find that it is always new and important for me, even after some thirty years involved in spiritual accompaniment, in the giving of the Spiritual Exercises, and in the work of training or formation in these fields. As Newman often emphasized long ago, we are called to be ‘watchful’, to look out for, to attend to, the signs of the Lord’s coming—not just at the end of our lives, but always and every day.¹ Implicit in this watching, this living by faith, is the requirement to sift, to distinguish, to discern. Opinions and impressions are everywhere in conflict, and can pull us in very different directions. How can I evaluate what is good and right for me? Who or what will guide my understanding? How am I called? To what am I called? What is God’s wish for me, God’s way for me? And what is not God’s way—not the true way, but a direction of illusion and untruth?

Our Own Stories

My first experience of giving the Spiritual Exercises was in Canada, during the summer of 1977, at Mississauga, outside Toronto, under the tutelage of the late Sister Olga Warnke IBVM. Over the years since, the application of the Ignatian Rules for Discernment has been central to me in continuing to give the Exercises. Moreover, I feel that my individual gifts have lain in the immensely varied work of accompanying people in their day-to-day and year-to-year living, especially when the challenge of discernment has been to the fore. In

¹ John Henry Newman, ‘Watching’, in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, volume 4 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1896), 319–333.

the realm of the training and formation in spiritual guidance, too, the focus on discernment has been a strong one. My own journey over that time, I hope, has been a process of discovery—of learning the kinds of things that cannot be learned in books or on courses, but only through the living of life itself.

Clearly, each of our own stories is important for understanding discernment. The story of Ignatius of Loyola was particularly so. But your story and mine are just as relevant—in so far as we have truly entered into life, have desired to cultivate our faith, and have endeavoured to learn from many different people and sources. Discernment and understanding are crucial in the one and only life that belongs to you or me, given by the God who has called us by name. And this is all the more so in its interweaving with the lives of others, and when we listen to their stories and attend to them. I should like to identify some of the things that seem to me central for a life of discernment and for helping others in their discernment, however simplistic this may seem, and elaborate a little on them.

The Way We Live

I often say that what is important for us today is to live with humanity and faith. This is self-evident, and yet for all sorts of reasons, in today's world, I feel that our humanity and our living by faith can be under severe pressure. We need to treasure our gifts of humanity: our naturalness, our compassion, our capacity to understand, and so on. As I write this, I think of the parish of Chiswick in London, where I supply for a few weeks each summer, and where there is a great sense of humanity and community. Such an environment is an appealing one; people are attracted to come to the parish and be helped and supported. And obviously the quality of faith found there is attractive also: it is meaningful, and sustains people in their lives and in facing the challenges of life's mystery.

Humanity and faith: these qualities interact with each other, enrich each other, fulfil each other. 'You are the light of the world', we are told (Matthew 5:14). In today's world the simple but profound living of our lives is a light which can shine brightly. Modern living, and work, and travel can have much of the impersonal about them, which leads us to loneliness and lack of meaning. There is the temptation to compensate by withdrawing into 'virtual reality' in its various forms—which can

deprive people of the challenges and supports offered by engaging more with life itself. Then there is the pressure of expectations, in religious and church circles as well as elsewhere, which I believe can prevent some individuals from being their true selves and acting accordingly. We can find ourselves playing roles and cutting ourselves off from real human interaction and need. And if in these or other ways our humanity is constrained or suppressed, we need to search actively for it and reclaim it as best we can. We are always called to emerge from the unreal and to go where life is lived more truthfully and richly—and therefore journey to where the living God most surely awaits us. All of which is important here, because you cannot authentically discern, or have the light to see, apart from a courageous care for the human.

Looking to Christ in the Gospels

For Christians love for the Gospels and appreciation of them will always play a pivotal role in how we live and act. And for Ignatius, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, it is especially the figure of Christ that elicits our love. We are drawn, we are attracted to the person of Jesus: to look towards him, have him before us, and know that his gaze is always upon us. ‘Look to him, and be radiant’ (Psalm 34:5). ‘All of us’, St Paul writes, ‘with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another’ (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we contemplate Jesus we are transformed into his likeness.

Crucial to the process of discernment in the Exercises are the continual contemplations of Christ: whoever makes them is absorbed in the very atmosphere of the gospel mysteries. But while ordinary Christian living may not require anything like the intensity usually experienced in making the Exercises, still the touchstones of the Ignatian text remain valid for us. As disciples, we are always centred on Christ, on his living presence before and with us. We are always in some sense looking at the Gospels. We are also, I believe, drawn into relationship with all the people who inhabit the gospel scenes, in their various roles, with their many needs and their different outlooks. They too, with Jesus, are not just historical entities but are mysteriously present and real, here and now. And in turn they are intertwined with all the people and situations that we ourselves encounter in life today—and with the issues which require evaluation and decision for us.

The Gathering of God's People

Something else that needs to be considered here is the Church: the *ecclesia*, the calling together, the gathering of the Lord's varied disciples. The community of the Church must be involved in the life of discernment alongside the more personal consciousness of the Gospels and of Christ's presence. In the panorama of Christian life today, however, the ecclesial dimension must be understood in a broader sense than that envisaged by Ignatius when he set out his guidelines for having a right attitude within the Church (Exx 352–370), and when he intended those guidelines to be included among the criteria for discernment. I would understand the Church to incorporate all of Christ's disciples, all lovers of the Gospels, all who value the Eucharist and who have allowed their own lives to become eucharistic in some meaningful sense—blessed, broken and shared out. So in discernment I listen to the Church in this sense, and try to hear what the Lord is saying today among his people.



The Calling of Andrew and Simon Peter, by *Giusto de Menabuoi*

Called by Name

We are disciples, followers, as we journey along the path of our life. Therefore, it seems to me, we are constantly being called anew into discipleship, into following, into being with Jesus (Mark 3:14) and into walking as he walked (1 John 2:6). We walk with one another, and we follow Christ's way, which is the way and path of our own lives. So discernment and spiritual guidance have to do with questions such as: 'What is my calling? In what way am I being called? What is being said to me in the present circumstances of my life? What am I to do?' And here my desire comes into play. For the quality of my spiritual accompaniment and discernment will be determined by the desire within me, by the authenticity of that desire as God's gift. It is the human desire for what is right and good. It is the deep longing of my innermost self for God, and also the desire for God's way in Christ as the guiding principle of my life.

Right at the heart of it all, at the heart of any understanding of calling, is something which can often be overlooked. It is that, first of all, I am 'called by name' (Isaiah 43:1), by my own name. I have been called into being with love, and now I am called to be who I truly am. Surely that is the primordial and most personal meaning of calling! That is the word addressed to me above all: to be myself, to be in that hallowed space where my true self is brought forth in the gaze and love of Christ. Within that reality, as beloved disciple, I cannot but desire to respond positively to whatever it is right and good for me to do.

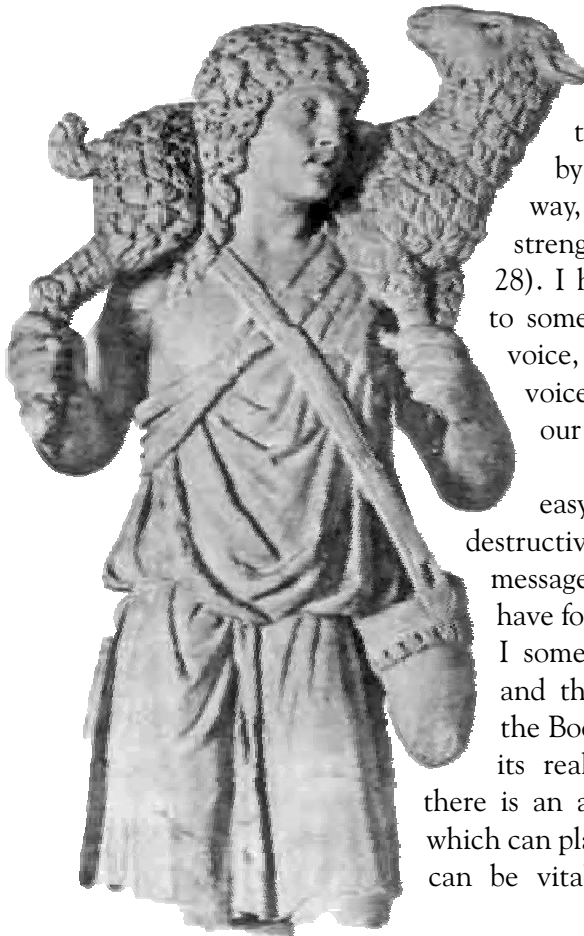
It is vital for any spirituality, or way of prayer, or process of spiritual accompaniment to attend to that primordial experience, when I know that I have been called into existence to be uniquely who I am and to be sustained by that look of love. Certainly I have felt this to be so, both in trying to help others and in wishing to see the truth of my own life and journey.²

² When helping in the formation of spiritual guides, I have often recommended two addresses on 'Vocation' by Rowan Williams, as well as another piece entitled 'Knowing and Loving'. See *Open to Judgement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995). He says these things much better than I am able to.

The Voice of the Shepherd

Life, of course, involves struggle—so that when we face situations which require decision, we find ourselves pulled in different directions. Some of those directions, while they are in conflict, may still be generally good in themselves. Yet, if we look more deeply, we can perceive opposite sources of influence at work. Thus when we truly desire the very best, there are somehow destructive forces active, trying to undo what would be right and worthwhile. Discernment traditionally has to do with distinguishing the influences working upon us, pinpointing their source, and sifting what is true from what is false and illusory. This we know. And we follow then what has been so well taught by Ignatius concerning the affective states of spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation within us.

But in the midst of any process of evaluation and discernment I



have found it helpful to focus on the primordial experience of calling. The image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, who calls each by name and guides us along the right way, is a particular source of light and strength (Psalm 23; John 10:11–16, 27–28). I have often found myself suggesting to someone to listen out intently for this voice, and to single it out from other voices which pretend to be interested in our welfare.

Why do I take this approach? It is easy to find ourselves listening to destructive voices within, such as negative messages from childhood, which can still have force to ruin our lives and paralyze us. I sometimes call these ‘accusing voices’, and think of the ‘accuser’ mentioned in the Book of Revelation (12:10). Whatever its real source, I certainly believe that there is an accusing voice, a desolating voice, which can play havoc within us. And therefore it can be vitally important to be conscious of

another voice that is constantly there, in great and consoling contrast—the true voice which speaks to any person’s heart, and which belongs to the Good Shepherd. Listening to that voice, which can speak through good people as well as through prayer and through circumstances, will enable any of us to find the right way forward in life.

Care for the World

Although the image of the Good Shepherd I have described is personal and intimate, nevertheless it opens up vistas for us. Jesus speaks of himself repeatedly as the ‘shepherd’, who ‘lays down his life for the sheep’ (John 10:11, 15, 17, 18); such is his care for each and all. So in looking towards him and listening to his voice, we are drawn to perceive how he embodies the *ecstasis* of God, that ecstatic reaching out in love which is the whole way of God in the world. ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’ (John 3:16) The horizons opened up are endless. Think of the Contemplation on the Incarnation in the *Spiritual Exercises* (Exx 101–109), in which we are invited to look at the great movement of Trinitarian love reaching down into the world’s predicament and need through the personal response of Mary in Nazareth.

In taking this wide outlook—which is part of what it is to be a Christian, and shows itself in all sorts of ways—we cannot remain simply as onlookers, but find ourselves drawn into the action and the momentum of that Trinitarian love. We therefore find ourselves looking with the eyes of the Trinity, having their perspective on the world. We are also involved in what they are doing, through their *ecstasis* of love, which issues in the *kenosis*, the self-emptying love of the Second Person (Philippians 2:5–11) directed towards healing the broken world. This is what happened in Mary, through her response to the angel (Luke 1:38). It came about in the life of Ignatius too, in the vision at La Storta, where he saw himself placed with Christ. And something of that grace can become present in every Christian, to a greater or a lesser degree. In the midst of ordinary and perhaps hidden lives, in answer to the primordial call of God, there is elicited a response like Mary’s, a ‘yes’ to God’s mysterious and loving purposes. It is a ‘yes’ uttered not once, but many times and in many ways, through the varying circumstances and challenges encountered over a lifetime. It will shape the course of a whole life, with real blessings for other people, known and unknown.

This wider theological perspective forms a background to the simple human reality of listening to and accompanying a person seeking direction. It underpins the process of spiritual accompaniment, and provides encouragement. The image of the Good Shepherd is an immediately relevant and personal one which helps us to distinguish the voices or influences operating in our human consciousness.

For the large picture, of the incarnation and of the outpouring of the life and love of God for the world, does indeed come down to the simple and human realities which encompass all of our lives. Take the early scene in Mark's Gospel (Mark 1:40–42) when a leper comes to Jesus and asks for cleansing. The Greek word denoting Jesus' response, *πλαγχνισθεῖς*, often rather poorly translated into English, indicates that Jesus was utterly moved in his innermost being, in a maternal way; I think it is best translated as 'being filled with tenderness'.³ He was so moved that he immediately stretched out his hand to touch the leper and make him clean and well again. It is an extraordinary scene, but characteristic of how Jesus responds to people's needs. The whole momentum of Trinitarian love is here, as when Jesus came to Jairus' daughter and 'took her



Jesus heals a leper, from Petrus Comestor's Biblia Historiale

by the hand' (Mark 5:41), or when he lifted up the woman who had been bent and crippled for eighteen years (Luke 13:10–13). We see something here of the deepest reality in God, the *ecstasis*, the outpouring of divine love. This is also the deepest thing in everyday life wherever we witness it, or whenever we can reach out to others ourselves or find that we are the recipients of such care. All of this is

³ See *The RSV Interlinear Greek–English New Testament* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1968).

at the heart of spiritual accompaniment, and points to its lived outcome, in how we go forward and find ourselves in relation to others and to our world today.

All that Is Good, and the Quest For Justice

Sometimes I find a familiar exhortation in Paul coming to mind:

Finally, my friends, whatever is true, or honourable, whatever is just, or pure, whatever is lovely, or worthy of admiration, if there is anything good and to be praised, think of these things ... and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8–9; my translation)

His words here are valuable for anything to do with discernment and spiritual guidance. Paul, I believe, is here referring in some way to the great transcendentals of Greek philosophy: the true, the good and the beautiful. They are always worthy of our consideration. And the search for them, and openness to them—to what is truthful, and good and beautiful—seems to me to be at the centre of human life and vital to the art of discernment. For there is no merit in remaining within narrow religious, ecclesiastical or spiritual perspectives, even if at one time it seemed right and worthy to do so. Rather I would like, for myself and for anyone who comes to me for guidance, to look to a wider spirit of openness to life, according to our differing gifts and interests and concerns.

And to the things that Paul proposes for our consideration, one ought today to add the quest for justice, the stand for what is right and equitable. That is vitally important too, and especially for discernment. So many people, in all sorts of situations, are being treated dismissively and are looked down upon. Again, the Gospels are full of examples, and our world today no less so. So do I care for and stand for what is right? When I come across something inherently unjust, whether personal or institutional, can I summon the courage to stand against it, and stand alongside whoever struggles for what is right? Do I also have a concern for the truth, and would I look for it in every person's situation—or might I avert my gaze and not look too deeply? Might I be too afraid of opposition, of the dismissiveness of those in authority, who often have ways of closing ranks and preventing the truth coming to light? These are real and living questions. And again there is much in the gospel

which is of great relevance here—much to be learned from contemplating the stance and outlook and words of Jesus.

For many years now I have helped with part of the summer training programme in spiritual direction at St Beuno's in North Wales, and part of my brief has been to open up the topic of injustice. It has been quite an experience each year, as people from different parts of the world have shared experiences of the situations they have known. We have often been left with a sense of helplessness at the overwhelming realities of injustice portrayed. Yet we have had no doubt about the relevance of what we share and reflect on for the field of spiritual direction.

And Once Again God's People

In conclusion, it is worth saying something obvious: that in the midst of all we could say about discernment, we learn best from the extraordinary lives of ordinary people. Spiritual guides, although they sometimes offer something special in terms of listening and wisdom, are always receiving and learning. None of us lives anywhere else but among God's people—in that gathering, that communion of persons. And, although we need time apart and prayer, the simple sharing in one another's lives, in humanity and faith, is among the greatest gifts of all under God. That sharing, whatever form it takes, provides the proper realism and rootedness for authentic discernment. And I happen to believe that it is the place where the authentic voice of the Shepherd is most heard today, calling by name, and calling lovingly into truth.

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