

# TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

## Towards a Theology of Spiritual Direction

IN THIS SERIES of Traditions of Spiritual Guidance, which has been running in *The Way* since 1984, most of the articles have been historical, focusing attention on the contribution which a particular individual, group, movement or school has made to the development of the art of spiritual guidance. This present article, however, is slightly different. All forms of Christian ministry have a theological foundation and *raison d'être* in the sense that they are rooted in God's self-revelation in scripture and in history and called into being by the life of the Church community. In the last twenty years in certain parts of the world, notably but not exclusively in the United States, Britain, Ireland and Australasia, there has been a growing demand for spiritual direction, with a corresponding rediscovery and development of that art. The numbers of those practising spiritual guidance has increased and training courses for spiritual directors and prayer guides have multiplied. In many cases the emphasis of these courses has been predominantly practical: they have set out to train people in the art of spiritual direction, using and developing traditional models. The practice of any ministry, however, if it is to be effective and faithful, needs to be accompanied by regular theological reflection. In the current development of spiritual guidance we have reached a point, so it seems to me, at which it is helpful to reflect once again on the theology which shapes this ministry. This article is intended as a contribution to that reflection. It sketches a possible theological framework within which current practice of spiritual guidance can be understood and discussed.

### *Theology and psychology*

Another notable feature of pastoral ministry generally and spiritual direction in particular in recent years has been the influence of psychology. Observations, insights, theories and therapeutic methods from all branches of psychology have immeasurably enriched and helped to develop a more effective practice of spiritual guidance. While some people have been content to incorporate psychological insights and therapeutic processes eclectically into their practice of spiritual guidance, others have devised entire programmes which attempt to bring psychology, spirituality and Christian theology together in a unified theoretical and therapeutic system.<sup>1</sup>

While this holy alliance of psychology, spirituality and theology has undoubtedly had a beneficial effect on the practice of spiritual direction, it also raises several important questions. One question has to do with similarities and differences between on the one hand spiritual direction and on the other hand

counselling and psychotherapy. Is spiritual direction primarily therapeutic? Is spiritual direction the equivalent of counselling with an explicit faith dimension? Do counselling in a Christian context and spiritual direction have basically the same aims and adopt the same methods? Are the theoretical frameworks which underpin counselling, psychotherapy and spiritual direction fundamentally the same or radically different?

I am not going to attempt a detailed answer to those questions in this article. The very presence of such issues, however, does indicate that those of us who are involved in the ministry of spiritual direction would do well to ask ourselves once again what, in theological and psychological terms, we are about. Once again it is time to take our assumptions out of the cupboard and examine them.

#### *The basic framework*

The primary framework of ideas, beliefs and language which shapes Christian spiritual direction is theological (rather than, for example, psychological). Christian spiritual direction is first and foremost a ministry within a community of faith, even though not all those who ask for direction necessarily belong to that community of faith. In this community Christian theology provides the primary theoretical foundation and justification for the practice of spiritual direction, just as theoretical psychology does for counselling or psychotherapy. While certain insights and therapeutic methods of psychology (or for that matter of sociology, medicine or other relevant sciences) may be extremely valuable, they are not in themselves the heart of this ministry. Spiritual direction in the Christian community grows out of and is shaped by the self-revelation of God in Christ and the presence of the Spirit.

One of the fundamental theological factors that shapes Christian spiritual guidance is the belief that a God of unconditional love invites us, individually and collectively, to live and to act in partnership with God and with one another to bring about the reign of God. In this invitation the reign of God is a reality which encompasses every dimension of life. It has inner, personal and social-structural dimensions. It includes both personal growth into the kinds of people God desires us to be and the struggle to create a society and a world which are more human and a clearer reflection of God's desires. In this context the task of a spiritual director is in the first place to let the directee respond to this invitation by God both in life and in prayer: 'to let the creator deal directly with the creature and the creature directly with his or her creator'.<sup>2</sup> The subsequent dialogue between director and directee explores both God's invitation and the directee's response to it, with a view to seeing how the reign of God might be more completely realized in the life of the directee.

#### *An eschatological perspective*

Taking part in the struggle to make the reign of God a living reality obviously has an eschatological dimension, which gives Christian spiritual direction its particular perspective on the past, the present and the future. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the revelation of the outpouring of the Spirit, we

have an assertion that God's victory over evil is already won, once and for all. This serves to give us confidence that the reign of God, the personal and social transformations which we work for in and through spiritual guidance are in fact possible, and that the primary agent of this process is the Spirit who has already been poured out upon us. This eschatological context in which spiritual direction takes place, however, also gives us a perspective on the future. The belief that the reign of God, while already present, finds its fulfilment in the future life assures us that the work of empowering and liberating that goes on here and now has eternal value and will eventually be brought to completion.

*Beyond personal healing*

The alliance between psychology and spiritual direction, the emphasis on individual healing and growth which has characterized certain popular schools of psychology over the last twenty years, and the fact that in spiritual direction one individual gives close attention to another sometimes give the impression that spiritual direction is no more than yet another means to personal healing and growth for individuals. It may easily appear that for director and directee alike the horizon is limited to ensuring whatever degree of individual therapy and development is possible, without very much consideration of anything beyond. Moreover, there appears to be a general impression that spiritual direction in the past has often been concerned almost exclusively with the 'inner life', the life of prayer, personal sin and individual morality.<sup>3</sup> When, however, spiritual direction is shaped primarily by Christian faith and theology, it has a very different and far broader horizon.

The doctrine of the Incarnation implies that creation, humanity, culture and society stand in a new relationship with God. God has entered fully into the condition of being human, has freely and definitively placed himself within the sphere of the human, without at the same time forfeiting God's transcendence, God's otherness. As a result, there is no area of human life that is untouched by this presence of God. The invitation offered to all in the Incarnation is that we should live in communion with God and with one another in such a way that the whole of life, including not only personal aspects but also economic, social, political and cultural structures and institutions, is shaped by the presence of God. It is, in other words, an invitation and encouragement to us to fashion all dimensions of human life in such a way that they share in and reflect the life of God.

This theological perspective has important implications for spiritual direction. In many of the forms in which it is practised at present spiritual direction necessarily focuses on the individual person. It is a ministry in which one adult Christian puts certain skills at the service of another, for the purpose of assisting growth in Christian discipleship. Nonetheless, when one's practice of spiritual direction is shaped by a fuller understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation and of the reign of God, the aim of the process cannot be limited to promoting individual healing and growth, without reference to other, wider concerns. God invites each person to discover and explore appropriate ways of allowing the

reign of God to enter into every dimension of life, social as well as personal, and exploring this is an integral part of the spiritual direction process.

In the present climate, therefore, in which considerable time and energy are devoted to personal development and therapy, it is important that the ministry of spiritual direction be grounded in a mature understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation and of the reign of God. This enables us to see individual healing and growth in a wider Christian perspective, as part of the struggle for the reign of God. Individual healing and growth, when they take place, are one dimension of God's reign, one form among several in which the presence of God among us becomes visible.

### *The community of faith*

The formation of Christians in holiness is the task of the Church, the community of faith, and for this purpose the Church appoints educators, catechists and others to whom is entrusted the ministry of formation. Spiritual direction is part of this ministry. In a real sense, therefore, spiritual directors are representatives of the community of faith. In the days when spiritual direction was allied very closely with aural confession, this connection between the director and the community was clear, at least when the priest in confession was actually seen as representing the community. Even so, the development of 'private confession' as opposed to communal celebrations of reconciliation tended to obscure rather than reveal the character of the minister as representative of the community of faith.

In the last few years a shift has taken place in the practice of spiritual guidance. Spiritual direction is no longer tied closely to the sacrament of reconciliation and the range of those practising spiritual direction is widening to include lay people and religious (both women and men) as well as clergy. People come into the ministry of spiritual direction in various ways: some because they feel drawn to it and discover or develop the required dispositions and skills; some because they find that other people recognize in them the necessary qualities and 'call' them to this ministry, perhaps even before they themselves are aware that they possess the appropriate gifts. The personal gifts necessary for spiritual direction are not conferred by ordination, though in fact whether he or she has the gifts or not, a deacon or priest is likely to be called on to exercise that ministry simply because of his or her position in the community. What I want to emphasize, here, however, is that at present, in comparison for example with the ministry of catechesis, we have very few structures or symbols which embody the fact that the spiritual director is a representative of the community to whom the community entrusts the task of Christian formation.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it would be helpful to explore this issue in terms of the continuing and necessary tension in the Church between 'institution' and 'charism'. When spiritual guidance was tied almost exclusively to sacramental confession, it was accepted by the community as part of the function of a priest, irrespective of whether an individual priest had the necessary qualities. Now that this connection has been broken, spiritual guidance is seen as a charism, a gift of the

Spirit which some individuals (whether ordained or not) possess, while others do not. As a result—and this is especially true of lay people who, as often, find themselves in a more vulnerable position than clerics or religious—many people who have been drawn into spiritual direction and practise it effectively are forced by present circumstances to engage in it without receiving adequate recognition or support from the community, the Church, and sometimes even in an atmosphere of ‘official’ suspicion and mistrust. The answer to this difficulty is not, of course, to re-institutionalize spiritual direction or to make it the exclusive preserve of one particular group. Nonetheless, there is a real sense in which the church community and its leaders have a responsibility to recognize and visibly foster gifts of the Spirit given to individuals for the building up of the Body of Christ.

*The human person*

We do not need theology to tell us that the human person is a complex creature; experience is enough. Nonetheless, theology is helpful in exploring and explaining that complexity, and can offer a framework within which it can be understood. A Christian understanding of the human person, derived from biblical sources, highlights two features of being human which are central to the task of spiritual direction. On the one hand, the whole human person is ‘spirit’: open to the transcendent, to God; able to receive God’s gifts, to heed the voice of the Spirit of God and to reach out to others in self-forgetting compassion and love; capable of growing by grace and of being changed into the person God desires her or him to be. The fact that we are ‘spirit’ gives us the capacity to live in the Spirit as sons and daughters of the Father and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, at one and the same time, the whole human person is also, in the Pauline sense, ‘flesh’: weak and fragile; capable of neglecting or rejecting God and of becoming absorbed in the satisfactions of the senses or of the ego and its interests; liable to idolatry and sin (Rom 8; Gal 5, 16–26). In this sense, it should be emphasized, ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’ are not two separable layers placed one above the other, nor are they what we often understand by ‘soul’ and ‘body’. They are two co-existing, ineluctable and inseparable dimensions of what it is to be human; the one opens us to genuine communion with God and with one another and to growth and wholeness. The other draws us in the opposite direction, away from what God desires us to be. The ‘spirit’ in us gives life; the ‘flesh’ is ultimately destructive of ourselves and others.

The fact that each of us is inextricably composed of both ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’ means that we have ideas, feelings and desires which pull us in opposite directions. They draw us either towards God, giving life, or away from God, which leads to death. The struggle between ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’ is what gives rise to experiences of what the Ignatian tradition of discernment calls ‘consolation’ and ‘desolation’. At any one time we may be dominated by ‘spirit’ or by ‘flesh’. The task of spiritual guidance is to understand the often subtle ways in which these two dimensions operate and to do what is appropriate to assist another person to ‘live by the Spirit’ and not by the ‘flesh’. In other words, the role of a

spiritual director is to help another person to understand those ideas, feelings and desires which belong to the 'spirit' and those which belong to the 'flesh', in order to tread the path of 'spirit' in the circumstances of everyday life.

*The value of experience*

Contemporary spiritual direction rightly gives a central place to the directee's experience.<sup>5</sup> That, in fact, is the primary focus of the conversation between director and directee. The purpose of this conversation is to explore, reflect upon and interpret that experience in faith with a view to shaping future choices and actions in the service of the reign of God.

In spiritual guidance, we need to be clear about what constitutes religious experience or an experience of God and what does not.<sup>6</sup> It is not only in 'peak moments', whether expected or not, nor only in specific activities such as prayer, worship, reading the Bible that we encounter God. The whole of creation is capable of revealing God to us. God is present, though often hidden and implicit, in all our experience of the world around us and of ourselves. What particular activities or experiences such as prayer, meditation or visiting sacred places do is focus our attention more directly upon the presence of God in the whole of experience and evoke in us clear responses to God's presence and gifts.

One of the basic assumptions in contemporary spiritual direction is that God addresses us and reveals himself to us in and through our experience. At the same time, we belong to a community of faith to whose members God has previously revealed who God is and who they are in relation to God. Both Scripture and the Christian tradition are a record of a community's experience of God and further reflection on that experience. In this respect also, therefore, Christian spiritual direction has an ecclesial dimension. The principal task of the director is to help the directee to interpret her or his experience in such a way that it shapes future choices and courses of action. The directee, however, is not perceived solipsistically as an individual who experiences God in isolation from the community. The directee's experience of God is related to that of the community in various ways, and therefore is interpreted and evaluated in reference to the community's past and present experience and in reference to the traditions, the liturgy and the life of the Church which embody it. On the one hand an individual person's experience of God is mediated by the community's experience, in the sense that the biblical texts, the traditions, the liturgy and the sacred symbols of the community speak to the individual of God. On the other hand, the community's experience also helps the task of interpretation by either supporting that of the individual or by challenging it. In either case, the community's traditions and life act as a touchstone by which its individual members' experience may be understood and evaluated in direction with a view to shaping the future.

*Women's and men's experience*

Feminist theology in recent years has been founded on a number of interrelated convictions. One of these is that women's experience and approach

to life are significantly different from men's. If, therefore, experience is truly a source of understanding about God and about human life in relation to God, women's experience offers a way of knowing God and an approach to theology which are significantly different from those of men, but also equally valuable. A second foundational feminist perception is that in the history of the Church and the development of our understanding of God patriarchy has ruled to such an extent that women's experience and the understanding of God that springs from it have received little or no recognition and have been positively suppressed. What is true of theology is also true of spiritual direction. In the history of the Church, because until recently theology and the ministry of direction have belonged almost exclusively to ordained priests, most spiritual directors and 'spiritual writers' have been men. With a few exceptions, women who sought spiritual direction were guided almost exclusively by men. Likewise, the aims and methods of spiritual direction and the models of growth and transformation which it presupposes, are seen as having been drawn largely, if not exclusively, from men's experience, understanding and outlook.

As regards, therefore, the topic of this article, which is to suggest a theological framework for the current practice of spiritual direction, feminist theology and spirituality still have a project in hand: to offer new and revised perspectives to those who are involved in the spiritual direction of women, based on a more just recognition of the nature and value of women's experience. These perspectives will question both the theology which shapes the current aims and practices of spiritual direction and the language in which they are phrased. They will also offer an alternative account of spiritual direction, and redefine its aims and methods in terms which establish and affirm the value of women's experience, outlook and understanding.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, if women's experience is significantly different from men's so also is men's from women's. What we also need, therefore, is a new critical evaluation of men's experience, of men's approaches to spiritual guidance and of their underlying theology.

### *Images of wholeness*

Spiritual direction is a dialogue in which one individual accompanies and where necessary assists another in his or her search for wholeness. In trying to define wholeness in recent decades we have been much assisted by what the best psychological schools understand by human wholeness. Psychological definitions, however helpful, are not absolute: they are likely to be relative to a particular time and culture and to reflect the values and outlook of that time and culture. Another implication of the doctrine of the Incarnation, however, is that in Jesus Christ God is intent on teaching us what it is to be truly human. The gospel thus offers us a critique of all times and cultures, including our own, and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus it offers us a model of human wholeness. Christian spiritual direction, therefore, needs to have a vision of human wholeness shaped primarily by the gospel. We might attempt to describe Christian wholeness as a matter of establishing and sustaining relationships with God, oneself, other people, the Church, and the world in

which we live in a way that reflects the gospel. Christian spiritual direction, therefore, has to do with fostering the kinds of relationships which reflect Jesus' relationships with God and the world around him.

*The paschal mystery*

One of the most difficult tasks in spiritual guidance is learning to understand and to handle in a Christian manner experiences of diminishment, weakness, pain, suffering and death. If it is true that in Jesus Christ God is teaching us about ourselves, offering us a pattern of what human life is, then we may look to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus for guidance in understanding and dealing with these experiences. The message of the death and resurrection of Jesus is a hopeful one. The paschal mystery indicates that in and through experiences of weakness, pain and even death God is able to bring life in abundance. The suffering and death of Jesus, undergone in trust and hope, were the starting point for liberation to new life both for Jesus himself and for his associates.

This mystery, therefore, has an overwhelming importance for the ministry of spiritual direction. It points to God's promise that similar experiences in the lives of others, though painful and often tragic, need not be wholly destructive and a matter for despair. On the contrary, they are the (perhaps necessary) occasions for new life, for growth to wholeness, for liberation and for the establishment of the reign of God in greater fulness. The paschal mystery, in which pain and death give way to new life, establishes one of the recurring patterns of true growth and transformation in human experience.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Christotherapy, Psychosynthesis, Clinical Theology and the work of the Institute of Formative Spirituality are some examples of attempts to bring together psychology, spirituality and Christian theology in a complete programme or system. Each, of course, has its devotees and its critics.

<sup>2</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola*, section 15.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the article on spiritual direction in the 1907 edition of *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*.

<sup>4</sup> The RCIA is perhaps an exception. Its structure, its clear community orientation and the fact that it is parish-based leave the way open for showing clearly that those who accompany the neophytes are recognized by the community as its representatives in the ministry of spiritual formation.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *The practice of spiritual direction* by William A. Barry and William J. Connolly (Seabury, New York, 1983), especially ch 2.

<sup>6</sup> See Dermot A. Lane, *The experience of God* (Veritas, Dublin, 1985) for a good, short theological account of religious experience.

<sup>7</sup> Books such as Kathleen Fischer's *Women at the well: feminist perspectives on spiritual direction* (SPCK, London, 1989) have begun this project.