

## Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

# Spiritual direction in cyberspace

*Gemma Simmonds*

EVERYONE'S DOING IT. IT SEEMS AS IF LIFE has become virtual overnight, the expansion of on-line services mushrooming as astonishingly as the fortunes that are apparently to be made in e-commerce. Transactions and encounters that once required moving to the place of service provision and interacting with the providers can now be accomplished with greater ease and speed from the convenience of one's own home or desk. Internet shopping is now being touted as the answer to the pressure of modern life, the isolation of the rural elderly and the lack of local services. Why, some ask, should spiritual services not also be available in this way? Would it not reach a wider audience, many of whom no longer present themselves at the traditional outlet of the parish church? Might not spirituality in cyberspace be one response to the increasing shortage of ministers to care for the faithful? It may well be that some spiritual and pastoral needs could be as well or even better met virtually than in reality, but the notion of virtual spirituality presents some knotty problems to the holy service-providers. At one glance, it looks reasonable: for the conveying of a message, first catch your audience, and if the congregations in the pews are shrinking, then at least the attention of today's surfer might be caught with the twenty-first-century version of Augustine's *'Tolle, lege'*. And there are personal as well as practical advantages. Shy vocations-enquirers can now wander around virtual monasteries, seeing into cells, hearing the chant, and exploring the basics without having to face the alarming prospect of a real, live monk who could prove over-enthusiastic in his recruiting techniques, and ask awkward questions. Worshippers on the lookout for good liturgy can see and hear a sample before leaving their houses in search of a congregation.

But it was only a question of time before the debate arose around virtual spirituality, and especially the notion of spiritual direction via the internet. The idea of sacramental confession and absolution by e-mail has already been explored amid howls of derision and indignation from some, and serious urging from others, as being at least one way to reach out to those of irregular practice, or to combat the shortage of

priests. For some, the indignation is fuelled by the fear that the unique and sacred nature of the sacraments and of the spiritual life are going to be taken over by offers of cheap grace and ersatz conversion. They suggest that the idea of virtual spirituality is as impossible as that of virtual sex, leaving the searcher as empty as a voyeur, shown the sights but forever deprived of an experience which can only be achieved through active, en fleshed participation. But a recent article of mine on spiritual direction by e-mail has elicited many responses both virtual and incarnate, which suggest that there are a number of issues needing to be addressed here. Are religious web sites such as the Irish Jesuit [www.jesuit.ie](http://www.jesuit.ie) the answer to the need for readily available spiritual support amid a vastly wider spread of the population than retreat centres can cater for? Can they reach the parts other spiritual resources cannot reach? And can we go beyond just providing instant resource materials and actually engage with retreat-giving or spiritual direction *per se* via e-mail? By encouraging virtual spiritual encounters, are we merely exacerbating the abdication of personal responsibility that en fleshed encounters would demand? Or are we providing, at least initially, the anonymity which might allow the disengaged to make contact at a level which feels manageable? What of those who have no access to retreat centres or spiritual directors? Might this be a way to build virtual community at a time of increasing fragmentation? Might it be a medium that would allow the deaf to engage far more effectively in a conversation whose words need to be seen, and from which they so often experience exclusion by the hearing? And what might such a medium allow us to do that the immediacy of spoken encounters prevents? Is the keyboard mightier than the word in this instance, or are we selling out to technology?

***Many are called but few are hearing***

The question of outreach is certainly addressed, in at least the numerical sense, by virtual spiritual services. But it is not only a question of labour shortage. As religious practice becomes less and less common, it becomes increasingly problematic for those unfamiliar with or alienated from the worshipping community to approach with their questions and desires. It has become a cliché in religious circles that, paradoxically, in these days of falling numbers in the pews, there is an increasing desire for and interest in the spiritual journey. There may be a lot of 'resting' Christians out there, but many continue to wrestle with the big questions though they may not wish to engage with them in the

forum of the card-carrying community. There also remains for many people a serious problem of access to adequate spiritual companionship. Retreat houses and religious communities need to make ends meet and have to charge realistic prices for their services, though many operate on a shoestring for the sake of those unable to afford the luxury of a weekend away or a retreat. They are also few and far between in comparison with the numbers of people who would benefit from a more personal style of ministry than is possible within the average parish. But, for searchers, an initial approach to a retreat house already represents a considerable level of trust, confidence and understanding. Making a booking to go away somewhere and deliver your spiritual life into the hands of strangers is a risky business, even for those who are familiar with the Church and have the confidence to do it. For the many who feel alienated from the structural church, or who feel that their hold on religious matters is not sufficiently strong or respectable to pass muster, it offers too close an encounter for comfort.

So where are people to look, within the safety of anonymity, for responses to lingering questions or to the first, tentative exploration of a more satisfactory spiritual life? The very firm conclusion that one reaches at the end of any sort of retreat day, week of guided prayer or spiritual encounter in a parish or group setting is that there are probably thousands of people all over the country whose spiritual life is lying dormant, an untapped treasure trove for them and the wider community, for want of the encouragement that personal spiritual direction would give. The biblical paradigms for such encounters are the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and Philip and the eunuch. They first walk along, recounting their story to one another and trying to make sense of their experience. Another comes, who travels with them unrecognized, and responds to their narrative by making connections with Scripture. The interaction of the Word of God and of their own story allows them simultaneously to understand what has happened to them and to encounter God in a new and life-giving way. In the second account, Philip overhears the eunuch reading Scripture to himself and asks if he understands what he is reading. 'How can I,' responds the eunuch, 'unless I have someone to guide me?' (Acts 8:30). In both cases, there is a dynamic between Scripture and life experience, and an interpersonal encounter which leads to a faith that is confirmed in sacramental signs and by the desire for apostolic witness. The same needs and the same potential for spiritual insight and growth reveal themselves in a multiplicity of apostolic contexts. But it takes a good deal of persuading for people to believe that they are as gifted and graced as

they are. People's lives, messy and complicated though they might be, are full of grace, but many have not been able to see it. Often people of remarkable competence and maturity in professional or practical fields are trying to run their spiritual lives on the information they gleaned from primary school or catechism classes. Professional giants but spiritual pygmies, they grapple to reconcile their own spontaneous sense of encounter with the divine set against nursery-style notions of prayer or inadequate images of God. They have an instinctive sense of the holiness of creation but turn their faces resolutely to what they have been taught to consider 'holy', even though it has become sterile and alien to them. Francis Thompson, who knew more than most about the God of surprises, pointed to this continuing tragedy of spiritual alienation:

'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,  
That miss the many-splendoured thing.<sup>1</sup>

It might well be that another medium of exploration is required here, not in the context of church but one where they are encouraged to seek God within the less 'sanctified' world of the internet – a place where the seeking of information and communication with strangers seems less strange and threatening, more part of ordinary life.

### *Life in the fast lane*

For many people the greatest challenge of modern life is the speed at which it must be lived. In a city like London, weakened transport infrastructure makes for longer hours spent travelling to work. Hours of work in Britain are longer than elsewhere in Europe, and the fear of losing their job drives many to cut corners with their personal time. In the age of all-night and all-week shopping, the notion of Sabbath is becoming a dim historical memory along with milk deliveries and standing up for the national anthem at the end of a film.

The notion of spiritual direction or, at least, spiritual conversation, by correspondence is nothing new in the Church's tradition. The letters of Abelard and Heloise, of Jane Frances de Chantal and Francis de Sales, of Ignatius Loyola, Catherine of Siena or, in this century, of Dom John Chapman, have long provided spiritual sustenance and wisdom for more than those to whom they were addressed. The idea that one can converse on serious spiritual matters and derive fruit from the conversation with someone who is not present is well established. But the

model for this is the dynamic between spiritual master and disciple, even in correspondences that were experienced as mutually edifying. Questions about prayer and the spiritual life were more an exploration of mystical theology, wrestling with questions of meaning and understanding and practice. As such they lent themselves reasonably easily to the kind of discussion, question and answer that are the stuff of such correspondence. But models of spiritual guidance have shifted, as attested by the reluctance of many to use terms such as 'spiritual direction' or even guidance. The word 'pilgrimage' or 'journey' has better resonances for some, 'companionship' or 'accompaniment' is preferred by others. All these point to a more balanced relationship of equals, and the last has interesting implications of playing to support the music of another's life, finding the harmonies and rhythms that will fit. But this raises the questions of methodology that challenge the notion of virtual spiritual conversation.

### *Models of spiritual guidance*

It is perhaps only since the English-speaking world began, in the 1970s, to use a model for spiritual guidance based on the dynamics of person-centred psychotherapy, that companions have learned to rely on the more nuanced skills of interpreting meaning in people's body language, choice of words and general self-expression. The question here is more 'How does it feel?' than 'What does it mean?' But this then opens up whole questions about how effective spiritual guidance can be when undertaken outside the context of an actual meeting. There can be elements of theologizing in virtual encounters, of exploring the meaning of Scripture or of some aspect of faith or praxis. But if the encounter is meant to be one where two people seek to clarify the meaning of lived experience, and if the nature of the encounter with God is assessed by a person's affective response rather than by their intellectual analysis of it, then the incarnate context is going to be important. I know that as a spiritual director I listen with my eyes. I hear what a person is saying but I also watch the signs given with the body. Trained originally as a linguist, I catch significance not only in the choice of words but in the choice of what is not said, in the tone in which words are said, the resonances, sometimes unconscious, with other words spoken or references made. Trying to make sense of what another is saying, when the other is not sure of the meaning either, is like detection work, unpeeling layers of meaning, of desire, of self-deception. I am aware of my own body's reaction at times, of yawning

or overwhelming tiredness or sudden pain or exhilaration or peace. These often prove to be mirrors of the hidden emotions of the other. If this is the art of spiritual accompaniment, then it is hard to see how virtual spiritual conversation can cope, the computer screen proving a blunt instrument for a precision skill. But then, for some, this eyeball-to-eyeball encounter may be overwhelmingly intimate, intrusive in its closeness. The very neutrality of the screen might prove the most apposite tool in some conversations.

### *Behind the confessional screen*

In the days when religious lived in large and settled communities, there was often an 'extraordinary confessor' assigned to the community, so that at regular intervals members might celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation with someone who was not part of their everyday life. Even with the anonymity of the confessional, there could be felt a need to talk something through with someone more remote and neutral. The same is true of people seeking a retreat or short-term spiritual help from someone other than their usual companion. The anonymity of the screen can be a help to those whose contact with the Church is minimal and who do not yet have the confidence to make the approach direct. But in times of pressure or stress, it can also help to defuse the emotions around a situation for people who would otherwise be at ease with personal encounters. If a person needs to retain a strong sense of autonomy or neutrality in tackling a particular issue, virtual conversation may be the best medium. It can even be disconcerting to meet the interlocutor face to face, as when long-term pen pals stand before one another, when meeting for the first time, speechless and unnerved to be faced at last with a person both known and unknown. I recently heard from a friend who had had a lengthy spiritual correspondence by e-mail during a time of extreme family crisis. I asked him why he found it so helpful, and if he could compare it to personal encounters. A reluctant churchgoer, he deals professionally with the written word all day and it is his natural medium. He liked the fact that he could use the computer like a journal, writing out of himself the traumas of his situation, but that he could then go over it again, editing it before giving over his thoughts and feelings to another. That does, of course, leave the control very much in the writer's hands, and a more therapeutic model of spiritual guidance might seek to elicit more spontaneous responses to get a less pruned and polished version of what the individual is thinking and feeling. The truth may be more easily revealed to both in the raw,

unvarnished word than in the tidy narrative. But he also experienced some shock when meeting his correspondent in the flesh, when the latter came to offer support in a desperately fraught situation. My friend had to deal not only with his own emotions but with his companion's, whose highly valued on-line neutrality and calm deserted him in the face of a grieving family.

I had a conversation for over a year with a woman I had never met, who contacted me via a vocations web site from Eastern Europe. I ended up being a companion to her through her discernment of a religious vocation, her attempt at religious life and subsequent departure. Certainly I think that the presence of an outside and neutral observer seems to have been of considerable service to her. I was conscious of feeling drawn into the ups and downs of the story, but it was possible for me to be much more measured and even-handed than I suspect I would have been on the spot. And for her it was possible to get a perspective on the wider picture of religious life that would have been difficult to access within her own country, with its very particular situation, dominated by recent history. The distance can be an asset as well as a disadvantage.

Perhaps the screen can operate, in a relationship of spiritual guidance, rather like the couch in one of psychoanalysis. The couch has a variety of functions. It can shield both analyst and client from the intrusion of the analyst's reactions and facial expressions, leaving room for greater neutrality and a sense of not being judged. At best the confessional could also provide this, and on-line spiritual direction might provide that buffer in a conversation. It also leaves room for the client to give vent to strong feelings without the brake of the analyst's seen presence. But it is essentially an asymmetrical relationship, where one partner in the conversation is seen and the other is not. There is a tilting of the balance of power there that would not generally be thought to be necessary or even desirable in a relationship of spiritual guidance, gurudom notwithstanding. And it also renders the nuances caught in the voice of the client considerably more crucial for the analyst. If a spiritual companion is trying to make sense of what another is saying, without the benefit of anything but the written word, can the sense effectively be caught? Conversations themselves are tricky things. We have to think on our feet, and can end up saying what we do not intend, or giving the wrong emphasis where it is not helpful. It is hard to be sure that we mean what we say and say what we mean, that we understand and have been understood by the other as we would wish. The notion of being able to edit our conversation, whether as

companion or pilgrim, offers an attractive sense of security, of control over the riskily spontaneous.

But equally the written word, even in the immediacy of the screen, can develop a momentum of its own wholly out of proportion to its writer's original intention. In spoken conversation we are always at risk of mishearing and of remembering incorrectly. We can't run over the conversation again unless it has been recorded. But in writing there is the risk of something being set in concrete form so that it can be gone over again and again. And this may prove not to have the advantages of Ignatian repetition! I became deeply aware of the challenges within both the rhythm and the nuances of the conversation when I made my first attempt to give a retreat in daily life by e-mail. The very immediacy of the medium meant that it was difficult to set the boundaries around time and response that come naturally when one is seeing a person once a week or a fortnight. It is certainly possible to decide you will only e-mail one another on a given day at given intervals, but it is less easy to keep to that when it is all so easy and instant, and the send button hovers invitingly. Written responses, questions or challenges, can come across as very bald and blunt when it is impossible to soften the words by tone or look. Perhaps in the end a lot of this depends on whether one is more at ease in the written than in the spoken medium, and people vary. But I suspect that a lot of very careful negotiating of boundaries and expectations needs to go on before two strangers engage in such a process.

### *A question of clarity*

For Ignatius, the most essential element in the Spiritual Exercises is to clarify, as a preliminary to prayer, the *id quod volo*, the desire that is emerging through the process. In the end I suspect it will be a matter of being clear what one wants out of computerized companionship. I would see the internet as being principally a highly effective tool for reaching the disengaged, the frantically busy and the curious. There are also some excellent sites offering what many people need on a daily or regular basis in their spiritual journey, particularly good and varied resources to allow a wider exploration of prayer than is possible from one's own limited repertoire. I have frequently heard, from people accessing the Sacred Space site, that finding a piece of Scripture of the day, given in that context, can feel extraordinarily personal and intimate, having the element of surprise and delight at recognizing God's providence in the serendipity of choices. I see it as useful for people



who don't know where to start with their questions and exploration, or who are far from being able to face personal encounters. I see it, inevitably, as facilitating spiritual journeys of people who are isolated either by geographical factors or by difficulties with speech. A deaf man contacted me by e-mail precisely about this, seeing virtual spiritual companionship as one way in which he might redress the balance of relationship and break out of his silence. Intriguingly, it has also become a marvellous way of being able to talk to enclosed religious, a twenty-first-century version of a visit to the parlour – that context in which, during centuries past, so much spiritual conversation took place. Retreat houses and spiritual companions will always be a much-needed resource, and in that sense have nothing to fear from their virtual rivals. But they touch so very few lives in comparison to the need and to the people longing to be heard and understood. And so much good quality learning can be done via the internet on the part of people for whom a sabbatical is an impossible dream. Distance learning is the great expansion area of the future in education: education for apostolic ministries and spiritual growth could open up huge new possibilities for the people of God via the internet. What only time and experience will show is how successfully spiritual conversation by e-mail can ever offer retreats or ongoing companionship in anything like the same quality as real encounters. After all, grace and truth came fully among us only when the word became flesh . . .

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#### NOTES

1 Francis Thompson, 'The Kingdom of God' (1913).