

# The place and value of theology

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**S**PIRITUAL GUIDANCE IS A MINISTRY, a means of personal help in the living of faith, much in demand today. Its strength lies precisely in its personal focus and emphasis, where someone seeking guidance in the religious orientation of life is received and heard by the guide, and enabled to go forward, to grow, in faith and prayer. It is a quite specific ministry therefore, where the guide or director is required to be a respectful listener, responding to and encouraging whoever comes, and in this way providing help from within the horizon of faith.

The ability to listen well, to have respect and empathy, to appreciate the different ways of prayer in a person's life, to offer wise counsel, all within a faith context – these qualities, and others, are expected of a good spiritual guide. But now a question may be asked: what about the relevance of having some adequate theological understanding? Alongside the many other important requirements, what does a guide need from the field of theology in order to have the best possible grounding in his or her ministry? By theology here I mean some intellectual grasp of the great realities which the eyes of faith behold, especially those concerning God's revelation and coming to us in Christ, the divine working in human history for the world's salvation, and the mystery of God's presence in human hearts and lives. Of course, around these and other aspects of faith there are many theological viewpoints today. So a further question can revolve around the kinds of theological approach: what is especially valuable among them for underpinning and enhancing the ministry of spiritual guidance? In a brief and exploratory way, this article will attempt to address these questions, and to outline something of a general theological background for this personal and very individual ministry.

## *Theological approaches today*

To provide a framework for discussion, it is perhaps worth while pointing to some of the major theological currents of the present time, specifically those which have relevance to our theme. Theology, as we know it now, has grown out of a great renewal and

impetus in the field occurring over the past one hundred and fifty years and more. People like John Henry Newman in the last century and Henri de Lubac in this are among the many names associated with the best of that renewal, inspiring the move away from the dry discipline of neo-Scholasticism, and reclaiming a deeper approach to the study of theology suffused by a living sense of the mysteries of revelation. The Second Vatican Council became in many respects the defining event for the living of contemporary faith, situating the mystery of the Church squarely within the modern world's needs and aspirations. As a new point of departure within the Catholic Christian tradition, the Council also provided the stimulus for a more widespread interest in theology – and in turn encouraged the growth of the many theologies of the past decades which influence how we live and see our Christian calling today.

Among these theologies, which ones might be said to have a bearing on the field of spiritual guidance? There are three which I would single out as representing wide trends in recent times.

First, there is an extremely influential form, especially associated with the transcendental approach of Karl Rahner, which has as its starting point the dynamism within the human person towards the mystery of the divine. In human experience, there can be delineated an openness towards all the major aspects of faith treated of formally by theology – so that nothing dealt with theologically can be considered foreign to people's lives, but can be seen as the authentic fulfilment of all true human aspirations. On this model, the mystery of God's revelation is especially found in the midst of the deepest human realities, which of their nature are in a self-transcending process of openness towards God's self-disclosure in Christ who, in his humanity, guarantees the ultimate conclusion of that process.<sup>1</sup>

In the second place, there are the various theologies of liberation which have grown, not just in Latin America, but in many cultures around the world. Like the forms associated with Rahner's transcendental method, these liberation theologies start with human experience – but with that experience perceived as a decidedly social reality. They tend to work within the paradigms of oppressors and oppressed, the exploiters and the exploited, and by these means attempt to analyse the many tragic political and social situations in the world. Liberation theologians have argued passionately, therefore, that the core biblical teachings are about the liberation of the poor and all marginalized sectors of people from the tyrannical structures imposed by the powerful in society. Christian effort, align-

ing itself with the efforts of other like-minded people, is centrally about ridding the world of all forms of injustice and exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

Then there is a third, and growing, theological influence today, which at first glance has less to do with human experience as a starting point. Although there are other writers in this stream, the principal one has been the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar who, if one can speak of a single point of departure in his immense writings, begins from a sense of being overwhelmed by the deed of love done in Christ. Such an overwhelming sense of love, of glory, leads in Balthasar's view to the engagement of people's lives in the dynamism of that love which is for the redemption of the world. The starting point therefore is not so much human experience, human realities, but more directly the perception and experience of divine glory in Christ's endless love for the world. In this approach, there are in fact many consequences for human living; and, as well, large vistas are unfolded on the manifold ways of God's engagement with humanity in Christ.<sup>3</sup>

### *Complementary perspectives*

These three ways can be seen to provide complementary perspectives for good spiritual guidance. In the theology of Karl Rahner and similar writers, the place of the human is also the primary meeting point with mystery. Such an emphasis, widespread today, obviously encourages the articulation of human issues and experience in spiritual guidance, with a view to delineating the features of the divine action in human hearts. Then the theologies of liberation, wherever they impinge on the field of spiritual guidance, will in a forthright way incline the process towards an active prayer on issues affecting the poor, and to consequent decisions around life-style and ministry with or on behalf of the poor and all who suffer discrimination. And finally the theology of Balthasar, while it can also make way for the orientations contained in the other two approaches, will nevertheless lead to what I would consider a greater depth of understanding of the ways of the living God, and to the nature of Christian calling and mission in the contemporary world. Coming from someone who was himself involved in the ministry of spiritual guidance, and also in the giving of the Spiritual Exercises, Balthasar's theology will especially orientate a person's prayer towards the ways of openness to God in Christ, towards the necessity of choice in discipleship, and towards the receiving of a mission

as the realization of one's own personal meaning and fulfilment in life.

Naturally, not many spiritual guides will have the opportunity of studying these theological approaches in some depth. Yet some of the principal points in Karl Rahner and in liberation theology have been finding their way into many popular formats – as in various writings on spirituality, and through the workshops and courses today which stress human experience and treat of the themes of justice and liberation in their many aspects. Balthasar's rich contribution will take much longer to find its due place within the mainstreams of spirituality and guidance. Yet, for instance, his own book *Prayer*, containing a wealth of material, has already been helpful to various people over past years who have been captivated by its themes, including some who have entered into the ministry of spiritual direction.<sup>4</sup>

It is right, however, to make the point at this stage that many good guides have acquired a sufficient theological understanding, not so much through academic formation as through the authentic living of faith, nurtured and developed in the context of community and family and Church. For a lived and reflective faith is of course a necessary prerequisite for spiritual guidance. And deep reflection on faith already implies in some degree the articulation of a theological outlook, even if it requires filling out where possible by reading and academic study. Indeed, the best of theology itself in all ages has arisen directly from the experience of the actual living of faith. All the great inspirers and authors of good theology in the past era, from Newman onwards, have lived the Christian life intensely. This they have done first and foremost, and only secondarily have they embarked upon the theological quest – which is, in Anselm's phrase, a matter of 'faith seeking understanding'. And the recent proclamation of Thérèse of Lisieux as a Doctor of the Church is, I think, a very important recognition of how her simple life and courageous insights led to some of the finest theological understanding offered us in recent times.

### *Theologies implicit in forms of spiritual guidance*

In actual fact, then, spiritual guides in a pragmatic fashion carry on with their ministry, and usually it is only in an indirect way that they are influenced by some of the aspects of modern theology noted above. What is relevant about this *de facto* situation, I feel, is that many guides can be considered to belong to one or other of a

number of what may be called 'schools' of spiritual direction, depending on what they have read, the mentors they may have had, or the particular centres of training attended. And in turn of course these 'schools' are not exempt from the influence of theology, but owe something to it more or less, as it inevitably filters down through books and articles, through teachers, and on training courses.

But if these ways or 'schools' of the practice of spiritual guidance therefore have some theological background, it may be that in some cases they require a more adequate one than they have at present. So, among them, I would like to single out what I would consider are four fairly common forms of practice, in order to see how much of theology informs them – and to assess whether, in some instances, they might require a better and more satisfactory theological underpinning.

There is what may be called a *contemplative* approach, in which some understanding of the contemplative tradition – often especially of the past and present Carmelite writers on spirituality – is a primary motivating force for helping others. The life of prayer, and growth in that life, are central to this mode. Growth in the mystery of God is seen as a growth in love and faith, in a simplification of prayer from what is discursive and active to what is contemplative, receptive and more directly of God. Importantly, such prayer is itself seen as apostolic, of universal significance. But growth in active ministry, in this approach, also involves a shift away from emphasis on the self's activity to being open transparently to the immediate initiative of God.

There is a more actively apostolic approach, especially seen in the *Ignatian* way, founded on the deep experience of the Spiritual Exercises, in which discipleship and prayer all hinge on the person's response to the call of Christ, who forms the focus of the contemplations of the gospel mysteries. At the heart of this experience, existential choices are made concerning a way of life, followed by immersion in the Paschal Mystery, and a living of life henceforth which is a 'finding God in all things' and a loving service of God in a grateful return for immense love received. Spiritual guidance will revolve around these and the other themes of the Exercises, but will stress the finding of God in all the aspects of life, by means of reflective discernment in the face of issues and decisions.

There is also what could be described as a *psychological* mode, where the central emphasis and interest in spiritual guidance

revolves around issues of human growth. Prayer, and the choice of Scripture for prayer, have to do with what is uppermost in human consciousness, with the material which usually arises in therapy or counselling, but which is now brought for healing and resolution in a faith context. The basic premise in this very contemporary mode of guidance is that spiritual growth is impossible without the recognition of human resistances and having to work to remove them, all of this leading to a consequent freedom where one can be drawn forward by God. Sometimes this approach is considered an initial or preliminary one, where groundwork is done which will allow guidance to take one of the forms mentioned above. But sometimes it seems that this way is believed to be the overall one best suited to a person's needs at every stage of growth.

Finally there is what may be termed a *social justice* type of guidance. Although, for instance, it may in some cases utilize the framework of the Ignatian Exercises, it is yet a way of guidance based very much on liberation theology. It therefore stems from the view we have mentioned already, that religious faith and action have to be realized, made concrete, in a commitment to social change. Without this commitment, prayer based on this view would be unreal, removed from actual realities, inhabiting a spiritual or devotional world at variance with what is considered to be the central biblical viewpoint, that of God's alliance with the poor and their concerns. Spiritual guidance here, then, will aim at heightening consciousness of present-day issues of justice through carefully chosen texts from the Old Testament, also from the New Testament (principally the Synoptic Gospels), leading to a prayer which orientates to action on behalf of justice. Often people will be urged to have some first-hand experience of being with the poor, either in situations in the western world or among the peoples of the developing world. In all of this, the aim may be to effect a conversion of heart and outlook regarding the poor today.

### *Discerning the theological*

What about the theology which underpins the four approaches? It seems to me that the first two have the strongest theological foundations, and perhaps especially the Ignatian way. The Spiritual Exercises encompass a large, dynamic view of God's action in the world through the incarnation and in Christ, but a view which draws us into its picture through the living of our own lives and the decisions we make. Then, in a manner profoundly right for our

times, the contemplative approach stresses that great change in us over time which would allow the initiative of God to be in reality the governing principle of our lives of prayer and discipleship. Sometimes traditionally at odds with each other, especially because of an inadequate understanding of the contemplative dimension of the prayer of the Exercises, these two ways in fact complement each other.

The last two very contemporary modes have in themselves, I would suggest, rather weaker theological presuppositions, narrowing the wide dimensions of theology towards particular partial aspects which are advocated strongly as keys to the whole. But they do offer valuable and providential insights, and ones coming from the modern human sciences. Thus the psychological type of guidance stresses the need of the human psyche for healing, and offers some ways in which this can be brought about – and this is surely a bringing to light of an often neglected aspect of the gospel stories. Again, there is in the social justice approach a providential highlighting of something central to the compassion of God in Christ for a broken world, in the mystery of Christ's identification with the poor of all kinds. Yet both of these modes, in order to fulfil their true potential, require to be corrected and filled out by a more complete theological perspective, such as that offered in the contemplative and Ignatian ways. Often, of course, they are so complemented – and, moreover, each can add to the other, so that there is an enrichment of all the ways in an overall approach which can allow for the nuances and strengths of each.

### *A theological vision*

Summarizing what has been treated so far, it can be seen that there are particular theologies at the present time which, however they are received and mediated, can have an important function in underpinning good spiritual direction. Further, there are in any case varying theological perspectives underlying the actual forms of the practice of the ministry. But some discernment can be required around those kinds of theological approaches which may be of benefit to spiritual direction. What is needed as a consequence, it seems to me, is the presentation of some *overall picture* of the major themes of theology itself – in the light of which the various contemporary theological emphases can be evaluated. Such a picture should, especially in keeping with our interest here, form the back-

drop to any approach to spiritual guidance which would seek to provide the best possible help for people's living of faith today.

Now, an attempt here to offer a general theological perspective may seem rash and imprudent – the many differing, even contradictory theologies today might suggest that any overall portrait is impossible. Yet I believe that there is such a picture presented for our contemplation, however poorly we may try to describe it for ourselves. For, just as there is in English literature what has been described as 'The Great Tradition', and in music a classical, rich stream, so there is in theology a great tradition linking the past with present creativity, or what can be better described as a large vision towards which the many different theological emphases may converge, provided they are essentially in harmony with the principal features worked out in that vision. So let me try to describe in a few impressionistic paragraphs something of what the vision contains. In the attempt, I incidentally touch on some of the themes in Balthasar's writings, which I consider are large enough to offer us a significantly modern and comprehensive theology, linked with much of the Church's best understanding over the ages.

### *Mirroring the glory of God*

In the first place theology may be said to be the stumbling effort at commentary on the 'many and various ways' of God's revelation and word to us, and on how 'in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world' (Heb 1:1–2). Theology attempts then to mirror for us something of the glory of God reflected in Christ (Heb 1:4; cf. 2 Cor 3:18, 4:6), present too in all creation and in the wonder and tragedy of human lives. As a result, and with some consciousness of that glory as revealed, it can go directly to human situations and experience, to outline there the features of the God revealed in Christ – but, if it does so, it should also lead people directly to that vision of God offered in the Scriptures, in the living of faith, and in the Church's mystery.

It is as if theology must always try to move between two worlds, and within their intermingling with each other: the world of God, and the world of human experience. Great theology has always opened up vistas and pathways into the world of God, and so, indeed, does the theology of Ignatius, so conscious of the 'heavenly court', the home of the Divine Majesty, inhabited by Mary and the saints, who intercede for us (Exx 98, 232).



Theology, true to its innermost inspiration, must know too that the place of the intersection of the world of God and our human world is the living person of Christ: in his incarnation, his mission, his deed of love for the world 'to the end' (Jn 13:1; cf. 3:16). In the mystery of the 'handing over' (Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25) of the beloved Son, and in his dying, there is revealed both the extent of the predicament of the world, its fathomless need, and also that which alone through God's immense initiative of vulnerable love can heal and save it. Theology circles round this, the Paschal Mystery, wishing through it to understand something of the depths of the heart of God, and likewise the ways of the engagement of divine love in the world.

### *The drama of Christian life*

There is – to borrow a central motif of Balthasar's – a living, dramatic quality to God's engagement in Christ in the world. It is of a kind which does not allow us to remain merely spectators, but draws us inexorably into the living action of the drama, into the place and role which belongs to each one in the redemptive process. We are called by name, into discipleship in the particular ways that are uniquely ours, in and with Christ, in the gathering of his people which is the mystery of the Church. We have our role, our mission, which gives the essential meaning to our lives. Theology will reflect on all of this. It will ponder on how the Church too is an essential part of this action, being both the place of our (especially eucharistic) gathering together, and also the outgoing, dynamic reality of our prayer and activity, shedding the reflected light of the presence of Christ to the nations, and into all the 'ends' of human existence. As well, it will know that the Church is mysteriously described as the woman whose life echoes that of the Chosen People, always under mortal threat in the wilderness of human history, yet nourished and kept safe, while angry war is unleashed on her children, on 'those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus' (Apoc 12:1-7).

Within this dramatic situation Christian life and prayer and effort have their meaning. Identifying with the Christ who 'emptied himself' (Phil 2:7), and hearing his anguish crying out in the midst of all injustices, despair and loneliness, theology will help us reflect on our responsibilities. Theology today, to a degree not thought out so clearly before, rightly turns its attention to human experience and need, and will interact with those sciences which elaborate that

experience in manifold ways, in order to shed a divine light on what without it is ultimately inexplicable. But it yet realizes that the predicament of the world is such that, although now essentially redeemed in Christ, angry forces are always let loose, and tribulation reigns on the earth, while still we can join in the praise of the victorious gone before us (Apoc 5:11–13; 7:9–12; 15:1–4; 19:1–9). And always, therefore, if true to itself, theology will point towards that place of light shining in the midst of human life: that heavenly world of meaning and communion open to us in Christ and in a measure ours already, where humanity is called to reside, beyond the experiences of injustice and tragedy, where it will at the end find healing and resolution, in its true home in the household of God.

### *Light for spiritual guidance*

A large vision such as this, containing indeed much of what is given to us in the Church's life and liturgy, if seen and lived out, has many consequences for the field of spiritual guidance – both for its actual practice, and in possibly correcting and filling out the various partial theological ideas sometimes underpinning the ministry. It would be beyond the scope of this article to outline these consequences in detail, but some can be hinted at, as a conclusion to what is offered here.

An obvious consequence, but needing nevertheless to be mentioned, is that spiritual guidance does not occur in a vacuum, where just two people meet and one of these is being helped in some way through the interaction. Rather, it occurs within a context, a framework, of the mystery of the Church's life and *its* overall guidance. Again, it does not simply facilitate some arbitrary process of growth, human or spiritual, but ultimately encourages the engagement of a person with the realities sketched out in our theological vision. In other words, the ministry among other things should help a person develop theological perception, an outlook based on good theology, perhaps especially by being pointed towards the Church's true inner life, and towards the vision contained there, in liturgy, teaching and Scripture.

Naturally, the sense and feel of spiritual guidance *will* be that of the simple meeting of the two people involved; it will certainly allow freedom to articulate themes and experience, thus providing the stimulus for growth and for exploring the way forward. This environment of freedom, in which there is a sense of trust and safety and understanding, is crucial to good guidance. But the great

Christian mysteries of salvation, of calling, of mission – all the great things that faith tells us of – will pervade that simple meeting, explicitly or implicitly, will undergird the freedom, and will form the ground for all decisions, ways of prayer and possibilities of lifestyle and action.

Thus, for instance, prayer will not just be a personal means to decision and growth, and its interest will not remain confined to methods and the delineation of experience, but will be seen also as entry into the mystery of the interchange of love both within the Trinity and pouring out for the world's healing and salvation. Christian prayer, then, transcending the needs of self, becomes the mysterious way of supporting and lifting up numberless people before God in *their* need. And guidance in prayer is guidance into the dimensions of a great and living reality, going on in the Church and in the communion of the redeemed, both those living on the earth and those gone from us beyond this life into the realm of God.

### *Recognizing God's call*

Further, while spiritual direction will be a help in arriving at a sense of who one is personally, and where one is called to be in terms of particular concerns and interests, it will also help to open out a consciousness of, and initiate a movement towards, one's essential place or mission under God. Here, it will be understood how, in Newman's well-known words, a person has a special part in a great work going on, as 'a link in a chain, a bond of connexion between persons'.<sup>5</sup> I believe that good guidance will enable people to discover this theological reality in the living of their faith. Perhaps the clearest example of this can be seen in the unfolding theology of Thérèse of Lisieux, which led her to discover her mission as a calling to be love at the heart of the Church<sup>6</sup> – really a central Christian calling, and one which Thérèse knew many other people are called to live out in some manner akin to her own.

All of this, concerning prayer and mission as basic issues in spiritual direction, may lead people in many different directions, depending on gifts and inclinations and situations experienced. Some may be led, because of a special awareness of injustice, to a living at the margins of society, among the 'end' situations of people's lives, where in certain cases something can be done in terms of liberation, and in some others seemingly nothing at all (but, under God, much is being done). Others may equally find that their call demands coping with where they find themselves situated already, perhaps having

to endure difficulties of various kinds, darkness, or illness, and with quiet, unknown heroism. And there may be a few who, especially at present, find that a special call is unfolding to a life of prayer on behalf of the Church, its mission, and the world's need. And so on. The different modes are equal, once people are helped to discover God's choice for their role in life.

### *Attending to the mystery*

Something of the wide panoramas opened up for the ministry of spiritual guidance emerges from a theology attentive to the great realities of revelation, the mystery of the Church's life, and God's working in human hearts. Much more needs to be said, but perhaps enough has been sketched and hinted at, offering lines of thought which can be carried further. Spiritual guidance – to state the point once more – ultimately is a simple meeting, in faith, and trust, and understanding, where someone coming for assistance is being encouraged along the journey of life in faith. Sometimes that encouragement involves a listening to very human and precious things; maybe much of the time indeed it is just that. Yet it is worth while to outline what is implicit at least in meeting like this in faith, and to show how good theological understanding is not the enemy of personal attending to the human, but rather an invaluable and necessary grounding for the whole enterprise. It is to be hoped that spiritual guides have the courage to reach towards such theology for themselves, by whatever means are at their disposal. Then, living by it, they are in the best position possible to exercise their ministry of guiding others personally along the ways of the living God.

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## NOTES

1 Cf William V. Dych, *Karl Rahner* (London, 1992); Leo J. O'Donovan (ed), *A world of grace: an introduction to the themes and foundations of Karl Rahner's theology* (New York, 1981).

2 Cf Alfred T. Hennelly, *Liberation theologies: the global pursuit of justice* (Mystic, Connecticut, 1995).

3 Cf John O'Donnell, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (London, 1992).

4 Cf Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (San Francisco, 1986). A good introduction to some of Balthasar's central themes is contained in John Saward, *The mysteries of March: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the incarnation and Easter* (London, 1990).

5 John Henry Newman, *Meditations and devotions* (London, 1953), 'Hope in God – Creator', pp 215–219.

6 Cf Christopher O'Donnell, *Love in the heart of the Church: the mission of Thérèse of Lisieux* (Dublin, 1997).