

PASTORAL COUNSELING: THE IGNATIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE DYNAMICS OF THE HELPING RELATIONSHIP

We intend to present a systematic outline of some elements of Ignatian spirituality which may be useful in the work of pastoral counseling.

Two fundamental clarifications are necessary before determining which elements these are. The first: no universally accepted definition exists of what is understood by pastoral counseling. There are even some authors¹ who – in spite of the years of concrete practice and of the multiple university schools in which this type of professionals are formed – doubt that pastoral counseling is an autonomous discipline per se.² The question is whether this refers to a specific type of counseling or simply is a question of a form of relationship of help developed by professionals who are religious, or which takes place in religious environments.

The second clarification – very closely linked to the previous one – is, as we shall see, that pastoral counseling is different from spiritual direction or accompaniment, it does not *directly* consider the religious question (the Will of God in the life of the person). But there is no obstacle to ask ourselves how a spiritual tool with centuries of tradition behind it – in this case, the Ignatian spirituality – can help a mental health professional (a pastoral counselor) to enrich the relationship of

help with his clients.³

**Spiritual Accompaniment,
Psychotherapy and Pastoral Counseling**

It is therefore, necessary, to situate the area of competence of this discipline, and at the same time, distinguish it from other forms of helping relationships which eventually could be confused with it. Concerning this, we believe that an interdisciplinary perspective – which integrates the contribution of theology and human sciences, especially psychology and psychotherapy – will permit us to distinguish three basic types of helping relationships which possess specific objectives and methodology. We refer to spiritual direction and accompaniment, psychotherapy and pastoral counseling. The first is centered on helping the person to understand his/her religious experience and his/her relationship with God. Psychotherapy has as its first aim “to help others to solve or process significant emotional tensions and problematic behaviors which prevent or diminish the ability or capacity to attain personal goals and to achieve, in the greatest possible way, human functioning.”⁴

*the adjective “pastoral” is
of crucial importance,
in the sense of offering a
holistic vision of the
human being, which
includes
the spiritual dimension*

On the other hand pastoral counseling is understood as a form of help “which is informed by spiritual values and is open to the possibility of exploring spiritual and religious issues in the counseling relationship. This is done within a professional context of accepted standards of training and practice and is in conformity with current knowledge of psychology, spirituality, healing and human development.”⁵ The key, then, lies in the fact that pastoral counseling, similar to other forms of psychotherapy or counseling, helps persons to clarify, give or find meaning in personal problems of daily life. What is specific, though, is the point of view from which help is given. And in this the adjective “pastoral” is of crucial importance, in the sense of offering a holistic

vision of the human being, which includes the spiritual dimension. Then, beyond discussing themes related to spirituality or religion – which would be more appropriate to do in spiritual accompaniment – what is important in pastoral counseling is the openness of the counselor to help unveil the intra-psychic dynamics of the person who has recourse to him, with the clear awareness that both possess spiritual values which can be determinant at the moment of seeking a way out of a crisis situation or given existential problems. Concerning this, Greer points out that “in so far as a discipline, pastoral counseling seeks to make space for the presence and activity of Transcendence within both counselor and counselee in a clinical helping relationship.”⁶ When other professionals ignore the faith dimension of their clients, the pastoral counselor is attentive to recognize and to integrate spiritual themes (suffering, hope, the presence of God, etc.) which can help the person to get out of the trance in which he/she finds himself/herself.

It is not a question, therefore, that the professional be a consecrated person or that the helping relationship takes place in a church, parish or institution affiliated to a particular religious denomination. What is essential in the “pastoral” character is *the form or style* which they acquire: a) the way of being of the counselor, b) the way of understanding the one who solicits the help, and c) the way of intervening or of helping the client. On this point, we use the paradigm proposed by Doctor Sharon Cheston,⁷ who – concerned that students of pastoral counseling maximize the use of diverse theories of counseling, without falling into their own traps of eclecticism – created a theoretical model which permits the counselor to understand completely the selection of determinate theoretical tools and, at the same time, facilitates the harmonious integration of these instruments with his personality and his clinical experience as counselor.

This paradigm is useful to develop the core of this essay: the contribution of Ignatian spirituality to the helping relationship proper to pastoral counseling. Once again, we point out that this is an interpretative reading of Ignatian spirituality and that we do not intend to make an exhaustive study of it. It is rather a question of bringing out some points which seem to be relevant in strengthening pastoral counseling.

Way of Being: Vision, Right Intention and *Magis*

By *way of being* Cheston understands “the counselor’s presence in the room with the client. The following form part of this way of being: who the counselor is, the degree of empathy expressed, the values which inspire the counselor, the boundaries that are set, and the importance ascribed to the relationship are all part of a way of being.”⁸ In other words, it involves the understanding of self (or vision) that the counselor possesses of his therapeutic role, as well as the positive or less positive way in which he confronts the always challenging dynamics of psychological counter-transference.

At this level – that of vision – Ignatian spirituality offers a very rich meditation which can be assimilated to the identity of the pastoral counselor. It is the meditation of the call of the Eternal King (SpEx. 91-100), where Ignatius of Loyola places the exercitant before the call of Christ, the Eternal King, in order that he may examine himself concerning his disposition to be a companion of Him in his redeeming mission. In an analogous way, the pastoral counselor – even before beginning a relationship of help – must also consider what is his mission, how he understands his role, which is his degree of availability (is he one of those who *wish rather to respond in a spirit of love and to be outstanding in every service* (SpEx. 97)? A convenient degree of personal introspection as well as supervision by another experienced professional will bring out constituent themes in his identity as pastoral counselor.

Intrinsically linked to this dimension is the notion of right intention,⁹ which is always valid at the moment of wanting to “help souls.” As Dhôtel points out,¹⁰ the right intention is a conviction: only God is absolute; everything else is relative. Besides, it is an orientation of the heart: everything which I think, love or do has to be directed toward that absolute who is God. In counseling terms, this implies that the therapeutic tools used be considered relative, as well as having a fundamental orientation to seek, above all, the good of the client, without leaving any space for personal agendas or for the merely satisfaction of one’s own intentions. To paraphrase Saint Ignatius, it is to turn to the person who seeks our help – the creature -, loving her as God loves her and seeking to find God in her.¹¹ And for this we count on the Ignatian *preparatory*

prayer, which invites us to ask “that all my intentions, actions and operations may be purely ordered to the service and praise of the Divine Majesty” (SpEx 46). The right intention, previous to any other action, is a safeguard to erroneous attitudes in a helping relationship.

The way of being, besides this self awareness, presupposes an open disposition free from prejudices toward the client. Within the humanistic tradition, Carl Rogers speaks of a “positive unconditional look” of the one who comes to our office or consultation. Ignatius refers to a similar attitude when he asks the director of the Exercises to be “more ready to save the proposition of the neighbor, than to condemn it” (SpEx 22). Frequently clients manifest cognitive distortions or prejudices which block their way of facing therapy or their interrelations with others. A pastoral counselor who embodies this unconditional state asks the client how he understands his proposition or judgment, “and if he does not understand correctly, he corrects him with love” (SpEx 22). The adjective “pastoral”, therefore, besides the holistic vision described above, may also be interpreted as the requirement of a disposition without prejudices toward persons.

the pastoral counselor has to have a solid anthropological conception – coherent with the spirituality which inspires him – which supports his therapeutic interventions

Finally, the disposition of the pastoral counselor toward his client may be enriched with a new nuance when it is placed within the framework of the Ignatian *magis* [more]. Ignatius proposes that we act “only desiring and choosing that which *more* conduces to the end for which we have been created” (SpEx. 23). In professional terminology, this indication can be incarnated in the measure in which the counselor has recourse to the best and more creative means to help his client to find relief in his difficulties. Such a disposition follows the line of ongoing formation, the updating of knowledge and the wise and prudent election of techniques, exercises and therapies which are more adjusted to what

the client is experiencing. Many times Ignatius urges his followers not to spare human means when it is a question of helping others, “not to trust in them, but to cooperate with divine grace” (Const. 814). The *magis also* may be applied to the selection of clients, in the measure in which the counselor manifests a basic openness to serve the less favored ones: those who have been rejected by other professionals, the complex cases whom nobody wishes to assume, the persons who do not possess economic means to pay for our services,¹² those who are not “attractive” humanly speaking... “only desiring and choosing that which is more conducive to the end for which we have been created” (SpEx 23), for the end for which we have been professionally formed or trained.

**Way of Understanding:
Principle and Foundation, Incarnation and Two Standards**

The second area where we can catch a glimpse of the contribution of Ignatian spirituality to pastoral counseling consists in the *mode of understanding*. This term involves “the body of counseling knowledge that explains personality theory and structure, normal and abnormal human development, and different ways people change (...) [it] also involves knowledge of clients’ strength, resources, and existing skills.”¹³ In other words, it regards the way the counselor “reads” the reality of the one who solicits his service. It has to do with the theoretical approach of the counselor to such diverse affairs such as human behavior, systems of beliefs and the integration of family values or cultural aspects of the client.

These themes have a parallel in the *Principle and Foundation* of the *Spiritual Exercises* (SpEx 23). In this concise declaration Ignatius unveils his anthropology, the end of the human being: “man is created to praise, reverence and serve...” In the same way, the pastoral counselor has to have a solid anthropological conception – coherent with the spirituality which inspires him – which supports his therapeutic interventions.¹⁴ The risk in not possessing such a conception lies in minimizing or in the exaggeration of one dimension of the client’s life. (The corporal, the affective, the spiritual, etc.).

The Principle and Foundation also shows that Ignatius possessed a clear notion that the goal of spiritual life is *indifference* or freedom (SpEx 23), “not to wish health more than sickness, riches more than poverty...” In an analogous way, the counselor, once he has adequately understood the conflict (the problem presented) which the client has brought with him to consider, has to draw up the objectives of the helping relationship. (The proposal). In fact, in the Principle and Foundation we find an implicit methodology which serves as inspiration for the work of pastoral counseling.

The contemplation of the Incarnation (SpEx 101-109) is another Ignatian page filled with human content, which is worth while taking into account. In this contemplation Ignatius proposes to the exercitant to get close to the divine Persons, embracing under the one same look of love and mercy “all persons on the surface of the earth, so diverse (...), some white and others black, some in peace and others in war, some weeping and others laughing, some healthy and others sick...” (SpEx 106). It is a question of a respectful gaze. In agreement with these lines, Ignatius asks in his *Spiritual Diary* for the gift of *a loving humility*:¹⁵

the love which launches us to the Creator and the humility which maintains a delicate distance from the other persons. A similar respect is what is expected from the pastoral counselor toward the process of the client, his limitations and strengths, his pains and his search. Since every human being is created in the image of the Triune God, the grateful acknowledgment of our differences has to take us to praise “God our Lord whom each one has to try to recognize as in his image” (Const. 250). This spirituality of the Incarnation serves as an antidote for every possibility of being scandalized in face of the weaknesses of those who come to our offices.

In the Ignatian journey discernment plays a key role. The knowledge of oneself, the reading of the affective movements of consolation and desolation¹⁶ and the contemplation of the scenes of the life of Jesus lead to decision making or to the election. As a help for this discernment, in the meditation of the Two Standards (SpEx 136-148) Ignatius asks the

exercitant to understand more in depth the contrasting objectives and ways of acting of Jesus and those of the *enemy of human nature*, the Evil Spirit.

Some objectives give life; others, destroy it. The spiritual counselor, in therapy, has to evaluate how evil becomes visible in mental disorders or in the confusion experienced and how it can affect his work as a counselor. He may also invite the client to discover together him, in which way good and evil are present in the same counseling experience (reading interpretation of the therapeutic transferences and counter-transferences). If the helping relationship seeks to reach a certain depth, this work, no matter how demanding it may result, is unavoidable.¹⁷

*the annotations of the
Spiritual Exercises are a
relevant source of
wisdom for the time of
working with the client in
pastoral counseling*

**Way of Intervention:
Annotations, Imagination, Dis-
cernment and Criteria for Mission**

The last step in our interpretative model of pastoral counseling consists in the *way of intervention*, that is, the work of therapy itself. "These are the means through which the counselor interrupts the dysfunctional cycle of the client and allows for the processing of healthier alternatives of thinking, feeling and behaving".¹⁸ In the case of a pastoral counselor this dimension applies, whether the empathic listening of therapy centered on the person is employed, or cognitive conducive strategies which confront the erroneous cognitive perceptions of the client, or the association of ideas of a brief psycho-analysis, or any other form of help corresponding to a particular psychological school. Besides, it implies the way in which the counselor introduces aspects of the "pastoral" dimension, such as the role of pardon (or self-forgiveness) in the processes of psychic healing. The way of intervention relates to what we suggest to the client to confront and work out conflicts.

Within Ignatian Spirituality, the annotations of the *Spiritual Exercises* are a relevant source of wisdom for the time of working with the client in pastoral counseling. Ignatius begins by suggesting that the exercitant

enter into the experience “with a magnanimous spirit and with great liberality” (SpEx 5). Such an attitude facilitates in a significant way any therapeutic process. Thinking of the role of the counselor, it is a question of transmitting energy and hope, without generating false expectations. A second useful annotation is the one which asks the director of the Exercises to try to find out what is happening when there are no spiritual motions of consolation or desolation (SpEx 6). The counselor can also ask, discreetly, when he observes that the indications or steps suggested to his client do not cause any change. Sometimes, as Ignatius points out, sufficient time is not being dedicated to the exercises, or they are not being done in an appropriate way. The third annotation applicable to counseling indicates that, in the face of difficulties or processes of desolation, it is necessary to persevere in the proposed exercises, even extending them beyond the conventional hour. (SpEx 13). In counseling, it would be a call to persistence in fulfilling the therapeutic indications, especially when the results are not perceived in the first phase. The fourth note is the one in which Ignatius counsels discretion when there are experiences of great consolation: “do not make promises nor an inconsiderate and hasty vow of any kind” (SpEx 14). In the case of pastoral counseling it means to note that before the success of a therapeutic process, it is necessary to act cautiously, without making significant changes in the first phase. Finally, the fifth annotation, the so called *agere contra* (to act against), Ignatius suggests to move in the direction opposite to disordered attachments¹⁹ (SpEx 16). In pastoral counseling: not to let oneself be tempted by personal interests, but rather make efforts only to want and seek the greatest glory of God – in spiritual terms – or the well-being of those around the client – in therapeutic terms.

A second useful inspiration coming from Ignatian practice consists in the use that this spirituality makes of the recourse to the imagination as a method of transforming the Self. The model is found in the contemplation of the Birth of Jesus (SpEx 110-117), in which the exercitant inserts himself in an active way through the imaginary scene in order to assimilate the style of life of Jesus. In psychological terms, it is a question of beginning with a projective identification so as to attain a more objective level of psychic life, in which is established the difference. With

God this is accepted in reverential love.²⁰ The pastoral counselor can also use the technique of guided imagining transforming a passive spectator of life into a subject who acts. What is being sought is to recreate possible ways out which will help to get out of the blockage.

There is no doubt that the Rules on Discernment of the First and Second Weeks contain some of the clearest intuitions of Ignatius which are applicable to every helping relationship. Since the limits of this presentation oblige us to give only some indications, we point out eight relevant aspects. First, the therapeutic use which can be made of the Rule not to make any changes in time of desolation or darkness in life (SpEx 318). This Rule prevents any hasty decision of which the client may repent in the near future. Second, the importance placed on the concrete means which motivate the person and help him to get out of depressive

*the importance of a
healthy integration
between trust in God's
grace and personal effort*

states (SpEx 319). Third, to profit of the good times – consolations – to gather renewed strength which will be useful at the moment of facing trials (SpEx 323). Fourth, to act *oppositum per diametrum* – to act in an opposite direction – when the person desires to abandon the therapy or some step which he finds difficult to accomplish (SpEx 325). Sixth, invite the client to share those things which instinctively he is tempted to hide (SpEx 326). Seventh, to discover together “the weakest part” of the client, in which the capacity to face crisis is at stake (SpEx 327). Lastly, be attentive at “the beginning, the middle and the end” of thoughts and sentiments, and invite the client to analyze his personal process with the help of this paradigm. (SpEx 333).

Some criteria Ignatius foresees for “mission” can be of great help in pastoral counseling. One of the dangers in therapies which the client can experience lies in the closing up in oneself.²¹ In this case, service, doing something for others, may be very helpful, “the help to souls” on which Ignatius insists upon many times. (Const. 605, 723). Alberto Hurtado, S.J. points out very clearly: “Begin by giving yourself. He who gives himself grows.”²² In doing something for others, one can find relief. In this same line, the counselor can also insist with his client on the importance of

generating a network of relationships and in allowing to be helped by others. Besides, at the moment of analysing actions and determinations, it may be very enlightening that the pastoral counselor reminds his client that “the more universal the good is, the more divine it is” (Const. 622). In other words, it is essential to consider the persons who may be affected or benefited by an important decision taken.

As a background to these indications, I would want to stress that one of the tasks of the counselor consists in reminding his client about the importance of a healthy integration between trust in God’s grace and personal effort.²³ When the clients are believers, it is common that there is the distorted belief that God can solve the conflicts in a magic way. We have to know how to employ human means, with wisdom and decision. Lastly, a therapeutic-spiritual remark, both for the counselor and for his client: “For it is not much knowledge but the inner feeling and relish of things that fills and satisfies the soul” (SpEx 2). It is not a question of carrying out many exercises or executing many resolutions at the same time; it is a question, rather, of deepening understanding of the way of getting out of the complex processes through well thought out and discerned steps.

To summarize, and as a conclusion, I believe I have demonstrated – through the three elements: to be, to understand and to intervene – that a pastoral counselor can very significantly enrich his work if he has recourse to the Ignatian way of proceeding. Ignatius of Loyola proposed brilliant and outstanding psychological intuitions, and in this he was far ahead of his time. Therefore, human sciences, in general, can continue to exploit these intuitions. Even more, my firm conviction is that the discipline of pastoral counseling involves a central element of Ignatian spirituality: the vocation to find God in all things, in all circumstances and in all persons... “To love and serve in everything” (SpEx 233). While the client can be invited to find God in suffering, in the healing process, the counselor has to face the challenge of finding God in his role, in his service.

LARRY YÉVENES, S.J. Coordinator: Psychology and Spirituality at the Center of Ignatian Spirituality, Santiago, Chile. Director of “*Cuadernos de Espiritualidad*.” Master in Science of Pastoral Counseling, Loyola College, Maryland, USA. Program: Master in

Psycho-Spiritual Accompaniment, Univ. A. Hurtado-Center of Ignatian Spirituality, Santiago, Chile.

NOTES

1. See, for example, John Foskett and Gordon Lynch, "Pastoral Counseling in Britain: An Introduction", in *British Journal of Guidance and Counseling*, 29 (2001), p. 375. Concerning the definition of Pastoral counseling, see Charles M. Shelton, S.J., "Spiritual direction, Pastoral counseling and Therapy", in *When a Jesuit Counsels Others. Some Practical Guidelines, Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 32/3, May 2000, pp. 8-17; in *Notebooks of spirituality*, 145 (May-June 2004), p. 32.
2. For a history of Pastoral Counseling I suggest to consult Orlo Strunck, Jr., "A prolegomenon to a history of pastoral counseling", in Robert Wicks et alia (Eds.), *Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling*, vol. 1, Mahwah, N.J.; Paulist Press, 1993, pp. 14-25.
3. We use the term "client", taken from the Rogerian Psychology (*client*), given its more neutral and less directive character, over the term "patient".
4. Cf. Shelton, op. cit., p. 37.
5. Brendan Geary, "New paradigm for pastoral counselors, with clinical applications", *Pastoral Sciences* (2003), p. 68. Another definition is the following: "(...) a process of interpretation and reinterpretation of the human experience within the framework of a primary orientation toward the Christian mode of interpretation in dialogue with contemporary psychological modes of interpretation", C.V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989, p. 20.
6. Joanne Greer, "Inventing psycho theology: New directions in doctoral research". *Currents: News and Information*, Pastoral Counseling Department, Loyola College in Maryland (1999), p. 9.
7. Sharon E. Cheston, "A new paradigm for teaching counseling theory and practice". *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 39 (2000), pp. 254-269.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 256. the translation is mine.
9. *Const.* 288.
10. Jean-Claude Dhôtel, S.J., *La Espiritualidad Ignaciana. Claves de Referencia*, Santander: Sal Terrae, 1991, pp. 107-109.
11. A concrete form of living this basic respect consists in never moving the client

toward specific options. This is an essential norm in every code of therapeutic ethics. Annotation 15 of the Spiritual Exercises follows this same line when it asks the director to abstain from moving to a determinate state or way of life, because “*it is more convenient and much better, that seeking the divine will, that the Creator and Lord communicates himself to the devout soul*” (SpEx 15).

12. A central aspect of Ignatian Spirituality is *gratuitousness* in ministries: to give freely what you have freely received... (Const. 565).

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 256-7.

14. For a Christian anthropology, see Juan Luis Ruiz de la Peña, *Imagen de Dios. Antropología Teológica Fundamental*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 1988. Also Javier Melloni, S.J., “*El camino hacia el centro. Una tipología espiritual*” in *Itinerario hacia una Vida en Dios*, Eides 30 (February 2001), pp. 16-21.

15. *Diario*, 30-III-1544. Cf. Dôthel, *op. cit.* pp. 39-41.

16. On consolation and desolation within the Ignatian discernment of spirits, see David Lonsdale, S.J., “*El Discernimiento de Espíritus*” in *Ojos para ver, oídos para oír. Introducción a la Espiritualidad Ignaciana*, Santander: Sal Terrae, 1992, pp. 79-101.

17. To know more about the psychological basis of discernment of spirits, I recommend reading the excellent work of Carlos R. Cabarrús, “*Acompañamiento para el Discernimiento: Principios Psicológicos y Experiencia del Espíritu*”, in Carlos Alemany y José A. García (Eds.), *Psicología y Ejercicios Ignacianos*, vol. 1, Bilbao: Mensajero-Sal Terrae, 1996, pp. 223-238.

18. *Cheston, op.cit.*, p. 257.

19. A disordered attachment – which is neither a sin nor a psychopathology – is a subconscious motivation of the subject who believes he is pursuing transcendental values, but in reality he is only seeking self love, will and interest. Cf. Luis María García Domínguez, “*Qué son las afecciones desordenadas para Ignacio y cómo leerlas hoy desde la psicología*” in Carlos Alemany and José A. García (Eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 94-108.

20. For a detailed explanation of the use of the imagination in Saint Ignatius, see Eckhard Frick, “*La imaginación en cuanto método de la transformación del Yo. Reflexión práctica desde la Imaginería Afectiva Guiada (IAG) de Leuner*” in Carlos Alemany y José A. García (Eds.), *Psicología y Ejercicios Ignacianos*, vol. 2, Bilbao: Mensajero-Sal Terrae, 1996, pp. 287-303.

21. See Larry Yévenes, S.J., “¿Dónde está Dios en medio del dolor? Acompañamiento espiritual a personas en psicoterapia”. *Cuadernos de Espiritualidad* 148 (November-December 2004), pp. 41-46.

22. *Un fuego que enciende otros fuegos. Páginas escogidas del Padre Alberto Hurtado, S.J.*, Santiago: “Padre Hurtado” Center of Studies and Documentation”, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, 2004, p. 91.

23 Cf. W.W. Meissner, “The Ignatian paradox”, *The Way*, V. 42, Nº. 3 (July 2003), pp. 33-36. The translation in Spanish is the following: “*La paradoja ignaciana*”, *Cuadernos de Espiritualidad* 145 (mayo-junio 2004), pp. 3-15.