

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN DAILY LIFE

In *The First Jesuits* John O'Malley indicates the importance of spiritual conversation in the pastoral strategy of Ignatius and the first companions.¹ Obviously conversation as a pastoral strategy differs from ordinary conversation since it aims to "help souls," as Ignatius so often puts it. In this article I want to reflect on spiritual direction as a form of such spiritual conversation whose purpose is to help souls.

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Spiritual Direction: a Definition

Spiritual conversation in this Ignatian sense can take more than one direction. One can engage in such conversation in order to help another to develop a right conscience, to understand the meaning of a particular doctrine or religious practice, to learn how to perform a particular ritual. Or one can do so in order to comfort a grieving or suffering person, mediating a sense of God's presence. What distinguishes various forms of spiritual conversation to "help souls"? The focus of the conversation is one way to distinguish the various forms. In *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*² Connolly and I define spiritual direction

as help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the

relationship.³

While we did not call attention to the Jesuit predilection for spiritual conversation, it seems clear to me, in retrospect, that our experience in directing the *Spiritual Exercises* played a commanding role in the way we engaged in spiritual direction and how we defined it. The one who gives the Exercises engages in conversation with the one making them with the same purpose in mind.

Our definition of spiritual direction assumes that God is encountered in human experience, i.e., that experience can have a religious dimension.⁴ Ignatius presumed that anyone who made the Exercises would encounter God.⁵ But the points of the “Contemplation for Attaining Love” presume also that God is encountered in everyday life, not just during the Exercises. Our definition of spiritual direction makes the same assumption: God is always and everywhere active in this world, intent on attaining God’s purpose in creation. Moreover, with Ignatius we posit that God desires a personal relationship with everyone. Thus, at every moment we human beings are in contact with God who is active in the world. Everyone encounters God; there is no escaping this encounter. Every human experience is, among other things, an experience of God. That is, every human experience has a religious dimension.

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However, we can be unaware of this dimension of our experience. There is nothing unusual about this state of affairs. We are unaware of many dimensions of our experience all the time. I can be so engrossed in listening to a piano concerto in a concert hall that I do not notice the coughing of my neighbor and am surprised later when my companion complains about the noise the neighbor made. Modern psychology has made us aware of how we can defend ourselves unconsciously against the awareness of anxiety-producing thoughts, feelings and sensations. Since awareness of God’s presence is, quite often, awe-inspiring if not downright terrifying, there is even more reason to expect that we will

have difficulty noticing and taking account of experiences of God. Spiritual direction is encouraged, among other reasons, because of the difficulty of noticing the religious dimension of experience.

Spiritual direction, as defined, is a form of spiritual conversation whose focus is the religious dimension of the experience of the one seeking direction.⁶ Spiritual directors make a covenant with their directees to help the latter develop their relationship with God. In this covenantal relationship directees agree to talk about what happens when they try to be in conscious relationship with God and directors agree to put all their resources at the disposal of directees to help them to deepen their relationship with God.

Among the resources directors bring to the conversation are their own lived relationship with God, their knowledge of the theological and spiritual tradition, their membership in the faith community, and their commitment to act responsibly for the good of their directees' relationship with God. People do not become spiritual directors because of ordination or through any office in the church; they seem to have a charism that attracts potential directees to them. Ignatius was a layman when he began to attract others for spiritual direction. Because there is no office or order of spiritual directors in the church, those who seek them out need to be prudent in their choice. *Caveat emptor* applies to those who seek spiritual direction.

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What Spiritual Directors Do

They listen. They engage in conversation, just one Christian talking to another. But the conversation has a focus, as we have asserted. The first thing directors do is to help directees to pay attention to what happens when they try to engage in the relationship with God. Helping means encouraging them to talk about their experience, asking for clarification

and expansion. By these means they show their interest in the experience of their directees, in itself a rather infrequent occurrence in the course of ordinary life. The most important thing spiritual directors do, at least in the beginning of any session of spiritual direction, is to listen well to those they direct.

Let me give an example of the kind of conversation between a director and a directee that demonstrates the quality of this listening. Mary is the directee, John the director.

Mary: I was really struck by Jesus in the cleansing of the temple scene.

John: How did he seem to you?

Mary: He seemed very angry.

John: Angry?

Mary: Yes. He seemed so thoroughly involved in what God deserved and in the contrast between that and what those people were actually doing.

John: He seemed very involved with it. That seemed important for you. Could you say more about?

Mary: About the way it seemed to me?

John: Yes, about what he was like.

Mary: Well, he was angry, as I said. He was really involved with the merchants doing business in the temple.

John: Why don't you take a minute now and look back on the way that scene seemed to you? You seem to have been engaged with it.

Mary: (Pause) He really felt a lot about God. He seemed to feel that God was being insulted and that bothered him.

John: It bothered him?

Mary: Got under his skin. You know, it really seemed to affect him the way an insult given to somebody in your family who is dear to you might affect you. (Pause) That's what it seemed like.

John: And that seemed to be a moving thing for you?

Mary: It was. I've experienced things like that, harsh things, for example, said about people who meant a lot to me, so I could appreciate how he felt. It made me feel somehow more familiar with him.⁷

In this vignette we notice that the director patiently helps the directee to

pay attention to an experience and to notice more about it. We also notice that the director's remarks can seem rather banal, as happens in conversations, but they have the purpose of keeping the focus on the experience of the directee.

By keeping this focus in the conversation directors demonstrate their belief in the importance of human experience for the encounter with God. Such a belief is central to Ignatian spirituality. Directors come to such a belief through the experience of God's action in their own lives. Such experience piques their interest in learning how God works with other people. It is this interest in God that makes them good listeners and convinces directees that their directors want to listen to them. In training programs for spiritual directors I have often said that what will keep spiritual directors interested in what directees say is their desire to know more about God's mysterious ways. In other words, one of the motives for becoming a spiritual director is a profound desire to know God more intimately. Such a profound desire arises from directors' own experience of God, a God who is the deepest desire of their hearts.

They foster a contemplative attitude in directees. The focus on the experience of directees fosters in them a contemplative attitude, an attitude whose first question about any experience is not "What does it mean?" but rather "What happened during this experience?" The question of meaning, if raised too early, can sidetrack directees from paying attention to the full reality of the experience. For example, in the case just presented, John might have asked, right after Mary said that Jesus seemed angry, "What does it mean that Jesus was angry in this situation?" The conversation might then have moved off into a discussion of Temple practices and Jesus' anger at the buying and selling in the Temple; it might even have led to a discussion of Jesus' anger as righteous anger. Then she might never have realized that the experience had made her more familiar with Jesus, something she had desired when she began contemplating this scene, asking that she might know Jesus more intimately, in order to love him more and follow him. Questions of meaning, i.e., questions of discernment, in this kind of spiritual conversation, should come only after an experience is thoroughly explored and relived.

I have found that it takes much work with fledgling directors before they accept that they are doing their best work when they listen well and help people to pay attention to their experience when they pray or when they become aware of something deeply moving in their lives. New directors want to get quickly to the “real work” of interpreting the meaning of the experience. Close supervision of new directors is the best way to help them to realize that their penchant for meaning-making gets in the way of the need for their directees first to pay attention and to explore their experience. Discernment of meaning follows upon such noticing and exploration. We can only discern what, in this experience, is of God, what not, when we have paid attention to it as an experience with many dimensions.

They help directees to discern. Once an experience has been explored in some detail the spiritual director can then help the directee with the question of whether this experience is an experience of God, or rather, what in this experience is of God, what not. The precision at the end of the last sentence is important for direction in daily life. As mentioned earlier, God is, in a real sense, ingredient in every human experience since God is active at all times creating, sustaining and directing all created things and persons toward God’s intention. Hence, every human experience has a religious dimension. Spiritual directors help people to tease out the religious dimension of every experience that seems important to them.

At this point the rules for discernment of the First and Second Weeks of the *Spiritual Exercises* come into play. In daily life, as in a retreat itself, God and the “enemy of human nature” are at work, and directees need help to discern the different ways they act. Just as Ignatius made a distinction between rules for the First Week and rules for the Second Week, so, too, spiritual directors need to know the inner spiritual situation of their directees. In daily life a directee may be more caught up in the dynamics that are akin to those that occur in the First Week of the *Exercises* or even in the kind of preliminaries to being able to make the full *Exercises*. Some people, for example, are caught in a distorted image of God as implacable Judge or unforgiving Father. Hence, like Pierre Favre when Ignatius first met him, they are not yet ready for the full *Exercises*.

They need help to experience God as described in the prayer of Wisdom 11:24-26:

For you love all things that exist,
 and detest none of the things that you have made,
 for you would not have made anything if you had hated it.
 How would anything have endured if you had not willed it?
 Of how would anything not called forth by you have been preserved?
 You spare all things, for they are yours, O lord, you who love the
 living.

Those who live with an image of God as implacable Judge need help to see that their fear of God (what might be called “servile fear”) keeps them from having what they most deeply want, a closer relationship with God. Such people, most often, are trying to lead a good life, but are plagued by a distorted image of God from childhood. The second rule of the First Week applies to them.

Others are caught up in inordinate attachments. For them the first rule of this same Week may apply where they come to recognize the specious reasoning that keeps them enthralled to their attachment. For example, those addicted to alcohol often use comparisons with others who abuse alcohol to convince themselves and others that they are not addicted. (In

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Alcoholics Anonymous such reasoning is called “stinking thinking.”) Spiritual directors also make use of the other rules for discernment such as those defining consolation and desolation and those that speak of the wiles of the “enemy of human nature.” For example, they help directees to recognize the weak points in their make-up that become the target of the “enemy.”

Many who come for regular spiritual direction, of course, are “people of the Second Week,” as it were. They have been freed from distorted images of God and of their inordinate attachments and sinful tendencies and want to follow Jesus. The spiritual director can tell such people by

the quality of their relationship with God and with God's Son, Jesus. Such people walk with Jesus, for example, and converse with him about how to live their lives as his disciples. They no longer spend much time in prayer asking to be assured of God's love for them or to be healed from their sins. The image I often use for such people is of two people working together on a common project; they want to collaborate with Jesus in his mission to transform the world. For such people, the more subtle rules for the Second Week apply, where the angel of darkness masquerades as an angel of light. Spiritual directors help such people to discern how God is leading them in their life of discipleship.

They help directees notice resistance to new developments in the relationship with God. In addition to noting the influences of the "good spirit" and of the "enemy of human nature" directors help directees to discern where their own regular patterns of resistance to developing a closer relationship with God get in the way. All of us who want closeness to God know that such closeness will lead to some changes in our lives; we will have to face up to inordinate attachments, sinful tendencies and sins, for example. Such closeness might mean facing a change of life style or occupation. We resist these possibilities. Moreover, a sense of impending closeness to God has always raised fears in people. Once a woman wrote to me listing in four closely packed pages the kinds of fears raised by the very thing she most wanted, namely closeness to God. These fears can lead to avoidance of prayer or to superficiality in prayer.

Spiritual directors need to recognize that closeness to God seems to threaten people at their core. Such closeness, for example, seems to threaten one's identity; one fears being swallowed up in God's immensity. Paradoxically, as Karl Rahner was fond of saying, the closer we come to God the more ourselves we become, but initially the fear of losing oneself can be quite strong. Closeness to God also makes us painfully aware that we are not in control of our lives, and this can be frightening. People who pray regularly are perplexed to notice that periods of intense consolation are followed by an avoidance of prayer; the woman who wrote me the four pages on resistance noted that often she avoided prayer after intense periods of closeness with God. Gerald May writes:

Spiritual experience becomes even more threatening if it is viewed

as an accurate perception of the way-things-are rather than some kind of isolated “high.” Specifically, when one is in the midst of such experience, one cannot be in the business of defining oneself.... One’s ego, sense of identity, self-image seem to evaporate almost magically. And one is left, just simply being.⁸

In other words, when we experience God’s closeness, we recognize that we are just small players in the whole drama of creation, that we have a very limited role to play and a short time in which to play it, that we will not be spared from sickness, loss of loved ones and death. Spiritual directors help us to recognize the resistances such realizations engender in us and thus give us more material to talk over with the Lord. Growing into intimacy with God requires a growing transparency and openness that can be harrowing, but it also satisfies the deepest desire we have.⁹

Supervision

Spiritual directors take on a somewhat daunting task when they engage in this kind of spiritual conversation. They find themselves engaged intimately in the lives of those they direct and in the process are challenged not only in their own lived faith and prayer, but also in their competence as human beings who can engage that intimately with others and not let their own personal and religious weaknesses get in the way of helping them. In addition, they must not violate professional boundaries. For this daunting, yet greatly rewarding, task they need some kind of specialized training beyond the ordinary theological and spiritual education. The best modern analogy for the kind of training needed is the experience of supervision used in the training of psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and social workers who engage in psychotherapy and counseling. Here the focus of the supervision of the counselor-in-training is on what happens in the counselor when he or she engages in the work of counseling. So too, in the supervised training of fledging spiritual directors, the supervisor focuses the conversation with the spiritual director on what happened to him or her when engaged in conversation with a directee. This kind of supervisory conversation, in other words, is analogous to the conversation of spiritual direction itself. In the latter the director focuses the conversation on what happens to the directee when

the latter engages in the relationship with God. In the former the supervisor focuses the conversation on what happens to the spiritual director when he or she engages in the conversation with a directee. The spiritual director in supervision learns something about him/herself and, it is hoped, is able to engage in spiritual direction with others more adequately. Issues of confidentiality of the spiritual direction relationship do not arise so readily since the focus in supervision is not on the directee but on the experience of the spiritual director. Of course, the spiritual director conceals the identity of the directee when conversing with the supervisor or with a peer supervision group.¹⁰

Conclusion

Spiritual direction in daily life flows from the conversational strategy to “help souls” of Ignatius and the other first companions. Its prototype is the kind of conversation called for in directing the *Spiritual Exercises*. As a ministry spiritual direction presumes that God is encountered in daily life, that God wants a relationship of intimacy with us human beings and that talking about what happens in prayer with an experienced guide is very helpful for the development of the kind of relationship God desires. The recovery of the individually directed *Spiritual Exercises* in modern times has infused new life into the ancient practice of such spiritual conversation.

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NOTES

1. Cf. John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 110-114.

2. William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1982) (hereafter referred to as *Practice*). (The book

has been translated into Portuguese [São Paulo: Edições Loyola], French [Paris: Desclée de Brouwer], German [Leipzig: Benno Verlag], Italian [Milano: Edizioni O.R.], Polish [Krakow: Wydawnictwo], and Chinese [Taiwan: Kuangchi Press].

3. *Ibid.*, 8.

4. Cf. William A. Barry, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God: A Theological Inquiry*, 2nd Revised Edition (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 2004) for a detailed discussion of the religious dimension of experience.

5. The 15th Annotation clearly assumes such an encounter, for example.

6. For want of better words I will use “directee” and “director” for the rest of this article.

7. *Practice*, 57-58.

8. Gerald G. May, “The Psychodynamics of Spirituality: A Follow-up,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 31 (1977), 87.

9. In three chapters of *Paying Attention to God: Discernment in Prayer* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1990) I have explored such resistance, “Resistance to Union: A Virulent Strain,” “The Desire to Love as Jesus Loved: Its Vicissitudes,” and “Surrender: The Key to Wholeness.”

10. For more on supervision cf. *Practice*, chapter 11 and Maureen Conroy, R.S.M., *Looking into the Well: Supervision of Spiritual Directors* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1995).