

Spiritual Direction: Charism and Ministry

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The Setting: Four Life Situations

Sister Matilda is tired of teaching high school girls and decides that her new ministry should be "more spiritual." She determines that retreat and spiritual-direction work would suit her just fine at this time of her life.

Father Abe feels that he needs a break from the administrative office duties which he has had these past twenty years. In his sixties, he would like a lighter schedule, and he thinks that he will let it be known in the parish and diocese that he is available to be a spiritual director.

Susan is married, and her three children are all in school. She wants now to give more time to her parish activities. Susan has a master's degree in counseling, and so she is considering using her skills in the "At Home Retreat" movement and also offering some group spiritual direction.

Rudy has just finished some years of volunteer service in Latin America. He is more convinced than ever of the importance of lay ministry in the Church. He knows that he is friendly and easily approachable and likes dealing with people and their problems. He plans to go to the Jesuit School of Theology for training in pastoral counseling and spiritual direction.

Need for Theological Clarity

These four examples of Christian interest in spiritual direction ministry could be multiplied many times over and with many variations in age, experience, motivation, and desires. Although we know only the initial interest shown in spiritual direction in each of these stories, we find ourselves immediately alerted to the absence of some basic theological thinking about the place of spiritual direction in the Christian tradition.

ages and even to our own times takes on many forms, for example, individual and group, written and oral, incidental and ongoing, we hold a centrality for direction more traditionally understood as an ongoing relationship between two individuals, in which one is recognized as the helper for the other in the progress of living ever more fully one's Christian life.

Direction is called *spiritual*, not just in some "other than material" or earthy sense, but direction is *spiritual* because its source is the Spirit of God. For direction is rooted in our faith in a Trinitarian God, a God identified as Father, Son, and Spirit. This God is personal, not seen or related to in terms of forces or powers, or abstractions or neuter cases. Jesus used a love-word, *Abba*, as his apparently favorite imagery of his relationship to this personal God. In the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus saying to Philip that "anyone who sees me sees the Father." And so from the early Christian community down to our own day, Jesus has given us an entrance-image into a Trinitarian God who is personal. It is also in the Johannine writings that we hear Jesus identify himself as our "paraclete" when he announces that his leaving us is important for his sending "another paraclete" who will stay with us always and have no other message or mission than to help make Jesus as our Lord known to us in fuller and more intimate ways.

Direction, then, is taken up with the relationship of the Christian to the Christian God. As we well know, not all images of God are Christian, and some imaging of God is not only a distortion of the Scripture images but also totally incompatible with the Gospel. A person needs to be well-grounded in an adequate theology of God and Jesus in order to be a Christian spiritual director. Christian spiritual direction necessarily faces us not with a God of our prejudices or of our own making but a God of revelation and yet a God of our own experience.

B. Christian Prayer

An essential part of this relationship between a Christian and the Christian God gets expressed in that special conversation-communication mode we call *prayer*. In the Christian tradition, prayer, like direction itself, is not viewed as just one more human activity, common to anthropological studies and usually found as a part of all religions. Rather, prayer is seen as a specific gift of the Spirit of Christ, and so Christian prayer takes on a new depth of meaning and content from its very source in the Spirit.

Christian prayer is always a relational expression, and in the very act of praying, we come to a deeper sense of the limit-boundaries of the self and the God we adore as the "God of our life." In other words, in our Christian praying, we speak out the conviction that we are not God and that everything we have and are has God as its source. In Christian prayer, there is not a getting lost or absorbed into some kind of an all-devouring fog or some sidereal black hole. An interpersonal love marks the various expressions of Christian prayer, whether it be petition for needs, sorrow for sins, or thanksgiving for life.

The way of praying taught by Jesus focuses on a personal God of love, one who acts and is concerned for us individually and for our world, and who has plans for us all in which our free cooperation is invited. If we take Jesus' way of praying as

summed up in the Gospel story of his teaching the "Our Father" or if we more generally observe his own praying throughout the Gospels and his various teachings or stories about praying, we find a consistency in approach to God and to the content of prayer.

Direction encourages our growth as Christians by keeping us in contact with the ways of praying as Jesus prayed. Not every method or way of praying is automatically adaptable to the kind of relationship which Christian prayer is meant to engender. A spiritual director must be able to be discriminating about the ways of praying which call forth the growth proper to a Christian praying in the Spirit.

C. A Bringing About of the Kingdom

Spiritual direction does not concern itself only about growing in relationship with God. The Christian God is a God whose activity through creation, incarnation, and the Paschal Mystery is bringing forth a fulfillment (the Pauline *pleroma*) which is beyond human imagining. We believe and we hope in a God who makes all things new, and we know that in Jesus the in-breaking of this divine reality has reached a new and definitive form for ourselves and for our world. We as Christians take on a special responsibility for allowing it to happen in our own lives. This in-breaking of the Kingdom always catches us by surprise, even with all our efforts to lead better Christian lives and despite all our falling back and remissness in embodying Christian values in our lives and works in this world.

The focus of spiritual direction is as wide as a person's whole life. No activity, no suffering, no relationship, no good action or bad action is exempt from being looked at in spiritual direction. In fact, just as ordinariness is the typical context of God's dealings with the Israelites in the Old Testament accounts, so we find that the God who speaks and the God who calls and acts in our lives works ordinarily through human agents and through commonplace circumstances and events. It is in the listening to these experiences and growing in a discerning heart that we begin to realize that any of our human experiences is potentially a *religious experience*. For it is through our experience that we begin to learn a language of God, forming and focusing our lives. The ministry of spiritual direction is that attempt to help translate our religious experience into a language that we can more readily understand and so more fully respond to. A spiritual director knows that God's call is constant and all of us are necessarily involved in the bringing about of that part of the Kingdom where God is working in and through us. Christian spiritual direction looks for no nirvana of escapism in which people are left sitting around, feeling good about their prayer experience. Christian spiritual direction necessarily makes all Christians—those busy in the activities of secular life and those identified as cloistered contemplatives and those who follow the vocation of hermit—prophets who are responsible for a Kingdom still to come.

D. The Passion and the Resurrection

Because the Paschal Mystery remains the central theology dogma of the Christian faith, the passion and resurrection must take a consciously central place in the ministry of spiritual direction.

Jesus relates to every Christian as the one who is their savior. Every person must face how Jesus is savior for him or her—whatever form the question may take from being a savior *from*, to a savior *of*, or to a savior *for*. Sin, suffering, and death in all its forms, culminating at last in the apparent termination of one's human life, clamor for integration in each person's relationship with God. Christian theology has given a certain shape to our thinking about the integration and wholeness of human life in the light of the mystery of redemption. Spiritual direction is the attempt to facilitate the incorporation of this basic doctrine into the life-story of an individual Christian. The mature growth in Christian spiritual life takes place in proportion to a person's ability to enter into a passion and death with Jesus.

The full richness of Christian growth becomes evident when in spiritual direction a person learns to discover that the personal God who is more readily recognized in the treasured experiences of life and of love is the same one who remains intimately close in the dark moments and the secularly nonvalued or "throw-away" experiences of life. Through direction God more literally becomes acknowledged as the "God of my *whole life*"—a God found in passion, dying, and death and the same God who is our joy, hope, and source of all life. Christian spiritual direction retains the cross as the central image which challenges us humans to a mature and integrated spiritual life.

Direction: A Life Lived

Granted a more correct understanding of the essential notes of Christian theology in spiritual direction, is there a way of training or refining this gift of the Spirit found in certain members of the Christian community? Because of the modern-day development of psychology and counseling, we are inclined to be far more conscious today of skills and technique training in spiritual direction than in previous ages. Valuable as the contribution of psychology and counseling has been, it sadly has at times obscured the theological foundations and content of contemporary spiritual direction. But besides our consistent lack of focus on the theological foundations of direction, we also seem to pass over too lightly that the most important element in the refining of this ministerial gift of direction lies in one's own continuing development of one's spiritual life. Workshops and training programs in spiritual direction will fail to produce a spiritual director if a spiritual life is not seriously pursued. For it is in the lived spiritual life that the most basic formation is done by God in the potential spiritual director.

There is a tradition that St. Teresa of Avila identified that a director should possess a certain theological foundation as the most essential quality for giving good spiritual direction. At the same time, Teresa had an expectation that a director would be pursuing his or her own spiritual growth. From her experience, Teresa knew that pious sanctity or the good-willed attempt to help another was not enough for proper spiritual direction. And so her careful distinction about the more essential quality in a spiritual director was not to deny the good of a certain holiness of life lived by the director, but to stress that the director must possess a certain theological acumen. Teresa's sense of criteria I would hold to be even more essential for today's spiritual director than in previous ages.

Spiritual Direction: Concluding Reflections

Today, then, what is commonly missing in considerations about spiritual direction is its distinctive Christian theological base. We must begin with the fact that direction is a charism of the Spirit, and the Spirit gives these gifts where the Spirit wills. No one can claim a gift that is not given by God. Today as people put themselves forward for various ministries, this Christian fact of gifts which differ from person to person as well as the lack of certain gifts in any one individual is often being obscured or even ignored.

We need to pay greater attention to the fact that direction is a *Christian* ministry. The Christian context of spiritual direction gives a specific content to who God is, to how we pray, to our relationship to our world, and to the human reality of sin and death. These most basic elements of our Christian faith seem to attract little attention in the whole spiritual-direction project as it is considered in our day.

There is no doubt that we have a richness of resources, previously unknown or undeveloped in Church history, that we can bring to the study and practice of spiritual direction. Yet we need to make sure that these very resources clearly provide support for the most distinctive elements which identify spiritual direction as a Christian ministry. For ultimately only if we build upon spiritual direction's Christian theological foundations will we find that this ministry will be productive for the growth in holiness of Christians today.