

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

St Ignatius Loyola and spiritual direction, I

A CONTEMPORARY writer has suggested that the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola are 'the foundation for the development of a whole school of spiritual direction'.¹ I would suggest, however, that we must be very careful about uncritically removing certain items from the text of the Exercises in order to construct a model for spiritual direction in the widest sense. It is true that the Exercises have produced generations of spiritual directors. Such people are not limited to members of St Ignatius's religious order, the Society of Jesus, nor indeed to members of the Roman Catholic Church. However, it must be borne in mind that much that appears in the Exercises or in the early collections of notes on giving them (called the 'directories') refers to the very specific context of a retreat.

Having said this, it remains true that the basis for spiritual direction in the ignatian tradition must be, first of all, the observations and practical notes contained in the *Spiritual Exercises*,² and in the 'directories'.³ These notes are disparate comments on specific points rather than an organic body of definitive guidance for spiritual directors.

In writing this article I have confined myself to the ideas of St Ignatius rather than discussed the history of ignatian spiritual direction as a whole. For this reason I have not considered the 1599 'official' directory as a resource.⁴ This is still thought by some authorities to sum up the best of the previous directories and indeed the mind of Ignatius himself. However, this view is increasingly questioned. Much of its language and approach already seem to point towards the narrowing of perspective on prayer and the spiritual life which became more marked in the early seventeenth century. In this sense it seems to part company with the broader vision of Ignatius himself.⁵

I have already suggested that there is a danger in limiting our appreciation of ignatian spiritual direction to the Exercises and directories. It must always be remembered that 'the Exercises are essentially a point of departure'.⁶ It is therefore important to link the basics of direction in the Exercises with what Ignatius has to say in his letters and in the *Constitutions* of the Society of Jesus if we are to arrive at a more rounded picture.⁷

Finally, I would suggest that Ignatius's vision was that the *Spiritual Exercises* and the spirituality which came from it could only be transmitted in a vital way from person to person, for he saw the Exercises as an *experience* rather than a collection of spiritual maxims. Thus Ignatius sought to form people who would *live* the Exercises until their minds were simply reflections of its spirit. If this is the case it may be argued, perhaps, that it is futile to attempt to present a systematic approach to giving the Exercises or to spiritual direction in general. I have not attempted to do this. What

follows is no more than a collection of notes on a few important aspects of direction in general (rather than in the retreat experience): the nature of the relationship between director and the one directed; the focus or content of spiritual direction; some reflections on Ignatius's teaching on prayer; and finally, the training of spiritual directors.

Although Ignatius never used the words 'director' or 'directee', and although much of the traditional language of spiritual guidance can give a very false impression, I have reluctantly continued to use such words in this article for the sake of brevity and because they are still commonplace.

The relationship of director with directee

A number of contemporary writers have described the primary aim of Ignatius as helping an individual to true inner freedom.⁸ Certainly he himself describes the Exercises as 'every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments. . . .' (Exx 1). Again, in the preamble to the text proper he describes the purpose of the Exercises as 'the conquest of self and the regulation of one's life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment' (Exx 21). Spiritual direction, therefore, is to be a context for this vital freedom to grow.

Without any doubt this desire for the inner freedom of an individual colours the way in which Ignatius envisages the relationship with a director. The absolute foundation, the 'presupposition' without which the relationship cannot function properly, is mutual trust (Exx 22).⁹ In his 'presupposition' Ignatius draws attention to the very real danger of categorizing, judging or misinterpreting people. Prejudice is out of place. One should always put a good interpretation on what is said. Confrontation is to be avoided: if a person seems to be wrong one should first clarify whether one has understood correctly and if correction seems necessary it should be gentle. In other words, a director needs to become aware of his or her own inner reactions.

The person being directed will only arrive at the openness about inner feelings that Ignatius sees as vital for spiritual direction if there is real trust. If a person appears to have no such feelings or 'spiritual experiences' the director is instructed to ask questions (Exx 6). For it is only if there is a faithful and honest account of thoughts, feelings, experiences and disturbances that a director can 'propose some spiritual exercises in accordance with the degree of progress made and suited and adapted' to the needs of the individual (Exx 17). Ignatius points out in his Rules for discernment that there is often a real temptation not to be honest with a director when difficulties arise. This must be resisted (Exx 326).

Openness in direction is also mentioned by Ignatius in the jesuit *Constitutions*. In dialogue with the superior, Jesuits should keep nothing hidden, whether interior or exterior, 'in order that the superior might better direct them along the path of perfection' (*Const* 551). From the very beginning,

novices should open themselves in confidence to superiors or to their spiritual guide in order to receive 'counsel and aid in everything' (*Const* 263).

The importance that Ignatius attached to spiritual guidance is underlined by the fact that all Jesuits were asked to give a full account of themselves at least once a year (*Const* 97). This was seen as being of 'great or even extraordinary importance' (*Const* 91). It was presupposed that every Jesuit, from novice to professed, had someone to whom they went for spiritual guidance. In the case of novices this was either the novicemaster or 'whomever the superior appoints as being more fit for this charge' (*Const* 264). Rectors of communities had the duty to appoint someone to superintend spiritual matters for young jesuit students (*Const* 431). The jesuit superior himself also had the role and authority of a 'spiritual father' and could advise on the prayer life of individual Jesuits (*Const* 341 and 583). Professed Jesuits could deal either with the superior or with a regular confessor on such matters (*Const* 584). Ignatius often uses the word 'obedience' in reference to the attitude of Jesuits to their superior or confessor in spiritual matters. There is a sense too, in which this also applies in spiritual direction in general, for the relationship cannot function if a person continually refuses to follow advice or suggestions. 'Obviously anyone who refuses to obey the director and wants to follow his own judgment should not continue to make the exercises'.¹⁰

A director should always remember that the fundamental relationship is that between God and the person coming for direction. So the director is to allow 'the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord' (Exx 15). Directors must be careful not to impose their own ideas but should entrust directees to God 'that he should not permit that for the sins of one who gives the exercises any soul should be ensnared'.¹¹ The editor of Ignatius's autobiography, da Camara, records in his own diary that 'the Father (Ignatius) said to me that there can be no greater mistake, in his view in things of the Spirit, than to want to mould others to one's own image'.¹² As a modern experienced director has suggested, to stand off and to be patient and objective in direction is a very difficult role to maintain. It is easy to become either too close (over-identification) or to become too impatient.¹³

Because the role of a director is secondary and supportive of the fundamental relationship with God, he or she should be a balance without 'leaning to one side or the other' (Exx 15) and should be extremely careful not to put undue pressure on someone to undertake any course of action (Exx 14).¹⁴ This does not mean that the director's role is negligible because it is not a matter of being merely a passive sponge! It is perfectly valid, humbly and sensitively, to help a person to follow what best serves God.¹⁵ This search for what is 'better' in a relationship with God is a frequent reference point in the Exercises and is at the centre of spiritual direction in general as well.

The human guide must avoid seeking, unconsciously perhaps, to do

God's work for him. Direction is not primarily a classroom and should not be over didactic (Exx 2).¹⁶ Interviews should not be too frequent for there is a danger of creating over-dependence by seeing a directee too often.¹⁷ The emphasis, too, should be less on intellectual input or talking 'learnedly about God' than on guiding a person towards self-discovery and the meaning of their own experiences.¹⁸ For as Ignatius succinctly comments, 'it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth' (Exx 2). In other words the director's task is to help the individual 'to articulate, clarify and distinguish what is occurring within him'.¹⁹

Ignatius's comments about brevity of explanation also imply that what people discover for themselves has a deeper effect. If a person is prone to fluctuations of feelings (what Ignatius terms 'consolation' and 'desolation') and finds this confusing, the director is to explain the various rules for discernment (Exx 8). In other words, people must be helped to discern for themselves instead of relying merely on the director. Ignatius clearly wanted the development of self-awareness in people. 'Our Father wanted us, in all our activities, as far as possible, to be free, at ease in ourselves, and obedient to the light given particularly to each one'.²⁰ The discipline of reporting to a director is itself an education in discerning for oneself, for what is reported is already sifted and assessed as important. The *Constitutions* indicate that Ignatius anticipated that spiritually mature people would be able to function to a great extent on their own, but even those at an earlier stage were to be trusted to some degree with the conduct of their own spiritual lives. In his remarks on penance in the Exercises, Ignatius suggests that each person should experiment for themselves 'for he (God) often grants each one the grace to understand what is suitable for him' (Exx 89).²¹

A director should not seek unnecessary information for while openness is vital, the privacy of each must be respected (Exx 17). The focus should be on the present and most especially on inner experiences or feelings for direction is essentially a response to these (Exx 6,17).²² Yet it is also true that 'the particular inner movements . . . only take on meaning for direction against the background of the personal, spiritual and relational structures of his concrete life and experience'.²³ So Ignatius would not have objected to a director seeking to know the directee reasonably well. It has been argued that his concern was more with the director's *motivation* in seeking information.²⁴

In the end, the aim of any information is to help the director to speak helpfully to a particular person's needs and to adapt what is said to the right level or stage of growth. Generalizations, spiritual maxims or universal rules for the spiritual life are not part of Ignatius's method. In a letter to Francis Borgia in 1548, Ignatius strongly affirms the need for flexibility. Sometimes a person needs penance or a certain kind of prayer, at others he or she needs something different. Likewise progress necessarily makes methods which were once useful no longer so.²⁵

This attitude of flexible response by the director is reinforced by some of the observations in the Exercises that allow for adaptation of material (Exx 4,18,19,20). Likewise, in the *Constitutions* Ignatius returns to the same theme in his treatment of prayer. Those who do not seem to be advancing by one method should be guided by the superior towards some alternative. Spiritual directors should always keep in view the 'circumstances of persons, times and places' (e.g. *Const* 343).

Ignatius is clear that a director should be neither too firm nor too lenient. If a person is suffering distractions or dryness it may help to suggest more prayer (Exx 13).²⁶ In the Exercises the director should always encourage perseverance in prayer particularly if there is a temptation to give up or to cut corners (Exx 12). Yet the director must also be sensitive to weakness. When someone is in difficulty or suffering from temptation or desolation the director is to be gentle and kind and always encouraging, thus offering the necessary hope 'to prepare and dispose him for coming consolation' (Exx 7). One of the early directories adds that a director should not press 'melancholic types'. 'Rather be careful to keep them open'.²⁷

Focus of direction

St Ignatius affirms both that prayer and life should be integrated and yet that the primary focus of spiritual direction is 'religious experience' and a person's relationship with God. In his own practice, Ignatius's aim was always 'to discover the concrete will of God and to bring it to completion'.²⁸ He was primarily concerned 'with leading those entrusted to him to a spiritual experience. . . . The person should receive an inner sense for the workings of God's grace'.²⁹

Thus the introductory notes in the Exercises fix the attention both of the director and of the directee firmly on prayer. That being said, should spiritual direction limit itself purely to prayer? Certainly spiritual direction outside a 'closed retreat' (whether ordinary direction or the 'Exercises in daily life') will not be detached 'from all friends and acquaintances and from all worldly cares' (Exx 20). Quite the contrary! However, even within the Exercises, there is implicit reference to the fact that 'religious experience' is not to be limited to the time of explicit prayer. For example the general examen of conscience presents a way of reflecting on what happens in daily life (Exx 43).³⁰ Likewise the 'Contemplation to attain the love of God' at the close of the Exercises offers a form of prayer that focuses explicitly on the ways in which God acts in the world and in daily life (Exx 230-37).

The Exercises clearly assume that certain fundamental attitudes that lie behind what happens in prayer will also be an important focus in direction. The most important is generosity which enables a person to offer self to God. Obviously generosity will never be total and will appear as an issue at various times in direction (Exx 5). One of the early directories also mentions another attitude — the gradual purification of motives in prayer so that one does not seek consolation or anything else for its own sake.³¹ A

most important attitude is to centre on the 'here and now' rather than on an unhealthy and introspective stirring around in the past. This is one interpretation of an aspect of the introductory notes that is suggested by a modern commentator (Exx 17).³²

As we have seen, Ignatius's emphasis in prayer is very much on the 'affective' and on inner feelings. It is not so much ideas that matter as 'the intimate understanding and relish of the truth' (Exx 2). A person should, therefore, be encouraged in prayer to remain where 'I have found what I desire, without any eagerness to go on till I have been satisfied' (Exx 76). A modern commentator has suggested that Ignatius learned from his own process of conversion that the alternation of 'affective experiences' or inner reactions was the main criterion for determining how God is leading a person. It is this awareness of the significance of such experiences that led Ignatius to affirm strongly that God must be allowed to deal freely with the individual and that the director should question carefully about them.³³

Because Ignatius believed that there was an intimate link between prayer and externals such as environment, preparation, place and posture, he suggests that a director should ask about such things, especially if prayer is dry or distracted. The details of these 'externals' are to be found in what are called the 'additional directions' (Exx 73-90). Equally, Ignatius, in line with his philosophy that the physical is important in prayer, has a number of remarks about diet (Exx 210-17). This insight that the whole of life, including food, should be in proper order to aid inner growth finds an echo in other traditions — not least in such non-christian ones as yoga or zen where diet is part and parcel of the way to enlightenment.

Much the same motivation (that the body and external environment play a part in spiritual growth) lies behind Ignatius's concern that austerities or penance should also be in proper order. The director is exhorted to keep an eye on this while at the same time allowing the individual to experiment freely (Exx 82-90). Certainly no penances must be imposed. The aim is not in any sense a rejection of the body as a hindrance but the search for a proper balance in living. In a letter to Borgia, Ignatius emphasizes that in the end inner gifts are to be preferred to outward austerities. The body is not to be abused. 'We should love the body in so far as it is obedient and helpful to the soul, since the soul with the body's help and service is better disposed for the service and praise of our Creator and Lord'.³⁴ In another letter to a spanish nun he exhorts her to take great care of the body, to take proper nourishment, recreation and adequate sleep.³⁵

In all these matters moderation is the key. 'If one fails to observe this moderation, he will find that good is turned to evil and virtue to vice'.³⁶ And so a director is to keep a careful eye on this danger.³⁷ For the same reason Ignatius exhorts Jesuits to follow the superior's judgment in order to avoid vanity.³⁸

Finally, a central focus of spiritual direction is the development of discernment, particularly that which is appropriate to different stages of

spiritual growth (Exx 8,10,14).³⁹ The one who comes for direction needs it even to establish what should be mentioned in dialogue with the director as we have already seen. A director can help by showing the directee how to make a brief period of reflection after prayer and how to keep notes on this (Exx 77).⁴⁰ The main body of Ignatius's teaching on discernment, however, is contained in the Rules which appear in the Exercises and which the director should explain as appropriate to the directee (Exx 313-36). There is no room to discuss these in such a brief article and in any case there are several good commentaries available in English.⁴¹ The Rules help both director and directee to understand the significance of inner feelings or reactions — in other words how to sift experience in order to distinguish the true and helpful from the false and misleading.

It is clear that Ignatius did not see his teaching on discernment as limited either to a closed retreat or to an early stage in spiritual growth. He felt it helpful to discuss it (especially the nature of consolation, desolation and scruples) in his dealings even with people who had made considerable progress.⁴² There do remain serious questions about the practical validity of the Rules in the later stages of growth in prayer. The great analyst of mysticism, Poulain, implies that at least the teaching on consolation and desolation remain useful.⁴³ Ignatius himself recognizes a difference between what were traditionally called the purgative and illuminative ways (Exx 10). The strong oscillation of feelings is associated with the First Week (or earlier stage in the spiritual journey). As commitment deepens, Ignatius suggests that deceptive good or the 'enemy' posing as an angel of light will be more significant. The dangers become those of false humility or spiritual élitism.⁴⁴ The greater subtlety of the remarks in the Rules for the Second Week seem to me to indicate that movement or interior feelings will be much less obvious. If so, this indicates a need to be very careful in the application of Ignatius's remarks (Exx 17) about the director questioning the absence of such movements.

As a conclusion to this section on the proper focus of direction, it may be useful to refer briefly to certain comments in the *Constitutions*. We have seen that regular spiritual conversation with superiors was expected of all Jesuits. What should such conversation focus upon? Ignatius explicitly mentions 'inclinations and motions' (*Const* 92) and this presumably refers to those spiritual experiences which as we have seen are the object of discernment. However, at another point, Ignatius seems to suggest the widest possible content. Novices are to open themselves in confidence in order to receive 'counsel and aid in *everything*'. Their 'entire soul' should be open, not merely their failings but their penances, devotions and virtues (*Const* 263). In other words, spiritual direction will inevitably touch on the whole of an individual's consciousness and attitudes. However, this total openness centres around, and finds its primary focus in, an explicit reference to 'spiritual experience' or how God is working in a person's life and prayer.

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NOTES

¹ Leech, K.: *Soul friend* (London, 1979), p 58.

² References in this article are to *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, trans. L. Puhl (Chicago, 1951), cited as Exx.

³ The early directories appear in *MHSJ*, 76. In this article I have referred to an english translation, *Autograph directories of St Ignatius Loyola* in the series 'Program to adapt the Spiritual Exercises', ed. Thomas Burke (Jersey City, no date). In this there are three directories associated with St Ignatius himself which I have cited subsequently as: *Autograph*, *Tradita* and *Calveras*.

⁴ This also appears in *MHSJ*, 76 and in a good english translation in *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola*, ed. W. H. Longridge (London, 1930).

⁵ Cf Veale, J.: 'Ignatian prayer or jesuit spirituality', in *The Way Supplement*, 27 (Spring 1976), pp 3-14.

⁶ Veale, *op. cit.*, p 8.

⁷ For Ignatius's letters I have referred in this article to the selection entitled *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. William Young (Chicago, 1959), cited as *Letters*. For the Constitutions, see *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, trans. George Ganss (St Louis, 1970), cited as *Const.*

⁸ Cf Fleming, D.: 'The ignatian Spiritual Exercises: understanding a dynamic', in *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, ed. D. Fleming (St Louis, 1981), pp 4-5. And English, J.: *Spiritual freedom* (Guelph, 1982), *passim*.

⁹ Cf Fleming, *op. cit.*, pp 4-5.

¹⁰ *Tradita*, notes.

¹¹ *Calveras*, 407.

¹² Quoted in Veale, *op. cit.*, p 9, n 28.

¹³ English, *op. cit.*, pp 56-68.

¹⁴ *Autograph*, 7.

¹⁵ *Autograph*, 8.

¹⁶ *Tradita*, Manner of giving Exx, 1.

¹⁷ *Calveras*, 412. Cf also English, *op. cit.*, comments on Exx 2 in pp 56-68.

¹⁸ Cf Bernadicou, P.: 'The retreat director in the Spiritual Exercises', in Fleming *op. cit.*, pp 27-38.

¹⁹ Robb, P.: *The retreatant in a directed retreat*, in the series 'Program to adapt the Spiritual Exercises', p 1.

²⁰ Quoted in Veale, *op. cit.*, p 9, n 27.

²¹ *Tradita*, 2.

²² *Autograph*, 5. Cf also English, *op. cit.*, on Exx 17, pp 56-68.

²³ Robb, *op. cit.*, p 1.

²⁴ Robb, *op. cit.*, p 5.

²⁵ *Letters*, p 179.

²⁶ *Letters*, p 179.

²⁷ *Calveras*, 431.

²⁸ Wulf, F.: 'Ignatius as a spiritual guide', in *Ignatius Loyola, his personality and spiritual heritage 1556-1956*, ed. F. Wulf (St Louis, 1977), p 36.

²⁹ Wulf, *op. cit.*, p 37.

³⁰ Nowadays most directors favour a broader approach to this, popularly called the 'examen of consciousness' which focuses not merely on faults but on the whole of life. Cf Aschenbrenner, G.: 'Consciousness examen', in *Review of Religious*, vol 31 (1972), pp 14-21, reprinted in Fleming, *op. cit.*, pp 175-85.

³¹ *Calveras*, 408.

³² English, *op. cit.*, pp 56-68.

³³ Robb, *op. cit.*, p 3.

³⁴ *Letters*, p 180.

³⁵ *Letters*, pp 24-25.

³⁶ *Letters*, p 126.

³⁷ For example, *Calveras*, 431.

³⁸ *Letters*, pp 159-62.

³⁹ *Autograph*, 11-12.

⁴⁰ *Tradita*, Manner of giving Exx, 4.

⁴¹ Cf for example: Toner, J.: *A commentary on St Ignatius's Rules for the discernment of spirits* (St Louis, 1982); Futrell, J.: 'Ignatian discernment', in *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, vol II, no 2, April 1970; Buckley, M.: 'Rules for the discernment of spirits', in *The Way Supplement*, 20 (Autumn 1973), pp 19-37.

⁴² Cf *Letters*, pp 18-24.

⁴³ Poulain, A.: *The graces of interior prayer*, trans. L. Yorke Smith (London, 1950), pp 368-69.

⁴⁴ Cf *Letters*, p 19.