

SPIRITUAL GUIDES

By BARBARA BEDOLLA

SPIRITUAL GUIDES have many names: spiritual director, spiritual friends, spiritual father or mother. Whatever the title, this person is called by God to a very special ministry, which is to walk with others in spiritual journey. The function of a spiritual guide differs according to each person he or she is with. In one instance the role is that of listener/reflector, in another instructor/director; the guide moves according to the rhythm of each individual. It would seem that the primary focus of the guide is to be present with God for the directee.

Many lay people are called to the ministry of spiritual direction, and each person experiences the call differently. A pharmacist in a small town begins to notice that people spend more time in his store discussing their concerns about life, death, and God's place in it all. A pastoral counsellor begins to realise that a client's problems are not psychological but rather of a spiritual nature. A high-powered woman executive finds many of her colleagues coming to her and sharing their spiritual unrest; in some ways she enables them to speak of their search for God in a corporate business world.

In this article I would like to speak of the role of the spiritual guide from my perspective as a laywoman. I will share my call in a chronological fashion, speak of some of the personal tensions which occurred when I first began to guide people, and finally, in light of my experience and training, reflect a bit on the future of guides who are lay people.

My journey

Being a spiritual director had never been a part of my life plan. I had graduated from college when I was twenty one with a degree in social work. I was married at twenty two and worked in various social service agencies until our first child was born five years later.

I had been a member of the Sodality (now called Christian Life Community) most of my life. It was through this movement that

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I was introduced to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola. These retreats were made annually beginning in college. Daily prayer (meditation and contemplation), liturgy, and spiritual reading were an accepted part of my way of life along with the use of discernment in decision-making which helped to focus my life.

The small faith communities provided challenge and support which I needed to keep deepening my prayer experience. CLC also called me to integrate my prayer with my life experience. Thus in every area of my life, in my personal, familial, professional, local and global communities, I was called to mission and service. By the age of thirty one, I had two children and was a housewife. My concerns were primarily my family and the social justice issues of that day. Thus the problem of racial inequality and the needs of the migrant farmworkers were foremost in my mind.

So, when at the end of my retreat that year my director, Fr John Conrath, S. J., said to me, 'You know my dear, you are ready to give the Exercises', I was stunned and replied, 'I can't do that; only nuns and priests do that. Besides who would make a retreat with a laywoman?'. 'All right', he said, 'if that is what you think'. Later in the year, Fr Conrath sent me material on the Spiritual Exercises adapted to be made at home. This concept caught my attention, as I had always felt that spirituality was for the elite ('regular' and poor people could not afford the time or money for such a luxury).

Thus began the development of a home based retreat formulated on the Spiritual Exercises. This retreat involved both weekly individual direction and group experience over an eight-week period. All people invited to make this retreat eagerly accepted. Following that retreat, there were waiting lists of people asking to be a part of the next experience.

A year after this retreat experience began, my husband and I were transferred to La Paz, Bolivia, then to Panama, and finally to Quito, Ecuador. It was in these travels that my experience both in spiritual direction and of direction in retreats in daily life broadened. In these countries people desperately sought a sense of spiritual development in a situation where encouragement of this development was not available. I was soon directing religious and lay people, Protestants and Catholics, persons of every ethnic and cultural background imaginable.

Somewhere between our tours in Panama and Quito I was able to make the thirty-day Spiritual Exercises. This helped me greatly

in deepening my awareness of spiritual movements of my soul. I found my directing skills improving with the support of interested Jesuits, much reading, and finally with the ongoing experiences of my directees. All this time I was maturing in my experience in directing the retreat in daily life (Nineteenth Annotation). But a new dilemma presented itself: retreatants were asking to continue with me in ongoing spiritual direction. This was a whole new arena in which I had felt a need to gain more knowledge and skill. Now ten years later, programmes are being established to provide training for spiritual guides.

I chose an Ecumenical Spiritual Guide Program at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Guidance in Washington, D.C. This programme provided three specific experiences. First was reflection upon different apophatic and kataphatic prayer styles. Second came seminars and sharing on all phases of spirituality and life. Topics fully explored were discernment, psychology, social concerns, sexuality, beatitudes, and plurality, among others. Finally, students who were lay and religious of different religious traditions were divided into peer groups. Each member of a peer group would present a directee with whom they were working. The group members and supervisor would then help the presenter with any questions or concerns the presenter would have around the handling of the directee (this is to help the director freely move without his or her personal agenda affecting the direction stance). When I graduated from this programme I was certified as a spiritual guide but also clearly understood the necessity to be a member of a peer group.

My call to spiritual guidance came unexpectedly and it has grown through the years. It has been affected by CLC vocation, by the countries I have lived in, and by my own personal growth. Yet these years have not been without my own personal tensions, and from this has come a growth of my own admiration for the laity and the spiritual lives which we lead.

Reflections on tensions and gifts

During those beginning years in spiritual direction, one of the most difficult areas to deal with was my own feeling of not being ready to accept the authenticity of my own call and my lay spirituality. I was my own worst critic when it came to the question of lay spiritual directors, burdened by a history which said that a lay person cannot be as holy as a priest or as religious. I was

burdened with a sense that women cannot be attuned to other women as spiritual directors. Finally, I had a sense that laity were certainly less than adequate to deal with the quality of spirituality espoused by Ignatius Loyola.

It has taken me a period of thirteen years to gain a sense of adequacy as a spiritual guide. Not that I doubted God's ability to work in me, to help me be a director, but rather I questioned how capable I was as a religious spiritual director. I believe that my anxiety was eradicated when I sought out a lay woman to direct my annual retreat. Through this director I was gifted with a uniquely rich retreat experience. This richness was not based on a personal friendship but rather on the ease of our understanding during conference times. I found that what I had experienced in directing lay persons I also received in being directed by one. Less time was needed in getting into the heart of retreat prayer because the lifestyle, the sexuality, and the social concerns were understood. Because of this, my own capability to encounter Christ in an in-depth experience was not underestimated. I was treated with spiritual maturity and challenged to live out the gospel values.

Today's lay guide is on the threshold of a whole new exploration into the meaning of lay spirituality, a spirituality which evolves from the lives of those people who are seeking to interiorize the *word* into their own reality and to create a new response to justice and truth. The barriers which said that holiness was separate from wholeness are being knocked down. From this comes a new experience of the reality of Christ, not from a monastic vowed life but from the multi-vocational responses to Christ's particular call.

The uniqueness of this spirituality is found not in the similarity of lifestyle and patterns of life, but rather in the diversity and chaos of today's living. People are discerning and living out Christ's call from their economic status, their educational diversity and from the challenges of their state in life, be it married or single. Within their personal experiences of encountering Christ and his people, all struggle to find the meaning of prayer and the possibilities it holds for them, not in a structured existence but in a chaotic one.

The lay person who is a spiritual guide lives out and encounters this reality; there are no illusions of life, of its joys and sorrows. As lay guides walk the road of their retreatants/directees, they learn more and more about grace, relationship with Christ, and *hope*. The guide sees prayer interiorized and lived. Thus, the guide

grows in confidence that it is indeed right for him or her to be there, both to direct and to be directed, and to participate in the exploration of prayer and the retreat in daily life as lived out by Christians today. I continue to be reaffirmed by retreatants and directees. A young male teacher commented, 'I've made three retreats: the first with a priest, the second with a nun, and the third with you. By and large, I have to say that this one was the best. It was easier to relate to you my fears, my pressures, my concerns, and my prayers because I knew that you too had experienced them'.

Hopes and future

As the role of the lay guide continues to emerge in the Church today, it seems appropriate to explore ways to bring together the wealth of experience which religious and lay guides can offer to one another. The religious spiritual guide has the benefit of education and specific formation in spirituality. Religious orders provide specific spiritual traditions from which we as laity have much to learn.

On the other hand laity have lived experience of integration of prayer and various lifestyles. As laity experience deeper spiritual conversion, they explore the world they live in with a different perspective. This perspective is of an integration of the spirit, creativity and reality. This focus adds new life to a once strict interpretation of spirituality. Perhaps what the laity are capturing is the spirit which Ignatius worked toward in being contemplative in action.

This coming together may take form in formation and training programmes, in the sharing of direction, gifts and tensions with one another in peer groups, in exploring the possible needs to establish criteria and possible certification of all guides in order to provide the directee with the fullest of graced experience. In sharing my journey, its growth and development, I would hope that readers will begin to seek ways to enable this emerging ministry to come to its fullness for *all* spiritual guides. Thus in the future, the emphasis will not be on whether the spiritual guide is religious or lay, male or female, but rather the emphasis will simply be on the *person* of the spiritual guide.