

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

ANAMCHARA: A Reflection on giving Spiritual Direction

Beginnings

IT WAS only after I had given my first directed retreat, about four years ago, that I felt I knew what to do in spiritual direction. Before that, I had tried helping some others with their praying, but was not quite sure where to go. But in the course of that retreat I saw development in praying. I found I was able to discern what was significant in the retreatants' accounts of their praying: the point where the Lord's action was touching or moving them, and whither he was drawing them. By keeping them in contact with that experience, keeping their noses to the scent, as it were, I found that the inner movement was quite strong and could see the direction in which it was heading.

A second thing I noted was that the person's *way of praying* was, in a way, more important than the subject-matter. Of course, the style of one's prayer is easier to read during a retreat than outside of it. I believe that if a person is faithful to the manner of praying which is at this time appropriate, the Lord's contact and leading will be deeper. But most people need affirmation about this when prayer is becoming simple and when the matter on which they may focus is slight or even nil.

I noted a third thing: there is a prayer of faith or union in which the person opens out to God in surrender. Here there is no focus on definite material; here is the time when the reflection or meditation on texts needs to be done *outside* of the times of full, open prayer. Meditation is still necessary, but not during formal prayer. The material which exercises attraction may indeed come up into the prayer, but when it does so, it comes involuntarily and as part of the movement of surrender.

I noticed too, that the call of God during retreat tends to be towards the cross, towards self-surrender, towards a dying to self in order to be centred on God.

Having noticed all this, I felt I knew the broad lines of how to be helpful to a person outside of retreat.

Annual retreat

While I am speaking about retreats, I want to stress here a point that I think important: it seems to me that one's annual retreat points towards the future and needs to be lived out in the course of the succeeding year.

For example, if one has entered a new stage in praying, this has to settle down; or if a self-offering has been drawn from one during retreat, this is going to be asked for in the daily life-experience; or perhaps during the retreat one was moved most deeply when one accepted the word, 'You are mine'; or when one turned away from self-preoccupation to 'look' at God; or when one faced into the word, 'Let him deny himself'. Such an experience may well describe the programme for the succeeding year. In the annual retreat, one is given a glimpse of the future.

Experience

The experience I reflect upon in what follows was gained not only in directed retreats given, but also, and mainly, in meeting people regularly over these last few years. I see more than a dozen people—mainly men—on a regular basis, i.e. about every three weeks. I go out to meet and chat individually with about a dozen novices—also men—almost every two months. I meet about another dozen people less regularly, and I reply to a number of letters.

Anamchara

It seems to me that a spiritual director is, to use an Irish word, an '*anamchara*', which means a soul-friend; he is a companion on another's inner journey with and to God. He is a companion because both he and the other are on the same quest; and, as a companion, he befriends by listening supportively as the other unfolds his inner story. It is a journey *with* God, because the other has already been found by God, and yet also *to* God, in the sense that the relationship with God calls to grow in depth. And growth is entry into the dispositions of Jesus Christ, and letting him re-live in us his human experience.

Two levels in Christ's experience—the pattern for us

The experience which Christ had on the cross seems to me to be crucial for understanding the way forward. What he went through there was, from a merely natural and superficial viewpoint, utterly meaningless and quite wrong. But, at another level, he was finding there his Father and the risen life: in his lowest experience, he found the high-point of his life; where there was absolutely nothing for self, there he put pure love; in the mud, he found gold; in the ultimate defeat, he found ultimate victory.

All this is so because there are two levels, the experiential and the spiritual: that of the senses, and that of the spirit. It is also the sacramental principle: the bread-and-wine and the presence they carry. This seems to me to run through all our experience in the journey with and to God. It is central to our quest for God in all our activities, for the Creator is hidden in all that he sustains in existence. Jesus found his Father—or

should I say, was found by his Father?—in the apparent defeat of Calvary.

Prayer

The two levels are evident both in the growth of prayer and in the 'market-place'.

When prayer moves into simplicity, there is a minimum focus which carries something much greater: for example, some fascination with the phrase 'Jesus touched them', carries a loving attention to God which is much greater and wider than the meaning of those words. The praying person needs some contact-point to hold her in the relationship. It is a prayer of recollection. There is an awareness of horizon, but as yet she needs some particular focus.

When prayer moves beyond that stage, an attempt to focus seems to interfere with the relationship: in order to be in contact with God, one needs to be out of contact with anything definite, one must let go, one must float. The imagination—and hence the ability to think—cannot now contribute: the imagination becomes random, and it occupies itself with all sorts of flotsam and jetsam, while at a deeper level the person is being engaged by God; there are two levels. But at first it seems wrong. Control has been lost. It is a mystical prayer. God is presenting himself as spirit to the spiritual faculties, by-passing the imagination. Aridity is the pain experienced by the person as fantasy tries in vain to follow down into the level of intellect in an attempt to participate in what is going on there in that spiritual faculty. One feels that one has gone backwards.

This is a crucial stage for direction. The praying person needs affirmation, the assurance that all is well. A like simplicity should be evident in such a person's daily living: a desire for God's will, perhaps an anxiety in this desire; an awareness of one's unholiness, of one's inadequate response to God, and yet a peace deep down.

A person may experience a transition here into an ease with this kind of praying, a sense that surrender into it has been given: this is a prayer of union. The two levels are evident. I would hold that the two levels *should* be there: a level of 'distractions', so-called, and on another level something else, a kind of engagement, a sense of being happy to be in this somewhat messy state.

Such a person is like a mother who is attending to her guest in the front room, while upstairs the children are running about: if she wants to quieten the children, she has to abandon her guest; if she stays with her guest, she has to put up with the noise upstairs. The imagination is now like those children: it will not stay quiet.

The random activity of the fantasy is evidence that one is awake: that is all. I am distrustful of a search for one-pointedness: this is like trying to regain control. But when the imagination is random, one is more

under the Lord's control: and that is really what is desirable. One may at times be drawn into mystery, but in my opinion such absorption should not be engineered by any technique, such as the use of a mantra: it should be left to the Lord to do it, whenever it pleases him.

People who pray like this recognize that although during the time of prayer nothing much seemed to be going on, apart from the superficial flow of random fantasies, they are certain, during the rest of the day, that something was received which is empowering 'them' to cope with their situation and to be patient, spontaneously unselfish, and able to let go of their plans when an unexpected request intrudes: there is surrender of self in prayer and in life.

To describe the prayer, the word 'obscurity' is preferable to 'darkness' which seems too strong a word, for there is some light: people may refer to it as a 'benign darkness', a sense of inner poverty, a sense of being 'engaged' or even of being 'held', a sense of being 'enfolded' by some mysterious Lover; there is an at-home-ness with mystery. The experience can resemble 'peripheral vision': you know you are aware of something at the edge, but it eludes direct focus.

There can be a harmony or uneventfulness in such prayer, which is like the experience of putting one's hand into water of the same temperature as one's hand, without looking: you do not know whether you are in it or not. This harmony is a good sign. Nothing much can be reported about such a prayer-experience, except that there is a certain variation in it, some life, and eventually a varying intensity, a sense that the imagination is sometimes more stilled, and this not by one's own doing: there may be a degree of absorption. The conversation with the spiritual director at this stage is likely to centre much more on life outside of prayer: the attempt to surrender to God's will in one's circumstances.

Prayer may develop further: the touches of union with God may deepen, God drawing the intellect deep into himself in mystery, thus engaging the whole self in a very strong intensity which captivates the faculties of sense as well as spirit. God is preparing the person for the transforming union in which his 'access' to the person, or rather interaction, will be below the level of the faculties, deep within the spirit, where he will dwell and awaken.

But life-experiences may at this stage be bitter. The two levels are there again: God is here at work, detaching the person from all that is not God, so as to take her ever more deeply to himself; he is calling forth total surrender; he is emptying out a space for himself by displacing the self. Love, by excessive love, is preparing his own abode.

Prayer and life

Growth in contemplative or mystical prayer is an aspect of the person's growth *outside* of prayer. Prayer now will not be helped by technique—

the time for techniques is past—but only by a cooperation with the Lord *within* prayer allowing the awareness of ‘whatever it is’ to be vague, undefined, general; and by the effort *outside* of prayer to be Christlike in relation to one’s tasks and the people one deals with. The growth of the prayer hinges very definitely on the growth in oneself as a person; development in the prayer will be the echo of the development in being; what matters is the kind of person you become.

Differences

How that personal growth is *reflected* in one’s consciousness during formal prayer will depend on one’s temperament. So two individuals, different in temperament but, let us suppose, equally close to Christ and his Father, will experience this closeness differently in accord with their make-up. Thus, one, outward-looking, more inclined towards action, may be almost unable to perceive inner change during prayer and consequently finds prayer almost unreportable; another, inward-looking, less at home with action, sensitive, and perhaps made more sensitive by painful experiences, will be very conscious of the interplay between self and God in the imageless prayer. Both will receive God’s consolation, but in the second type it will register with more variation. Thus the difference will not be one of grace or of standing with God, but one of personality type. Hence, what I would say about various kinds of experience in prayer is that they ought to be accepted but not over-valued. God *is* indeed dealing with the individual, making known his love, calling forth a response; but one must not measure holiness by what is perceived within, simply be grateful for God’s perceived touch of love and respond.

Overflow

This brings me to the notion of overflow or echo in mystical prayer. People whose prayer is imageless speak from time to time, especially during retreat, of an image seen during prayer. It may be of a path leading away to a bend and out of sight, or of a boat on the sea, or of being washed up on an island, or it may be a vision of Christ embracing oneself, or of being nailed with him: it can be a sudden flash barely glimpsed, or it can be an extended beholding. The union with Christ is going on *unseen* in the depths, and a symbolic image—or it could be word—is thrown up from the depths to the surface consciousness. The function of the vision is to reveal to the person what is going on unseen in the relationship, and to give reassurance and elicit cooperation. I have noticed that this is particularly true of a vision of Christ: the experience going on within in the spirit can be too terrifying and awesome—he is Lord—and so the vision is needed to reassure the person that all is well and that the reaction experienced is the effect of Christ’s closeness in a

spiritual way to the person's spirit. The real thing is below words and images: these are merely an overflow or echo of it. For we do not experience God directly: it is the self's reaction to God's deeper action that is experienced. So experience of God is only *indirect*.

As the prayer deepens, one is more and more exposed to the God who is Love. In connection with this, and continuing with the notion of 'overflow', I want to mention a kind of response that I have met with in more than half-a-dozen people. I am speaking of a prayer that is imageless and in which God is touching the person in a spiritual way either at the level of the spiritual faculties or, more usually, at a receptivity below them which I term 'spirit'. Because we are a composite of body and soul, or of sense and spirit, and inextricably so, the love received in the spirit can, if it is a sudden and unaccustomed infusion, be echoed in the level of sense, and being love, it is experienced sexually. Some people read this right, and accept it; others, believing something to be wrong, resist it. But it is quite harmless. If one resists it, it keeps happening; if one accepts it, it soon is modified and eventually goes away according as the sense level becomes attuned to this new degree of infusion and able to cope with it. It is harmless because it is, one could say, occurring in the reverse direction—from spirit to sense: it is only an overflow in the psyche from the spirit, and anyway it does not have the dynamism of sexual desire nor does it leave any sadness or depression. There is nothing diabolical about it. It merely means that the sensitivity is not yet attuned to the stronger love. More women than men have reported on it to me: I suspect that women are more susceptible to an overflow like this, as their physical responsiveness to love is more diffuse.

The director's role

What goes on in a consultation? My experience is that the spiritual director's role in it is: *to receive, to affirm, and to point the other on God*. I will take each heading in turn.

1 To receive

As to this first heading, 'to receive', I have been particularly helped by the extended article by Fr Bill Connolly S.J., entitled, 'Contemporary spiritual direction: scope and principles', in *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, June 1975. He names three areas for discussion in a consultation, and he links them with the words *faith, hope, and charity*, and to these I add a fourth, *spiritual reading*.

a) *Faith*: the relationship with God in prayer: I always ask about prayer, what the experience is like. I help the person to articulate it, and I affirm it and often facilitate it. I must ask about prayer because God's Holy Spirit is the true director: it is to him that I and the person must listen, and it is a person who prays who is sensitive to him, and can hear him

and perceive his gentle pressure. Prayer is desire, and like desire it is movement; only when one is in motion can one be conscious enough of attractions and resistances within oneself to a degree that is helpful for discerning God's attracting, so I think that spiritual direction is hardly possible without regular prayer.

b) *Charity*: the relationship with God in one's dealings with one's fellow men and women. The only valid test of prayer—of one's sincerity before God—is how one is living with others. It is in our interaction with others that we are revealed to ourselves; and it is in our struggle to live out Christ's invitation to love and to forgive that we grow as persons. So I always want to hear something about relationships.

c) *Hope*: desires and difficulties. 'Hope' is an approximate but useful word under which to gather comments on the place of desires and difficulties on the inner journey; for hope is about a desired future goal which keeps me going during the present difficulties.

Spiritual direction is about helping someone who *desires* to be a follower of Christ. Without desire, no direction is possible, the person must want something and if there is to be depth, there must be strong desire: only strong desire can keep him going. I am reminded here of the ambitious desire of James and John recounted in Mark 10,35-45: Jesus did not criticize their desire for greatness, he re-directed it.

It is in the *difficulties* which are inevitably part of a follower's experience that his desires are re-directed by the Lord; and it is here, especially, that the two levels I earlier spoke of come into play. In the case of the person whose way of life is, so to speak, in the 'market-place', the struggle to grow will be mainly experienced *outside* of prayer as in the case of the teacher coping with the classroom scene; the parent adjusting to the changed relationship with her children as they grow up and apparently away from her; the business of trying to get on with those one lives with and of becoming someone who excludes none and forgives all; coping with the burden of all the unwanted calls on one's time and energies; coping with the sheer weight of living; with failing memory; with one's increasing sense of one's unimportance; with one's decreasing store of physical and psychic energy; with the tension between action and contemplation; and so on.

I think that what one has in all one's difficulties is an unwelcome experience of *self*; this is really what gets under one's skin. And as one grows as a person, there is a *losing of control* over one's life and an experience of one's *limits*. The teacher, if he is to become an educator, may have to settle for less external control in the classroom; the parent has to allow the adolescent son or daughter to move into independence; in my community and in my other relationships I have to give up the desire to change others and the desire that they serve my needs. This loss of control, which is really an experience of self being reduced and of

desired success becoming unattainable, can be very bitter; and it invites one to search for some meaning and help in the example of Christ as he coped with failure. One must find something *good* in the bitter experience if one is to keep going and continue to be christian in one's external behaviour and inward attitude; and this is found in the level below the surface. Unless one looks for what Jesus found on Calvary—the Father's will—one will not find (or be found by) the Father and Jesus in one's experience of difficulty. What one means by 'success' must undergo change. There is a relentless process of letting-go that is imposed upon one by very ordinary experience. Somehow, if one is to be more and more deeply found by Christ, one must settle for being dragged into a share in his negative experiences; one's expectation of 'paradise now' must melt away. Christ cannot take me fully into his union with the Father unless I allow him to take me into his experience of saying 'yes' to the realities of human living. Self's desires must be progressively displaced if one is to be filled by Christ and drawn by him into the current of love flowing between him and his Father.

I mentioned above the tension between action and contemplation. In prayer of union or faith, according as the contemplative state expands, people notice that a tension arises between the drawing from within and the business and detail of daily living. Activity which he formerly relished and took in his stride is now experienced as a kind of intrusion. There is an abrasive co-existence of contemplation and the need to act: there is a desire for space in which to be quiet, and yet so much has to be done. Some people may interpret this as a call to a contemplative order, but it is more likely, I think, to be a normal development in one whose vocation is to be a contemplative-in-action. It seems to me that the tension will be sorted out—through God's gift, of course—by one's wanting God more and more, by one's surrender to him in everything, by an increasing focus on him. There is a progressive attrition of my desire and a deepening surrender to his. Full surrender is experienced as not humanly possible: the final breakthrough in yielding is experienced as gift. No attempt to sort oneself out psychologically—I mean, using this or that method, trying to slow down, or whatever—will resolve the tension between the two lives. The solution lies below the level of mere activity: it lies at the level where self is dispossessed, surrendered, where God takes over, where the person becomes a pliable instrument in his hand. That is what God wants, a pliable instrument, so that the person stays in a real union with God, a union of wills, not only in what he does but in how he does it. The tension is resolved when self-interest is out of the way.

The other part of the unwelcome experience of the self is, of course, the growing sight of one's poor response. Prayer seems to give one a hidden light which shows one how to live as a follower of Christ. This

light shows up very obviously in a negative way, revealing that one is not responding in one's life as one should. And I suspect that, if one is honest, one will admit that one never adequately responds to God's call. The final resolution of the tension which this causes is found in recognizing that Jesus is my Saviour more profoundly than he is my brother: that my primary relationship with him is as my Saviour (is not 'he-who-saves' the very meaning of his name, 'Jesus'?). He is the one who picks me up if I admit my need of him—and my need is always there. There is always personal poverty, and there is always the Saviour's love; and when the poverty is embraced, welcomed, wanted, the Saviour most deeply finds me and picks me up. If one *thanks* Jesus for one's sin, even—I mean, for its revelation of one's weakness and of one's need of his forgiveness—I think that one finds a special union with him there. St Thérèse of Lisieux implied as much, a year before her death, in a letter (dated 17 September, 1896) to her own sister Marie, where she said, 'My desires for martyrdom are nothing . . . In fact, they are the spiritual riches which make us unjust—when we rest complacently in them . . . *What pleases him is to see me love my littleness and my poverty, the blind hope I have in his mercy* . . . That is my sole treasure'. What matters, in the end, is not whether I am sure that I love and serve him, but that I am sure that he loves me, no matter what. This, in the end, is what I must cling to: this is all Jesus had on the cross, total focus on the other.

2 *To point the other on God*

It is in helping a person with his difficulties that the director 'points the other on God'. I notice that people have a constant tendency to try to sort out their struggle without bringing God into it. There is a time early on when one's growth is a matter of taking oneself in hand and making the obvious moral effort to bring external behaviour into line with one's duty and, for this, one's resources within seem to be enough. But a point comes when human effort reaches a limit; it is as though one has met a glass wall. One sees ahead to where one ought to be, but one cannot get through. One is now trying to be truly good, seeking a goodness which is more interior, where motive needs to be purified and instinctive reactions sanctified. At this point, the effort to sort oneself out without reference to God proves sterile. One has to give up clawing at the glass wall and be, as it were, carried over it; or, to use a different analogy, one is like a bumble-bee trying to get through the upper pane of glass and failing to find the way through until, exhausted from vain effort, it collapses and falls down between the two parts of the window. Former effort is now sterile and one has to collapse into another's arms. The fruitlessness experienced here seems to me to be the obverse side of the fact that we are essentially made for relationship, that we are not being our true selves when we try to go it alone, when we try to manage

without a conscious turning towards God.

Whether or not we acknowledge it, we *are* each already in relationship with God in every fibre and molecule of our being, for he is the Creator, sustaining us in existence every second, all the time lovingly involved with us as the giver and sustainer of our every gift. This much we share with all creatures, but we, as creatures who are intelligent and also free, are invited to become *aware* of his involvement with us. Thus, when we relate to God consciously, we are more truly ourselves. When we do that in our difficulties, we gain the wisdom and strength to manage them fruitfully. We discover we can find him even in what is most unwelcome, and we gradually come to value more and more the gold below the surface of our experience, I mean, the love he has for us, and in the end this becomes our 'sole treasure'. Is this not what it means to be in Jesus facing the Father?

3 *To affirm*

I said that part of the director's role is 'to affirm'. He is to encourage the follower of Christ, helping her to admit to failure and to accept God's merciful view to her.

Should the director challenge? My view is that it is God who does the challenging. Anyone who is praying regularly, thus desiring God, and who is also trying to face the truth by revealing the inner life to another, will inevitably experience God's invitation from within. I think it may be irreverent to challenge from the outside—how does one know the right moment? But when the challenge comes from within, it is coming at a time when a person is able to see and accept it. God knows the moment of readiness, and he then also gives the strength to act. His challenge comes with an offer of peace and of entry into open spaces.

Furthermore, there can be a degree of obscurity about what is really wrong. What I mean is this: I have noticed that one may see that something is wrong in oneself, as for example, that one is impatient or intolerant or envious, and it may take six months to do anything effective about it, because the fault adverted to is but a symptom of something deeper, such as non-acceptance of the limited self God has made. It is this deeper level that has to be attended to: my saying 'yes' to God in regard to my own set of limitations will issue in a change on the more obvious level of my dealings with people.

The director may challenge people with questions, such as 'do you think you are praying enough?' or, 'this experience you have of distance from God when you pray: are there instances outside of prayer where you draw back from what you know you should be doing or are you excluding some people?'

But my experience is that people tend to misinterpret their experience, they misread as bad what really is good; they think something is wrong

when, in fact, all is well. They misinterpret aridity, or when God's obscure presence is very strong outside of prayer, they can feel a great weight which leads them to think they are suffering from depression. Or they can feel they have gone back to square one when closeness to God has given them light to see more clearly their impurity of motive and their refusals to love and their envy of the good they see in others. When they get some understanding of the good that is going on in them, they can cooperate with God's work on them.

Spiritual reading

Under the heading 'to receive', I listed three areas for discussion in a consultation, namely, 'faith, charity and hope', and now I want to take up the fourth area I mentioned there, 'spiritual reading'. I believe it to be very important, and I always ask about it.

By 'spiritual' I do not mean just any spiritual book; I mean the reading in which *this* person is finding *relish now*, not instruction or information, but delight, savour. The instruction and savour may at times coincide, but it is the experience of savour that defines for me that it is spiritual reading now for this person. The book that gave relish once may not appeal to the heart a year later. This is especially true when full prayer has become *inarticulate*, I mean, beyond the use of words or images. At this stage of prayer, spiritual reading as defined above is vital.

What I think is going on is this: the prayer being inarticulate, the emotions and fantasy can have no direct part in it. But the emotions and fantasy are yearning for some participation in the person's involvement with the hidden, unimaginable God; and it is in spiritual reading that they find this, and they *need* to have it. The reading in which one finds relish articulates a relationship which, in prayer, is inarticulate: in the reading, we hear what we already know but is hidden. Through reading, the levels of the self that are being by-passed by God's action get involved and are satisfied, and so the whole self is drawn into God's attracting. Unless such a person finds this relish through reading, she will be trying, in prayer, to get a glimpse of what is going on out-of-sight, will try to contribute something to the praying, will cling to consolation or try to revive it, will want to have something to report on about the prayer: all this, instead of remaining receptive and open and vague.

I have noticed, though, that a time comes when spiritual reading is not experienced as a need. The person feels fed from within. There is within her a well of peace, a deep well of living water. This is so when prayer has become established at the level of spirit, by-passing not only the fantasy, as earlier, but also the intellect. It is not experienced as coming from outside, but as welling up from within: the self's intensity is gone, it is another's that is felt. Prayer seems to have no beginning or end: all that one needs to be aware of this fountain is idleness. The

intellect is free: the prayer—it is another's—goes on without its necessary involvement; and if the intellect does get absorbed, this is an overflow effect of what is going on beneath it.

So, the last level to surface to consciousness is the first that was touched by baptismal grace, namely, the person's deepest centre. Such people need no articulation from outside, they are, as it were, being spoken to from within, and are being fed by a well of living water which, at times, becomes a living flame. But deep peace is the most characteristic note; it is the abode of peace; it is the Third Island. Yet, outward living is ordinary, nothing special: the two levels again, the gold hidden in the ore. It is a new beginning, on a new journey that is endless—till death, that is—for God is infinitely deep. Note that this union is termed 'transforming', not 'transformed', for the One who, like fire, has transformed those he touched is an abyss of infinite depth where the journey of transformation need never cease. This abyss is the embrace of Father and Son who can draw us ever more deeply into their current of love, on and on and on.

Apart from scripture, the authors whom people find helpful as spiritual reading are those who seem to talk about the relationship with God from lived experience of it: they are not simply quoting others, but are speaking from a gift of wisdom.

Examples are: Chapman, *Spiritual letters*; Ruth Burrows; Thomas Green; *The cloud of unknowing*; Julian of Norwich, *Showings*; Peter Van Breemen S.J., Carlo Carreto; Henri Nouwen; *The hermitage within* (anonymous); St Thérèse of Lisieux, *Collected letters, Autobiography, Last conversations*; St John of the Cross; St Teresa of Avila; von Balthasar, *Prayer*; André Louf, *Teach us to pray*; Abhishiktananda, *Prayer*; Maria Boulding, O.S.B., *Marked for life*.

There are two books that I have found particularly helpful on mystical prayer: John Arintero, O.P., *The mystical evolution*, vol 2, (Tan Books, 1978), and Ruth Burrows, *Guidelines for mystical prayer*, (Sheed and Ward, 1975).

Arintero concentrates on the prayer-experience and its evolution and draws from the mystical tradition of western spirituality; Ruth Burrows focusses very much on life outside of formal prayer. Taken together they are most helpful.

Ruth Burrows is, in my opinion, excessively hard on experiences within prayer. She is indeed right to impress on us the need for detachment from them, but her concern is so strong that she practically disconnects them from the union with God. She is right to *distinguish* the mystical gift, which of itself is hidden and imperceptible, from the overflow, which is perceptible and much less important; but she is not right to give the impression of *disconnecting* the gift from the overflow, for the overflow is something normal. How I see it is this: the human being is a composite

of spirit and sense, is inextricably soul-cum-body. Because the praying person is such a union, some overflow from the hidden level of spirit to the perceptible level of the sense faculties would surely be a normal, though not inevitable, occurrence and should be taken account of and given its relative importance. As another Carmelite has remarked, Ruth Burrows omits the role of the faculties. This results in her making no room for consolation: quite un-ignatian. But her account of the lived experience outside of prayer is original, and it demythologises much romantic writing about mysticism and is very healthy and freeing. She has done us a great service and this article is engrained all over by what she has written in *Guidelines*.

In conclusion

I am aware that, in my reflection, I have left some questions undiscussed, as for example, how to discern whether one is praying enough, and the problem that some people have with getting down to personal prayer. I have chosen to speak most of all about mystical prayer and mystical life because I have been quite surprised at meeting so much of it—and the whole range of it—in people: it seems to me that it is only waiting to be recognized and encouraged.

Finbarr Lynch S.J.