

TRADITIONS OF SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

Pierre de Bérulle

MUCH OF THE SPIRITUALITY of the Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was noted for its attention to method in prayer. From the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius and the treatises of John of the Cross, through the devotional writings of Francis de Sales, we find detailed descriptions of how to pray and how to direct those who pray.¹

However, the 'French School' of spirituality and especially its founder, Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629), are the exception.² Among all his writings, Bérulle has no systematic treatment of prayer or spiritual direction. But it is possible to describe his ideas about spiritual direction from an analysis of his writings and a look at how he functioned as a director himself.

Bérulle was a secular priest, a founder of the French Oratory and a cardinal whose thinking has deeply influenced Roman Catholic spirituality, but whose work has not been translated and is seldom read among English speakers. Bérulle was actively involved in prayer circles of his time. He was a spiritual director to Vincent de Paul and the Queen of England, Henriette-Marie, wife of Charles I, among others. His spirituality helped form the French Carmelites and Ursulines, the French Oratory and the Sulpicians. He was a man of prayer whom others sought out for advice. Descartes was one of those who came to seek his counsel. He was a man of learning, a theologian of the spiritual life as well as a practitioner and a contemplative. Bérulle studied theology at the Sorbonne and had a good foundation in the Christian spiritual tradition, having read extensively in the fourteenth and fifteenth-century German mystics and the sixteenth-century Spaniards, John of Avila, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Educated by Jesuits, he made the *Spiritual Exercises* in a directed retreat and was exposed from his youth to the spiritual tradition of Ignatius and his men. Besides Ignatius, the single most pervasive influence upon him was Teresa of Avila, and Bérulle was instrumental in bringing the Discalced Carmelite nuns into France. The sustained spiritual relationship he had with the Carmelite nuns from 1604 until his death was crucial to his own development and piety.

Thus Bérulle has a rich background in the classics of spirituality and spiritual direction from various traditions. One of his contributions to Christian spirituality is a synthesis of many different writers and a re-working of their ideas to fit his own time. This is equally true of his ideas on spiritual direction.

Although there is no text dealing with 'spiritual direction' as such in his collected works, there is a treatise written in 1624 for the superiors in the houses of the Oratory which he founded. Since much of their work involves leading others on 'interior paths' the treatise is very useful for our purposes in describing how he envisions spiritual direction. This *Mémorial de direction pour les supérieurs* was intended to give superiors advice on fulfilling their office. This text, correlated with Bérulle's letters of direction to men and women and his numerous meditations and works of piety form a pattern. From these combined writings one can get a fairly detailed description of the purpose of spiritual direction and the role of the director.

There are certain basic presuppositions of Bérullian spirituality which underlie all his ideas on spiritual direction. The first is that we are all creatures of God, dependent upon God and in relationship with God. Relationship as creatures is at the very core of human life. For the Christian it is more specified as living Christ's life, living with Christ's attitudes in relationship to God. How that relationship with God is to be lived out has been modelled for us by Christ.

Another fundamental conviction of Bérulle is that the goal of our life is to allow Christ to live in us. Bérulle appropriated as his motto the words of Paul, 'I live now not I, but Christ lives in me'. This life of Christ in the person is the lived out realization of what occurs sacramentally in Baptism. We are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. We are led by God's grace to 'strip off the old man and clothe ourselves anew', 'to live on earth for Christ and not for ourselves', to live 'not by our own spirit but by the Spirit of Jesus constantly' renouncing our own inclinations in order to follow the movements and the leading of his Spirit in us'.³

Our life's goal should be to seek first the Kingdom of God and God's glory. Our attention is directed to God and the Kingdom of God not to ourselves or our own virtue or good works. 'We are on earth only to establish the reign and announce the glorious coming of Christ.'⁴ He says that the 'foundation and the goal of our ministry . . . is to prepare and hasten the last coming of the Son of God as the prophets prepared for his first coming'.⁵ One of the fundamental tasks of the Christian is to wait for and long for the coming of Christ.

Although Bérulle customarily writes to and directs the spiritually mature and advanced, there is nothing anywhere in his writing to suggest that only the advanced, the ordained or the educated can hear this teaching. Bérulle proposes the same goal of the Christian life for everyone, regardless of rank, state in life, sex, age or education. For a Christian the goal is to put on Christ and live Christ's life on earth. God 'draws us to him in order to live with him, and to live in him another sort of life from what we live on earth; this is a heavenly and divine life, an immortal and

happy life and a life in which our eternal happiness consists'.⁶ Most of the work of transforming us into Christ and leading us to God is done by God's grace. We have only to remove the obstacles to grace. This is the human role in what is otherwise a somewhat passive experience. Clearly there are many pitfalls and difficulties and much danger of self-delusion in something so unspecified as cultivating the attitudes necessary to receive and embrace God's grace. Fortunately, according to Bérulle, one does have help available. We have the life and example of Jesus Christ and we have the assistance of spiritual guides.

All Christians have available to them the life and example of Christ. Bérulle says that one of Christ's purposes on earth was to teach us how to become holy. For this purpose Christ established a school where we can learn the secrets of heaven. This is Bérulle's way of thinking about Christ as wisdom and sanctity. The school of Jesus stands in stark contrast to the school of this earth whose spirit is cold and dry and proud. The school of Jesus is marked by a spirit of abnegation and discipline. Those in the school of Christ are characterized by a spirit of piety. In his school there is 'care to acquire and exercise true and solid virtues'.⁷ In the school of Jesus people learn about God and the ways of God. Only in Jesus, our sole mediator, do we find the way to God.

For Bérulle the way to holiness was solely through the example and teachings of Christ. People came to know this Christ through the cycle of New Testament readings in the Mass and the Divine Office. However, the image of Christ that Bérulle presents in his writing, and one may assume also in his spiritual conferences is a pray-er, a contemplative. Jesus is not portrayed with an active ministry, with a group of disciples, preaching, teaching and healing. He is almost always seen in relationship to God the Father, and very rarely in relationship to other people. Presumably, this was the Christ whom Bérulle wanted everyone to appropriate in their own lives.

In addition to the life and example of Christ to guide us, we also have spiritual directors. Bérulle has certain presuppositions about the role of the director and the qualities that the director should possess. The director is told that his task is to form Jesus Christ in souls: ' . . . our ministry leads us to form Jesus Christ in souls'. The call is to give a new birth to Christ. 'Jesus is the fruit of our labours, and our ministry leads to producing him just as the Father produces him in eternity'.⁸ Bérulle writes that since the Incarnation,

heaven and earth have been renewed in grace and blessing and our ministry . . . leads to birthing and forming Jesus in hearts; it leads to giving a new birth to him who was born from all eternity in the bosom of the Father, and in the fulness of time in the womb of the most holy Virgin, and it leads to giving us the sort of

relationship with the Son of God that this same Son of God honoured, celebrated and exalted in these great words: 'whoever does the will of my Father is my brother and my sister and my mother' (Mt 7,21).⁹

The director should be characterized by a breadth of spirit, a tolerance and charity toward others. The director should honour everything which comes from God, aware that there is nothing too small or insignificant, 'there is nothing little in the house of God'.¹⁰ Since failure is one of the most common human experiences the director should be particularly attentive to how to regard other people's faults. The director should avoid an authoritarian attitude and false zeal in correcting people.¹¹

How does the director accomplish such an awesome task? He must learn from the Spirit the care of souls which Bérulle describes as the 'art of arts'. 'The Spirit is the doctor of this science and the director of this work.'¹²

The Spirit teaches this art in the school of Jesus. This art is a science, not of memory but of spirit, not of study but of prayer, not of discourse but of practice, not of contention but of humility, not of speculation but of love and the love of Jesus which is delivered and abandoned, forgetting itself and poured out for the salvation of souls.¹³

There is great care taken to make clear that this science of the care of souls is higher than all other sciences. It confounds philosophers and theologians who are vain and arrogant. (It is important in all of this to remember that Bérulle held a theology degree from the Sorbonne.) This science is learned from the book of life at the foot of the cross, not from the books of the academics. Bérulle asserts that this science of the care of souls encompasses everything because it is based in Christ and in his cross and ultimately this science arrives at the end of all things, that is, Jesus. It is a holy science which he describes as 'the daughter of prayer, the disciple of humility and the mother of discretion'.¹⁴

In his century which saw the beginning of the modern scientific revolution it is significant that Bérulle has used the term science throughout his treatise. He expands on this idea when he writes:

Now God who wished to perfect in this century all other kinds of science, dispersing the shadows of past centuries, wishes also to renew and perfect in this century truly and properly his own science by his life and by his Spirit . . .¹⁵

It is clear that Bérulle has a very exalted understanding of the work of direction and has described it all as fundamentally the work of God. But

God uses human mediators for the care of souls. The director must prepare himself for this work by abasement before God, continual prayer, preparing himself to be a living instrument animated by the Spirit of Jesus. The director ought to renounce his own spirit in order to live in the power and the guidance of the Spirit of God. He ought to 'illuminate others in consuming himself', as though he were a burning candle.¹⁶ The two central virtues which should characterize the director are those which are fundamental to Christianity, humility and charity.

More practically, how does Bérulle suggest that the director assist the person who comes for help? The director listens attentively to all the relevant details of the person's life, no matter how small or insignificant these details may seem. Bérulle believes that God's grace and redeeming love permeates all of life and with Ignatius he holds that God's action can be discerned in many aspects of a person's life, not just in their prayer.

The director's role is to assist the person in becoming ever more abandoned to God and possessed by God. The test of this surrender and possession is obedience and living with the attitudes of Christ. As mentioned above the Christ who is being formed and brought to birth in this system is Christ the contemplative. The French School formed people of prayer in the firm belief that real contemplative prayer would create holy apostolic people. But the emphasis in direction was on the contemplative not the apostle.

The Bérullian model of spiritual direction has a contribution to make to the spiritual tradition of the Church and some limitations to be noted. Its contribution is first that it is a contemplative model. In an era of considerable emphasis upon methods and steps and stages, Bérulle's ideas are refreshing. This shows some of his debt to Teresa's interior castle where one may go from room to room with some ease. Everyone would agree that the work of spiritual direction is a work of grace and that the partners must be attentive at all times to God's action. What Bérulle's system does is to take this idea seriously and to focus on God's work without much stress on human activity.

The second is that the heart of the Christian life is to die and be raised up in Christ. Bérulle took that reality to be the goal of his own life and his spirituality. Practically in the spiritual direction relationship this meant a concentration on dying to oneself, making oneself into nothing, a central motif in his writings. Although it is often understood ascetically as self-abnegation and acts of humility, it is more profoundly a way of being in the world ever more ready to be filled with God. The human person is a pure capacity for God, according to Bérulle, and the work of direction is to cultivate the attitudes of receptivity. In concrete terms this means getting out of one's own way! It refers to focusing on God and not oneself, rooting out self-centred, destructive, grandiose, rigid attitudes

that prevent God's uninhibited action. The work of direction is also intended to help the person prepare to be raised up in Christ, in the sense of learning and growing in the attitudes of Christ, living as one reborn in him. Thus much of direction is concerned with learning Christ's attitudes, talking about the Jesus whom we meet in the scriptures and the liturgy of the Church.

Another contribution is the metaphor of spiritual direction as birth and midwifery. Instead of an image of achieving certain goals or reaching certain levels, we have an image of birth. A person reborn in Christ is brought to a qualitatively different life in this process as life in the world is different from life in the womb. The director has the uniquely feminine role of midwife, being present, lending support, using skill to avert danger or to bring comfort and strength, but essentially waiting and being attentive until Christ is formed in the person and a new Christ is brought forth. The director is an attendant at a birth.

The limitations of this model of spiritual direction are that it can lead to a very privatized piety. The individual and the director are concerned with the person living with Christ's attitudes in relationship to God the Father. There is very little emphasis on the wider Church community or the secular world. It is assumed that people will make the necessary connections between interior attitudes and building the Kingdom of God but this can degenerate into a very solitary enterprise. Because of the very lack of specificity, and absence of a series of benchmarks, there is a great potential for self-delusion. As was pointed out above, the Christ whose attitudes one appropriates is a very specific distillation of the gospels. The Jesus whom Bérulle presents is a man without disciples, ministry or community. He was a perfect adorer of the Father. This is not the whole Christ, and there is a real danger of an incomplete appropriation of Christ when the director is not skilful enough or aware enough of the limitations of the Bérullian portrait of Christ.

Although his model is not limited to any class or group of people in itself, it is clear that it would be much more effective with the spiritually mature and advanced. To speak of 'nothingness' with someone who has not done some of the purgative, ascetical groundwork would not be helpful. People must have come to a certain point in their Christian lives even to desire what Bérulle is talking about, much less to seek to deepen and expand this way of life. This contemplative, radical, Christocentric model presupposes certain kinds of people and would not be effective with beginners in the spiritual life, unlike the model of Ignatius and Francis de Sales.

The model also exalts contemplation over action and assumes a precedence temporally at least. One needs to begin with prayer. The danger is that the person will never understand the mutual interdependence of prayer and ministry and will always see prayer as central and ministry

and apostolic lives as expendable. It is also the case that people who do not have the environment conducive to contemplative prayer, married women, people in business and politics, diocesan priests, will experience a continual frustration in this method because they will never be able to give themselves over to contemplation as they feel they should because of the distractions of life in the world! Bérulle was able to avoid some of these pitfalls in his own life, but the system lends itself to these dangers in less than skilful hands.

Perhaps the single most important contribution that Bérullian direction can make to contemporary ideas about spiritual direction is its contemplative, theocentric focus. In an era dominated by psychological models and the pursuit of human health and fulfilment, Bérulle's model provides an alternative and a challenge. There is a radical difference between a theocentric and psychological/human potential model. Ironically, the goal of joyful freedom is often achieved as a result of the theocentric model, a goal sought by the psychological model. With Bérulle's form of direction the joy and the freedom that are experienced are the result of seeking first the Kingdom of God and God's glory, knowing that everything else will be given to us besides.

Anne Minton

NOTES

¹ For a good overview of Counter-Reformation spirituality see Evennett, H. Outram: *The spirit of the Counter-Reformation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, c. 1968).

² There is no substantial study on Bérulle in English. The best sources for further reading are Dagens, Jean: *Bérulle et les origines de la restauration catholique (1575-1611)* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1952), and Chochois, Paul: *Bérulle et l'école française* (Paris; Edition du Seuil, 1963).

³ Bérulle: *Mémorial de direction pour les supérieurs, Oeuvres complètes*, Bourgoing, éditeur (Paris: Migne, 1856), pp 807-808.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 833.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 815.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 820.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 816.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 816-17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 826.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 817.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 817.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 818.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 819.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 830.