Spiritual Essay

In a dark night?

An Ignatian approach

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IN THIS ARTICLE I WISH TO REFLECT on a significant contemporary experience of many Christians and to explore its implications for spiritual direction in an Ignatian context. In informal conversations, in reading, in the media and in personal accompaniment many people speak, in various ways, of a loss of faith or a sense of alienation from God and/or from the church to which they belong or used to belong. God seems distant or absent to a degree that they have never experienced before. Liturgy, worship, prayer, involvement in the local Christian community, in which they once found real consolation and joy, have become an arid struggle. People who have lived for many years in faith and hope now seem to find themselves adrift on a sea of meaninglessness and desperation; indeed many feel that they no longer have faith and their hope seems very fragile. Those things on which they were accustomed to rely for support now seem unable to sustain them and typically they experience the present situation as an impasse from which they cannot escape.[1] Holiness seems a mirage. Even their sense of themselves and of their own worth, which may have been very firm or which they may have struggled to attain, appears to have evaporated, so that they and their world seem to be fragmenting and disintegrating. Past struggles to sustain faith and hope and to live the gospel appear a waste of time and energy. Those who undergo such experiences speak of feeling profoundly disturbed, disorientated, blocked, helpless, confused and often angry.

This kind of experience, when people relate it in spiritual direction, raises important questions for directors and directees alike. How they understand and respond is crucial: their response may be either creative and life-giving or destructive in its results. For the purposes of this article, I envisage a situation in which a person recounts to his or her spiritual director experiences which, over a period of some weeks or months have some of the characteristics which I have described. I shall consider possible approaches to understanding and responding to this

experience within the framework of spiritual direction and discernment provided by the work of Ignatius Loyola. The approaches to spiritual guidance that I look at presuppose a series of conversations separated by intervals of a few weeks.

An Ignatian framework

As a starting point it is well to recall some of the basic assumptions with which Ignatius and those who follow his guidelines and practice approach spiritual accompaniment. The primary relationship is that which exists between the directee and God. Ignatius advises that the person who gives the Exercises, and by extension anyone engaged in spiritual direction, should try to be 'as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other' and should permit 'the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord' (Exx 15). The director is privileged to play a part in this communion between God and the directee as an informed, enlightened and skilled companion, supporting and encouraging the directee and facilitating and guiding discernment.

A second assumption is that God is present and acts both in the world around us as we interact with it, and in the hidden depths of the heart from which personal desires, choices, words and actions spring (cf., for example, Exx 235–237). Although we are not directly aware of that presence and action of God within, nevertheless we receive echoes, ripples of it in our consciousness: a kind of 'experiential feedback' of the action of grace and our responses to it. The purpose of this action of God is to draw all into fullness of life in union with God and others in love. Ignatius observes, however, that we may respond in different ways to God's presence and graced action. Whether consciously or unconsciously we may welcome it, rejoice in it, go along with it, live in harmony with it, co-operate with it; or conversely we may ignore it, resist it, reject it, rebel against it, refuse to collaborate. The movements of affectivity, of moods, feelings, desires and willing, with which we respond to God's presence and action, whether in the world around us or deep within, are what Ignatius calls 'spiritual consolation' and 'spiritual desolation'. When there is harmony between the action of God and the understanding, desires, will, intentions or affections of that person, there is an experience of spiritual consolation. When there is discord, lack of coherence, conflict, resistance between the movement of grace and the person's understanding, will, desires, affections or intentions, there is an experience of spiritual desolation.

In an Ignatian approach to spiritual guidance a directee is invited to give an account to the person who accompanies him or her of the significant events in his or her life during an agreed period of time, and in particular to recount experiences of consolation and desolation and the circumstances in which they occurred. The role of the director is to help the other to understand and evaluate these experiences and to explore their implications for the choices which give shape and direction to his or her everyday life. The director helps the directee to identify those experiences which seem to draw him or her into greater fullness of life in faith and love, and those which move in the opposite direction.

A further element in this kind of process is a recognition of the fundamental unity of the human person and, within this unity, the presence of different dimensions: physical, affective, mental, psychological, spiritual, social and so forth. To put it another way, a person lives within a network of continuing relationships, with self, with others, with the Church, with society and with the natural environment. It is important for good spiritual accompaniment that a director recognizes that the Spirit is at work in all these different dimensions of life, and that, to some degree at least, the director is familiar with the directee's life history and present circumstances, so that both director and directee may reflect on present experience within that wider context and, as far as possible, take into account all relevant factors.

Understanding and interpreting the experience

The experiences we are discussing here, at least at first sight, have the hallmarks of what Ignatius calls spiritual desolation (Exx 316, 317). They are painful experiences which seem to include what Ignatius calls 'darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly (and) restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations'. They have a spiritual dimension in that they appear to lead towards a diminishment of the life of faith, hope and love, so that 'the soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord' (Exx 317). Since the life of faith and union with God does not exist in isolation but is intimately affected by other factors, it is part of the continuing task of spiritual accompaniment to examine and reflect on the extent to which some of those other factors may be at work in any apparent experience of consolation or desolation. In spiritual desolation, it is necessary to take into account factors such as fatigue, stress, 'burnout' and events in the directee's life such as loss,

bereavement, illness, and other kinds of trauma; it is well also to consider the directee's age and the possibility of psycho-somatic clinical conditions like depression.

There is not room here for a discussion of the relationship between depression and spiritual desolation. Clinical depression, however, may and often does adversely affect the life of faith and a person's experience of relationship with God. Moreover, the experience of spiritual desolation may show many of the same symptoms as depression. In trying to understand this experience of darkness and pain, therefore, it may be helpful for director and directee together to explore the possibility, among others, that depression (or some other clinical condition) is an influential factor, albeit not the only one. If that is so, they might eventually come to agree that the directee look for and receive appropriate therapy, if he or she is not already doing so, while continuing also to explore the experience in spiritual guidance.

Another consideration in discernment has to do with whether a directee who reports this experience is genuinely trying to live according to the gospel and growing in Christian maturity, or whether he or she is largely dominated and driven by self-interest, the more basic kinds of self-satisfaction and values contrary to the gospel, without much love either for God or for humankind.[2] This is an important question because the answer to it affects the interpretation of the experience and consequently the outcome of the spiritual guidance process. In the case which we are considering here, however, we are supposing *ex hypothesi* that the directee desires to live the gospel and grow in Christian maturity. In any case, it will be helpful for director and directee to identify evidence that the gospel is efficacious in the directee's life and signs of transformation and genuine growth in the past. This kind of review may provide a much-needed source of encouragement and trust both in God's continuing faithfulness and in the directee's ability to respond to that God. However, as Ignatius observes, it is important to note that a person who has travelled some way along this road is open to some of the more subtle and potentially misleading experiences of spiritual consolation and desolation in which 'an angel of darkness disguises himself as an angel of light' and inner experiences are not always exactly what they seem to be (cf. especially Exx 332–335).

It is also worth remembering that spiritual desolation may be caused by negligence (or what the older spiritual writers called 'lukewarmness').[3] If a person who has been trying to live in faith, hope and love, with prayer and worship as regular features of daily life, begins to

neglect or to give up some aspects of this way of living, he or she will probably experience some form of spiritual desolation (Exx 322). This, too, is obviously an aspect of the situation for a director and directee to explore. However, in this present discussion I am assuming that this is not the perceptible cause of the pain and darkness which a directee is feeling. We are considering precisely those people who are trying to be faithful to a call to Christian discipleship and who none the less find themselves in darkness and confusion. They are not aware of any negligence on their part; indeed they seem to be undergoing a form of 'passive desolation', in the sense that they are not aware of being agents of their own painful condition; rather it is something which is happening to them (cf. Exx 320, 322).

A case study and first response: perseverance and struggle

An imaginary case study will help us to take this discussion forward. Suppose that Michael, a man in his forties, finds himself in the middle of such an experience as I have described. His reflection may go something like this.

> In the past I have genuinely tried to shape my life in response to the Spirit of God. This has led me into the kind of Christian life within the Church that I have so far been living. This life of faith, with all its different elements of prayer, worship, family, involvement in the community and so forth, reflects the way in which, I believe, God has led me. Until now, prayer, worship and the Church have supported me. It seems, therefore, that this present darkness and the powerful impulses which I feel to give it all up are signs of the presence within me of a self-centred resistance to, a rebellion against, God and the Church. The right response, therefore, is not to obey these voices of rebellion and resistance, but rather to struggle to go on in my accustomed ways, which until now have been tried and tested both by my own experience and the Church's long-standing tradition. If I feel dissatisfied with the Church, I will remember that, warts and all, it is the sacrament of Christ's presence in the world, and I will do what I can to make things better. In this way I hope to be able to weather the storm, and in time the darkness will lift, the winds will subside and I shall be in calmer waters once again.

Michael discusses this fully with his spiritual director and they agree on this approach. This response to the situation has, at least at first sight, the backing of conventional Ignatian wisdom. Michael attributes his

feelings to what Ignatius would call 'the evil spirit', and in the Exercises Ignatius suggests a number of strategies for dealing with this. First of all those in desolation should try to 'persevere in patience' (Exx 321): sit tight and weather the storm. Secondly, it is particularly important that they do not make major changes, especially with regard to choices made or confirmed previously in consolation (Exx 318). Thirdly, it can be helpful and encouraging to recall previous touchstone experiences of consolation, joy and freedom in God's service, in the confidence that such times will return again. A fourth strategy is to struggle to pray and live a Christian life as before, in spite of a strong inclination to give up. It may also be appropriate to intensify prayer and self-discipline (Exx 319).

There are also other reasons which, at first sight at least, suggest that Michael's interpretation and response may be the right one. Most people who try to follow Jesus in faithful discipleship recognize that there are areas of their lives in which they resist or rebel against the work of the Spirit of God; aspects of life not yet transformed in holiness. Michael's present response, however, also raises some further questions which director and directee need to explore. It may be, for example, that the strategies adopted do not bring the hoped-for calm and consolation. What happens then? Secondly, if this interpretation and approach are correct, it is difficult to see how real change or transformation is to take place. Thirdly, there is the added difficulty that, in this kind of experience, as accustomed forms and practices no longer seem to answer, satisfy, give energy or nourish and enhance life at the deepest level of faith, hope and love, the serious question arises of whether it is wise simply to continue as before.

A second response: desire and imagination

Let us, therefore, imagine that Michael has a different person accompanying him and responds in a very different way. This time his reflections might go something like this.

> At present I feel stuck in darkness, discouragement, inner turmoil, alienation from all that I have previously relied on for life in the Spirit. I have grown used to particular ways of being a Christian, but they seem to have led me into an impasse. It's very difficult and painful to continue in the same way, so that sometimes I think I'll give the whole thing up. On the other hand, I can't live without the gospel; life wouldn't make sense. So within all this pain and darkness, I ask myself questions like what am I really looking for? What do I really want: my

> old ways of being a Christian or something else? Are there other ways of living the life of the Spirit? Do I know what I really want?

Michael expresses this to his director and the director suggests two areas of reflection: to see if he can discover more clearly what his deepest and most authentic desires are; and to envisage and explore different ways of living out those desires.

It may not be obvious how this response, in comparison with the more conservative one which we have already outlined, is grounded in the Ignatian approach to spiritual direction. What Michael's director is encouraging him to do, however, is to sift through his experience in order to discover what he truly, fundamentally, desires above all else; and secondly to use his imagination to envisage possible different ways of living out those desires. This interaction of desire and imagination is, in fact, at the heart of the Spiritual Exercises and of Ignatius' understanding of spiritual accompaniment. Throughout the Exercises, Ignatius insists that at the beginning of every period of prayer the one who is making the Exercises should ask for what he or she wants 'according to the subject matter'.[4] In fact, he sets out for each stage of the Exercises what the person making the Exercises 'will want'; as, for example, in the Second Week: '. . . to ask for an intimate knowledge of Our Lord . . . that I may love him more and follow him more closely' (Exx 104). Some modern practitioners and commentators find Ignatius too prescriptive and even presumptuous here and encourage the person who is making the Exercises to set aside Ignatius' recommendation and to discover and express for themselves what they really desire at each stage. Be that as it may, it nonetheless remains true that this expression in prayer of fundamental desires has very great importance for Ignatius, both in the context of the Exercises and outside.[5] There are good reasons for this emphasis. First, our deepest, most authentic desires for ourselves coincide with the desires God has for us. Secondly, this process, repeated in each period of prayer, helps the person making the Exercises to discover his or her authentic, God-given self, since our deepest desires indicate who we are. And thirdly, whether in the Exercises or outside, uncovering a person's authentic desires is crucial for discernment, since that involves noting harmonies and discords between possible choices and God-given desires.

This brings us to the second member of this partnership, imagination. The use of imagination in 'Ignatian contemplation', in which a person places himself in the picture or story and imagines the details, is well known. What is less often appreciated, however, is the crucial part

played by creative imagination, along with desire, in Ignatian discernment and spiritual guidance. Ignatius understood well the constant and reciprocal interplay between desire and imagination: I desire what I imagine; I also imagine what I desire; and out of this interaction between imagination and desire choices are made. When someone, contemplating the Christian mysteries, relates them to their own life, they use imagination creatively to manage change: to envisage how life might be different, how the material of the contemplation, together with the desires and feelings that it evokes, may be embodied in the particular circumstances of their own life. This will usually involve exploring several possible options before it gradually becomes more clear which of those options most fully embodies their desires.

The theme of desire is taken up in the Contemplation to Attain Love (Exx 230–237), which comes as the culmination of the movement of the Exercises and represents the dispositions and character of a person whose imagination and desires have been sifted and shaped by the gospel. Here Ignatius makes two important statements about love: 'The first is that love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words. The second is that love consists in a mutual sharing of goods . . .' (Exx 230–231). In other words, love involves both receiving from another and a giving of one's gifts (and oneself) to another. This contemplation has the effect of creating in those who make it a deepening awareness of themselves as recipients of God's gifts, shared with them out of love, and evoking in response a desire that 'filled with gratitude for all, I may in all things love and serve the Divine Majesty' (Exx 233). This is Ignatius' version of union between lover and beloved, Creator and creature, of which much has been written in the Christian spiritual tradition. The movement of gratitude and love comes to expression in the prayer, 'Take, Lord, and receive . . .' (Exx 234), an offering of self and of all one's most precious gifts in a response of love to the God who first loved us. It is a prayer which, for Ignatius, represents the fundamental disposition and desire of a person who wants to live in union with God and others in love in Christian discipleship. This, in Ignatius' view, is what we were created for; this alone will ultimately satisfy the longings of the human heart.

Fear and resistance

This sifting through of desires and use of imagination to envisage alternative ways of being may take time, because the deepest, most authentic desires may be overlaid, obscured by others which are

powerful but less authentic and more peripheral to the real meaning and purpose of a person's life. Discerning reflection on longings that come to the surface both in prayer and at other times gradually reveals the true desires.

The second response which Michael and his spiritual director make, therefore, based as it is on the central importance and interplay of imagination, desire and love, is firmly grounded in an Ignatian approach to spiritual direction. It would not be unusual, however, for someone in Michael's position to feel some resistance to carrying out this response. It may lead him to the painful knowledge, for example, of the extent to which his good life and Christian practice have been coloured, albeit unwittingly, by ego-centred needs and desires, by a subtle, but none the less real search for self. It may also mean abandoning old, familiar securities and taking the risk of setting out in trust on an uncertain journey. And it may imply the fearsome prospect of surrendering familiar patterns of thinking, feeling and behaviour which, perhaps unbeknown to the individual, are blocking growth, energy and creativity. In these circumstances, fear, resistance or a sense of impending fragmentation or loss of selfhood are not unusual.

Consolation in darkness

It may happen, and often does, that when a directee goes through this process of discernment, they discover that, despite the fact that God seems absent, that accustomed consolations are a thing of the past and that even the confidence which they once had in their ability to love God and others seems to have gone, none the less their true desire is, in fact, to live in communion with God and others in love. In the present experience of emptiness, darkness and turbulence, this desire may be only a weak, flickering flame in a stormy night. It may seem to be no more than a desire for faith, hope and love rather than those gifts themselves. None the less, recognizing and exploring this desire is crucial in spiritual direction because, in Ignatian terms, it is consolation even at the heart of the felt desolation. It is the echo, however faint, of the voice of love in the depths of the heart; the response of the 'naked intent of the will' in the cloud of unknowing and hence a sign that a person's relationship with God is alive. This longing is the basic energy of the life of faith, hope and love, and to give scope to it is to enhance that life.

This experience of darkness, in fact, is like the 'painful consolation' of the Third Week of the Exercises in an acute form. A person in this

state, like Jesus in Gethsemane, is apparently facing the loss and destruction of all that seemed to give meaning to life. In this condition he may be able to make the prayer that Jesus made; on the other hand, he may not. And if he cannot, even then the presence of a desire to be able to make it is surely a sign that in this person the Spirit of God is united with the human spirit to cry, 'Abba, Father'. To be able to pray, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' is in fact a sign of love and longing in faith and hope for a God who, though experienced in powerlessness as absent rather than present, can bring light out of darkness, life out of death.

This brings us once again to the equally crucial role of imagination in spiritual direction. It is fundamental to Ignatian spiritual direction to go with and build upon experiences of consolation. It is they which move a person creatively towards a fuller life in the love of God and provide energy for love and well-doing. This hidden longing, therefore, however weak it may be, calls to be embodied and expressed in choices, prayer, worship, relationships, actions, lifestyle. One of the presuppositions of the circumstances we are considering here, however, is that of old, accustomed ways of doing that no longer seem to serve. The imagination, therefore, is called upon to fashion and explore new options, different ways of expressing this response to love in the circumstances of everyday life.

Conclusions

We have been considering two different ways of interpreting and responding, in the context of Ignatian spiritual accompaniment, to a common contemporary experience. My argument is that the second response is the correct one, and I will conclude with a summary of the main reasons which support this view.

It is axiomatic for Ignatius that God desires people to live in consolation, born of right relationship with God, themselves, their neighbour and the world. It is also characteristic of an Ignatian approach to direction to place a positive value on experiences of darkness, and to see them as, paradoxically, a gift. Such experiences are signs of where the Spirit of God is at work in a person's life and indicators of some level of resistance to that Spirit. For this reason, in the logic of discernment, this kind of experience is an invitation to change and to collaborate with the Spirit in the transformation of ourselves and the world. The task in discernment and spiritual accompaniment is to find strategies which enable us to go along with the movement of the Spirit

towards greater fullness of life. Moreover, the signs of the presence of the Spirit of God include creativity, energy, faith, hope, love, freedom and life. In the first of his responses to the situation, Michael runs the risk of remaining in his impasse and being unable to change; there is little sign of the presence of these gifts. By the same token, in the second response discernment opens up the possibility of liberation. The combination of imagination and desire for communion with God and others in love, even when God seems painfully absent, betokens faith, however faint, in a God who is faithful and can bring life out of death. This opens Michael up to the possibility of creativity, freedom and life.

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NOTES

1 For an illuminating discussion of present-day experience of impasse in relation to the teaching of John of the Cross, see Constance Fitzgerald, 'Impasse and dark night' in Joann Wolski Conn (ed), *Women's spirituality: resources for Christian development* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), pp 287–311.

2 Ignatius gives his own brief description of these two fundamental orientations of personal life in Exx 314, 315.

3 John of the Cross recognized that what looks at first sight to be an experience of the 'passive dark night of the spirit' might in fact be a different condition caused by either depression (melancholy) or 'lukewarmness'. For an insightful discussion of the 'dark night' of John of the Cross and depression, see Denys Turner, *The darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

4 Cf., for example, Exx 48, 55, 65, 91, 104, 152, 180, 193, 221, 233.

5 Ignatius also places a similar emphasis on desire in his guidelines for receiving candidates into the Society of Jesus. The desires are a sign of where and how God is leading a person and of the quality of their response. Cf., *The General Examen* [101], [102] in *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and their complementary norms* (St Louis MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), pp 46–47.