PSYCHOLOGY, NARRATIVE AND MINISTERIAL FORMATION

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SPIRITUALITY IS FUNDAMENTALLY NARRATIVE, the story of God's walking with a person through his or her life. A good narrative presents characters who are themselves revelations.[1] In theological terms, I am trying to point to the light of grace, the ability that some people possess to show God's presence within themselves and to illuminate how God is present in the world around them. This revelatory ability is different both from moral posing and from facile aestheticism. It is a gift that the bearers frequently do not realise they carry, a gift of being in grace—not a state you are in, but a presence you possess. It is what Ignatius Loyola termed 'good example'.

Assessment and the Evolving Narrative

This essay focuses on how this 'good example' can be nurtured, and on how psychological resources enrich and complement the wisdom we gain from our spiritual traditions and from our immediate intuitions. Firstly it will look at the role of psychological screening within the overall assessment of candidates to apostolic service. Then its focus will broaden: it will look at how the individual's life narrative or relational story—the material on which any competent psychological assessment concentrates—lies at the heart of all vocational choice. I link together narrative, character, and psychological screening for

[1] On revelation within history and human relationships, see Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999 [1991]); Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 2000). On good example in Ignatius Loyola, see *Constitutions* IV, Preamble [307]. On narrative and spirituality, see Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). I am deeply grateful to Dr. Donna Markham OP, who, despite a crammed schedule, found time to read and to criticize my draft, helping me reorient what I wanted to say here.

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several reasons: telling one's story remains the best way of explaining how God lives within a life; ministry is basically about relationships; and ministerial formation is the guidance of another through developmental stages of personal and professional growth.

I am not a trained psychologist or psychiatrist, though I claim the weary bromide that some of my best friends are both. I am treating this topic as someone long involved in religious and ministerial formation, and as someone increasingly aware that the pastoral survival of the Church depends on a diversified core of professionally and systematically trained ministers, ordained and not ordained, supplemented by part-time adjuncts.

For both these groups training will need to be on-the-job. Thus ministerial formation, whether it takes place in the seminary, or at a formation centre, during a training programme, or through occasional weekend workshops, will increasingly have to be sensitive to, and honour, the one, basic process of life-integration already established in the people who present themselves for ministerial education and formation. The process of incorporation into ministry has to be faithful to a founding and still influential tradition, but it must also be able to adapt to the prior experiences and current time-constraints of those involved. Formation work requires people with three qualities: the ability to illustrate what the mission means; the gift of helping others tell their story in ways that converge with the institution's mission; a level of psychological health sufficient to donate themselves to a work greater than just self-fulfilment.

The Role of Psychological Assessment

Church ministry today—in the parish, retreat or social action centres, schools, or health facilities—has to possess a core of sound leadership. Psychological screening helps ensure the quality of this core leadership. It serves three functions. First, the tests and their interpretation can uncover serious liabilities that inhibit a candidate from functioning peacefully and productively in a work that demands relational skills. For ministerial formation is not therapy; it is a process that presumes healthy people who can give generatively, that is, who can help other people. Ministerial formation presumes a healthy self-identity, a good sense of one's talents and energies, and a basic integration of the ups and downs of life into a realistic view of the world as 'wounded but

worth saving'. These are all common-sense observations about basic psychic health. But to have them confirmed by professionals in clinical psychology assures those in charge of formation that they are working with psycho-socially well people. This in turn means that the formation programme has a better chance of concentrating on mission and not on psychic maintenance.

Secondly, psychological assessment points up possible future problems, especially in the areas of sexuality, of relationships with authority, of anger, of fear, and of social adaptability. The compassionate heart does not just happen; it is usually banged into shape by the blows that come from all parts of our personal history. In ministerial formation we deal with basically sound people who nonetheless are struggling with their liabilities, recognising them, and trying not to let those liabilities hamper their ministry. Leaders in ministry and in ministerial formation should be able to help people cope with or work through their personal problems. For example, people coping well with their problems are able to face down the wave of self-defence that arises when someone in authority questions or confronts them, and to move beyond the memory of their less than perfect past encounters with authority in family, church, or school. No one likes to be corrected, but correction is a part of good formation. Mentors are not cheerleaders. They are guides and teachers, that is, people meant to show the way and to assist in the development of the knowledge, insight, and skills necessary to proceed along that way. We learn by mistakes, but someone has to tell us when we make mistakes. Authority goes with the territory of formation leadership. It should be exercised with graciousness, adapted to the people with whom one works, and open to suggestions and even to correction itself.

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Thirdly, initial psychological screening can alert formation leaders to areas of underdevelopment in candidates for ministry. For example, if the candidate is fundamentally healthy, but the psychologist notes a need for greater psychosexual integration, this helps those in leadership to make provision for addressing this need in the context of the formation process.

Psychological assessment of candidates for a life of ministry as a priest, or religious, or lay minister, is an essential part of the discernment about their readiness to relate to and help other people

professionally. My experience has been that the closer leaders work with psychological consultants, the better the formation programme. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the psychological consultant comes to understand the spirit of the community or the apostolic work better, and can therefore come to a greater intuitive understanding of the fit between a candidate and the community or work. Secondly, the leaders of the formation process develop a more discerning skill, a more sophisticated ability to read the distinctions between psychological development, graced insights, and vocational direction. Let me give a fictional example, based on experience with a wide range of people, of what I mean.[2]

A Case Study

A Jesuit novice in his second year of the two-year novitiate programme has moved peacefully enough through the stages of formal training, but he finds that the first stages of any new apostolic work are mildly traumatic for him. Leaving the familiar and going into the unknown or the less well known triggers anxiety and worry. He is not dysfunctional but he is hampered. In time he adapts well, once he gets settled into the new work and new circumstances; people really like him, and he finally does some excellent work.

As the novice director, I reviewed his initial psychological interpretations, noting that he was seen to be someone who could find change difficult. During my own spiritual guidance of this young man, he told me that the death of his mother when he was fifteen left a void in his heart, and that for some time he feared being left alone. Despite these feelings of loss and fears of abandonment, he studied abroad during his college years, and joined the Jesuit International Volunteer Corps after graduation, working in Tanzania for two years. I noted, too, how in his thirty-day retreat he went through a period of desolation, tempted to fear that Christ would leave him if he did not live his Jesuit life perfectly. Gradually, we worked through this and he came, in a moment of real freedom, to see that this temptation to perfectionism

[2] Two more detailed analyses of the interplay between psychology and formation can be found in Robert H. Albers, 'Unconditional Surrender', and Howard J. Gray, 'Beyond Abstinence and Toward Spiritual Integration', both in *Addiction and Spirituality: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, edited by Oliver J. Morgan and Merle Jordan (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), pp. 139-156 and pp. 215-233.

was giving no room for Christ to forgive him; he was behaving as if a close relationship with Christ was dependent on his achievement and good behaviour. I noted, too, from his relationships with the other novices, that he was someone the other men trusted and opened up to, that he kept confidences well, and that he had a fund of common sense.

When we spoke about the direction of his future life as a Jesuit, he had a mature grasp of his talents and acknowledged his own ambitions, most of which centred on returning to Africa. His prayer life was disciplined but not rigid. Using the recurring liturgical readings of the Church had helped him to unite the gospels to the Eucharist. The words of Christ, 'Do this in memory of me', had brought together much of his life. 'I want to remember my mother', he said, 'but not because I want to bring her back—I did pray like that once—but to appreciate what her love has meant, to recognise how important it is for us to give people good memories. I want to be that kind of person. I want to imitate what my mother did for me. I want to be a good memory for the people I will serve.'

This Jesuit novice suffered some trauma from the death of his mother. This may contribute to the initial feelings of abandonment whenever he leaves something familiar and comfortable and walks into a new situation. But it has not crippled him; he takes up new tasks, adjusts, and grows. There is no pattern of self-pity or self-dramatization. He is socially at ease and a figure of trust and friendship to his companions. His prayer has been touched by the loss of his mother, but it has developed as a kind of self-donation. It has not become self-indulgence in grief or loss. In short, as his formation leader, I see this young man developing but also carrying his own fragility. The need to adjust to a recurring sense of loss may be with him all through his life. However, as long as he can recognise this need as one of the defining features of his psycho-religious development, as an important part of his narrative, as an opportunity to appreciate the power of human love more keenly, and as an apostolic window onto the losses that others feel, then he will give that good example that his order's founder emphasized.

No one can predict how this young Jesuit novice will mature. Over time he could encounter a number of setbacks that challenge his vocation. He may feel an emptiness in Jesuit community life that accentuates, deepens, and extends his feelings of abandonment beyond

new circumstances to all circumstances. Gradually, he may succumb to a self-pity and self-absorption that sap his apostolic zeal and his ability to relate to other people in self-donation. Over time he could become someone who chooses his work primarily out of the assurance it gives him that he is admired, needed, honoured, loved. He could come to the conviction that the loneliness of his heart can only be satisfied by the love of another person and decide to leave the Jesuits. Psychological screening gives no assurance that candidates for apostolic mission will persevere in a vocational choice. It can tell us only that they were free enough to make such a choice, that they showed hope of corresponding with God's graces, and that they could be reasonably happy and effective in doing the mission of the community, the diocese, or the institution.

In short, we should expect help from psychological screening because it calls attention to developmental factors that affect prayer, community life, and ongoing discernment. But we also live in times when new circumstances create different psychological problems. For example, older candidates will enter religious communities and diocesan seminaries, sometimes with long-standing personal and professional autonomies that make formation more problematic. There are also fewer cultural and familial supports for the explicitly religious vocation today. Religious communities and seminaries are generally smaller than they were ten or fifteen years ago. There is a legitimate and widespread suspicion about the integrity of people who claim celibacy and consecrated chastity as their way of life. All these factors urge us to look for a high level of psychological maturity, even in comparison with what we required just a few years ago. Screening, therefore, remains important. Moreover, the increase in lay leadership throughout the ministries of the Church seems to me to demand a concomitant effort to bring psychological screening into the formation of lay ministers.

Ministry, Psychology and Narrative

Now let me turn to the second concern of this essay, the ramifications of psychological insights beyond the initial screening of candidates. Many religious and clerical professionals have benefited from psychological consultation during crisis periods of their lives. Perhaps there is an issue here about privilege: sometimes it has been said that

only clerics, religious, and the economically well off can afford psychiatry and clinical psychology. But people from any segment of modern society—rich or poor, men or women, gay or straight, mainstream or marginal—can and should benefit from psychological help.

My immediate concern here is that the riches of psychological wisdom should enter into the apostolic lives of all those who minister in the Church. How do people become effective in ministry? At the outset of this essay I suggested that the following factors were important: one's narrative, one's emerging sense of self or character, and one's ability to discern where one is growing with the Lord. Let me begin with my own experience of a vocational discernment process in which the three components played a pivotal role.

Another Case Study

A few years ago Lilly Endowment offered a grant to investigate the theological foundations of vocations. Boston College was one of many Christian foundations, both Catholic and Protestant, to participate in this programme. It developed an institutional strategy to facilitate vocational discernment, and it continues today to help students make more reflective and grace-grounded life choices.[3] In the course of the year-long study, those of us who guided the university-wide enterprise found that there was a number of ways to help students to examine their choices. But we also discovered that in this process the active presence of faculty and professional staff was equally important. In short, we had discovered that in vocational discernment there has to be something of a community ethos of vocational reflection. That discovery led us to investigate more closely what brings about such an ethos.

We began by formulating a descriptive definition of vocation: vocation emerges when one finds joy in using one's talents to serve others. 'Joy in using one's talents to serve others' may not initially seem sufficiently religious until one asks a further set of questions about this joy. Where does this joy come from? How did I receive these talents?

[3] Boston College Vice President for University Mission and Ministry, Joseph A. Appleyard gives details of the history and development of this programme in *Intersections*, a brochure available from Boston College, Service Building 108, Chestnut Hill, Ma 02467-3814, USA.

Who will show me how to serve? Questions about vocation, about what a call means, lead into the transcendental questions of the ultimate where, how and who.

In his perceptive article, 'The Discipline of Building Character', Joseph L. Badaracco Jr makes a distinction between an ethical decision and a defining moment. An ethical decision focuses on choosing between two decisions, one we know to be right and the other we know to be wrong. A defining moment moves more deeply into the self, asking us to choose among two or more ideals in which we believe.[4] Vocational choices emerge from questions about our defining moments.

Telling one's story in terms of the defining moments inevitably led participants to ask about the people in the narrative. Who were the people who brought me joy, who recognised my talents, who showed me how to serve? Conversely, who were the people who brought me heartache or caused me sadness? Who were the people who ignored or belittled or misused my talents? Who were the people who willingly accepted service, but never seemed to give it? It is essential to review important relationships, to acknowledge the presence of two drives—one expressing gratitude for relationships that lead to life and to love, another in search of the need for forgiveness for a life enfeebled and for a love denied or betrayed. These are also the questions on which any competent depth-psychological screening of candidates for ministry focuses.

Finally, from this awareness of joy in service and from the sense of personal history that this joy provoked, there emerged a third key element in vocation: the dreams, ambitions, and hopes inspiring and driving one's life and work. This third aspect of the vocation discernment process might be called 'emerging horizons'.

Ongoing Vocational Discernment

The basic structure of helping people to narrate their defining moments and then within that personal history to identify their

[4] Joseph L. Badaracco Jr, 'The Discipline of Building Character', in *Harvard Business Review on Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1998), pp. 89-113.

He appeared to the Virgin Mary. This, although it is not said in Scripture, is included in saying that he appeared to so many others, because scripture supposes that we have understanding.

Exx 299.2

The Great Mother is the origin of all life, to which one must return to be born anew. . . We must return to the earth on which we stand, to the unconscious, the mother from which our consciousness has come, to integrate ourselves in new life. . . . Thus, writes Jung in a letter, Christ's split is healed at Easter, the conflict resolved; and he recovers his perfect life when he is buried again in the womb of the virginal mother.

Kenneth L. Becker, Unlikely Companions, *p. 264*

defining relationships and to own the personal goals that inspire and guide their lives is essential to the discernment and development of vocation. What has been said here applied to a whole university community; hence it also applies to vocational discernment within priesthood, religious life, and lay ministry. The process involves our continually raising questions about affectivity, about spiritual movements, and stages of development. What are the healthy and unhealthy influences in the lives of students and professionals today? What have our relationships meant for us? How have they shaped us? How can our memories help us in our process of self-discovery? How is God's grace at work in these discernments?

Of course spirituality, particularly Ignatian spirituality, influenced the Boston College process. However, when we tried to translate Ignatian ideas into contemporary language for people unfamiliar with that tradition, we used parallels from psychology more often than not. Take the very idea of 'call', as an inspiration from God that leads a man or woman to a certain choice in life. We could not talk about call without referring to the psychological impact of interiority, the significance of recurring attractions, the interplay between freedom and choice, the difference between ethical demand and obsession, and the distinction between prayer and reflective interior dialogue with oneself. It would have been hard for those of us involved in the Boston College vocation project to do what we had to do without some common bonding in values and process. That bond was, more often than not, our understanding of interpersonal psychology. Our emerging inspirational bond was the realisation that the spirituality which had formed many of us was compatible with the idea of God working relationally within the lives of all people—young and old, male and female, student and professor and staff person. In short, we discovered, experientially and as a team, how much psychology and spirituality complemented one another and how the structure of our vocational process depended on both.

Spirituality and Psychology in Partnership

This essay has tried to lay out the complementary roles of spirituality and psychology in vocation. I take this partnership as a given, and as one that must deepen and develop. I have also laid out a practical ministerial paradigm that works in a variety of formation settings

(diocesan seminaries, religious life, professional ministerial schools, internship for new faculty and staff, *ad hoc* parish training) and within a variety of timeframes (from religious life formation programmes lasting a number of years to short-term programmes incorporating newly hired faculty and staff into the mission of a Jesuit University). This ministerial paradigm involves an evolving sense of narrative: a growing ability to read one's life in terms of its defining moments, its defining relationships, and its emerging ministerial horizons. This paradigm works at the outset of a life of service and throughout a life of service. It 'works' so pervasively because it relies on developmental realities for its data and on relational language for its interpretation, two realities that inhabit every narration. It works because it helps to form a community whose members read within each other's stories the presence of mystery, of those unplanned moments of grace and insight which help a person realise that there is something in life that only *they* can do. It forms a community that reaches out to younger generations still trying to make sense out of their gifts and talents, still sorting out strengths and weaknesses, still learning to read the crucial difference between ambition and ability. It helps all concerned recognise the enduring power of mentors, people who showed us how to use strength and power and how to endure suffering and frustration. Within the life of religious experience and spirituality, we need to read the direction of our souls.

Unplanned moments of grace help a person realise there is something only they can do

Ignatian Resonances

I opened this essay by suggesting that there was a connection between personal narrative, the power of example in apostolic formation and mission, and the role psychology can play in orienting this process and in guiding its development. How does all this integrate into Ignatian spirituality? I want to emphasize three areas where this process resonates with the Ignatian tradition.

First, the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises does not primarily reveal God to me or me to myself, but rather uncovers the quality of relationship, the graced mutuality that characterizes how God and I stand before one another. The naming of God throughout the Exercises is always relational: 'Creator and Lord', 'Christ our Lord',

'The Three Divine Persons looking down upon the face and circuit of the world'. In other words, God is God-for-us; and the dynamic of the Exercises leads us to ask ourselves how we will be before God, culminating in the Election, where a man or woman answers that question by establishing a special relationship to the God who has called. This relationship is progressive, not static: it unfolds within a life-narrative of discipleship, within a permanent walking with the Lord.

Second, the relationship to God *within* the Exercises seems almost relentless in its quiet insistence on the fruit that will come only *after* the Exercises. It is not contemplation as such that is central, but action: the way one will live because of one's prayer and contemplation. In the Exercises one prays to live by doing what Christ did. Consequently, the Contemplation to Attain Love is not only the climax of the retreat experience but also the orientation towards relational apostolic work. A man or woman sees that God operates as one who gives, who dwells, who labours, who reorients; and, because that person is in relation to this kind of God, they can find God only in seeing the divine as the enduring mentor, teaching a person how to live their narrative in a Godly way. One leaves the Exercises, then, in expectation: expectation that one's relational life-narrative will continue to develop.

Third, the Ignatian Examen of consciousness can be seen as a reflection on one's own narrative and relational history. The survey the Examen offers is not simply a set of questions about how one has performed but rather a contemplative assessment of one's developing relationship with God. The norm for the direction of that relationship is the actions that one claims as life-giving, forgiving, and loving or as withdrawn, angry, and indifferent. The relationship is secure: God is always there. But the relationship is also always developing: people are always in process, writing the stories that become their spiritual personalities through the life-decisions they take.

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