TRADITION, SPIRITUAL DIRECTION, AND SUPERVISION

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'I DON'T KNOW HOW I'D MANAGE without my spiritual director, my counsellor and my supervisor.' When a colleague said this to me some years ago, my first reaction was to panic, since at the time I had neither a counsellor nor even a spiritual director, let alone a pastoral supervisor. But, once I got beyond that reaction, I began to wonder. Was I really being so irresponsible in trying to minister without this trio of support persons in place? And if so, how was it that we had survived down the centuries, given that only spiritual direction can be documented as an ancient and well-established practice?

Counselling as a profession in its own right has developed with the growth of psychology in the twentieth century, and supervision has followed in its wake. I do not want in any way to deny the benefits that counselling and supervision have brought us. My aim is only to suggest that they are less new than they seem. In the last century or so, counselling and supervision have emerged as distinct activities, with their own aims and skills, and with professional codifications. But what they are about has never been totally absent from Christian practice. Christian spiritual direction has always been given within the community, and within an overall vision of what life is for. In a Christian culture, this supervisory context could remain tacit and unacknowledged. If we are to understand properly the enrichment which the modern development of supervision has brought us, we need to state more explicitly this wider Christian vision and situate the technical wisdom of modern psychology within this context.

Common-Sense Wisdom

Much that is regarded as essential in counselling must surely have been operative for as long as human beings have been around. Central to all counselling, irrespective of theory, is a concern for the other, supported

The Way, 44/2 (April 2005),105-112

by capacities for listening and for empathy, by a degree of objectivity, and by an ability to help the other grow in self-understanding. Age-old sayings such as 'a trouble shared is a trouble halved' express the effectiveness of such basic human involvement. The wealth of psychological insight that is now available has certainly improved counselling techniques and the expected outcome of counselling. It has also given counselling a status in its own right. But from time immemorial what we now call 'counselling' has, at least in rudimentary fashion, always taken place in friendships, in family relationships, in spiritual direction and in many other informal encounters. And it continues to do so even now.

Something similar might be said about supervision. In the textbooks, supervision is understood as the practice of overseeing, guiding and assessing the relationship between the client and the helper. The relationship may occur in ordinary pastoral care, in counselling, or indeed in spiritual direction. A standard reference book speaks of the supervisor standing

> … at the centre of a triangle which involves the needs and demands of (a) the agency (counselling centre or church etc.), (b) the student (counsellor, therapist), and (c) the client.[1]

Such formal third-party involvement is a comparatively recent development even in the counselling world. But, just as informal counselling has always been around, surely there have also been informal mechanisms of supervision. People have always consulted a third party on aspects of what has occurred during their ministry. In particular, they may well have explored how they themselves have been affected by their encounters with others, and how such effects may in turn be influencing the process as it continues—all of which are central to supervision as we now understand it.

Moreover, there is an element of supervision even when there is no third-party involvement. For something akin to supervision can emerge from the accepted values and principles according to which the care is being given. These parameters represent an inbuilt, implicit form of supervision. Furthermore, even when supervision is formalised through

[1] John P. Millar, 'Pastoral Supervision', in *A Dictionary of Pastoral Care*, edited by Alastair V. Campbell (London: SPCK, 1987), 272-273, here 272.

the involvement of a third party, their agreed values and principles surely provide the criteria by which the progress of the counselling can be assessed.

The point remains valid, I think, within the specific context of spiritual direction. Supervision for spiritual directors is a comparatively recent development—even though Ignatius did recommend some more formal third-party involvement for those learning to give the Exercises.[2] But elements of supervision were, surely, always operative. Quite apart from informal third-party consultation, there was a degree of supervision arising from the very nature of the activity, from what spiritual direction is about.

The director is there to assist in the growth of another's relationship with God. That simple formulation already says much about the relationship between director and directee. For example, the director is there not to tell, not to order, not to dominate, but to assist in what is essentially a matter between God and the other. The relationship between director and directee is at the service of that relationship with God. The fact that spiritual direction exists at all expresses a belief in God and in the possibility of a human relationship with God. Such beliefs set parameters which offer a degree of inbuilt supervision. Perhaps Ignatius' Principle and Foundation is there as much for the giver of the Exercises as for the receiver. It offers a clear 'super-vision', expressing the faith according to which both director and directee are operating.

Spiritual direction expresses convictions about God's action

'Religion' and 'Spirituality'

This brings us to the important issue of the relationship between religion and spirituality. It seems to be increasingly common today to consider the two quite separately, especially when religion is equated with institutional religion. But perhaps there is need here for caution. There simply cannot be a serious involvement in education, a coherent practice of teaching, without an underpinning philosophy of education that includes at least an implicit view of what it is to be human. By the same token, there cannot be serious involvement in spirituality, coherent spiritual practice, without a view of the nature and purpose

[2] *Constitutions* 4.8.E [409].

'The Bible … that would be in self-help'

of human existence. Without some such background, the spiritual journey is directionless, and talk of spiritual growth is meaningless. Hence spirituality *depends* on religion, because it is within the beliefs and teachings of the great religions that such foundational questions are addressed. Thus, any tendency to set up spirituality in opposition to religion would seem unwise and misguided—all the more so when a religion claims to be articulating not merely a particular philosophy, but a revelation from God.

There are obviously many reasons why it has become so attractive to suppose that there is a great gulf between religion and spirituality. When faith's philosophical underpinning (whether real or supposed) is called into question, faith needs to become more rooted in personal experience. Society has become increasingly secular, increasingly less supportive of a faith-vision and a religious way of life. But perhaps Roman Catholics have felt this pressure particularly acutely. The dominance of doctrine, the importance given to orthodoxy, the centrality of the liturgy—these characteristic features of Catholicism have all too easily led to an outward observance which has left

unfulfilled deeper and more personal needs. And when this vigorous corporate life fails to resonate in any meaningful way with the wider culture, we can easily be tempted to think in terms of religion being public and hollow while spirituality is personal and authentic.

There is, obviously, an element of discovery, of growth and process, in the spiritual life which goes far beyond mere knowledge of the catechism. Anthony D'Mello made the point memorably:

> To a visitor who claimed he had no need
> to search for Truth
> because he found it
> in the beliefs of his religion
> the Master said:
>
> 'There was once a student
> who never became a mathematician
> because he blindly believed the answers he found
> at the back of his maths textbook
> —and, ironically, the answers were correct.'[3]

Clearly the road map is no substitute for the journey. But the map has an important and significant place. The maps for the spiritual life provided by doctrine and liturgy reflect the insights of others who have already made the journey. They have a crucial role in guiding us, and without them, perhaps, our journey is simply impossible. The spiritual journey will inevitably be personal, but it can never be solitary, purely private.

The element of mutual dependence in an authentic spiritual life contrasts sharply with the current dominance of individualism in our society. Undoubtedly this individualism is another factor encouraging us to think of religion and spirituality as somehow separate, and of spirituality as something to be pursued not as an essential part of religion, but as an alternative to it. Against this, we might do well to remember the trenchant claim of Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, in Britain, published in a major national newspaper:

> The great religions are more than spirituality. They pose the question: how do we translate our private experiences into the

[3] *One Minute Wisdom* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1985), 132.

> public world we share and make? How do we turn our intimations of eternity into a more gracious order of acts, relationships and institutions? How do we escape not from but into reality? How do we move from soul to society? That is why, while spirituality changes our mood, religion changes our life.
>
> Yes, there is much positive about our search for spirituality, but there is also something escapist, shallow and self-indulgent. Just as street protest is the attempt to achieve the results of politics without the hard work of politics, so the current cult of spirituality is the attempt to achieve the results of religion without the disciplines, codes and commitments of religion. That is not good news.[4]

Spirituality and Authenticity

It is in this light that we can appreciate Ronald Rolheiser's account of what he calls the four non-negotiable essentials for an authentic twenty-first-century Christian spirituality. Drawing on Matthew 6, Rolheiser identifies three key activities named in Jesus' teaching on discipleship: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. He then spells out, in the light of Jesus' wider teaching, what each of these might amount to. Prayer should include not only prayer on one's own but also prayer in common. Fasting involves the keeping of the commandments, and the asceticism 'demanded by living a life of joy'. Almsgiving implies a commitment to justice as well as to charity.[5] On the basis of all this, Rolheiser lists his non-negotiables:

- the practice of private prayer and a commitment to personal moral integrity;
- a serious involvement with issues of social justice;
- what he calls mellowness of heart and spirit;
- an involvement in community as a constitutive element of true worship.

[4] *The Times* (24 August 2002); see also http://www.chiefrabbi.org/articles/credo/august2002.html.
[5] Ronald Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998), 51.

For Rolheiser, all four are essential for a contemporary spirituality. To the extent that any one of the four is neglected, one's spirituality is out of kilter.

But, for our present purpose, the interesting point in Rolheiser's account is the insistence, implicit throughout, on the inescapable importance of activities closely associated with 'religion': involvement with a community, communal worship, adherence to a common moral code, and commitment to the wider world through a concern for social justice. He is at once challenging the tendency to separate spirituality and religion, and also, more importantly, pointing out the implicit supervision in matters spiritual which the practice of religion can and surely does offer.

It would be foolhardy not to welcome the enrichment which recent developments in counselling and supervision have brought to spiritual direction. But we also need to recognise that commitment to a religious tradition, rooted in Scripture, has provided a form of supervision in the spiritual direction relationship—albeit without being named as such, and without formal third-party involvement. And surely it is this commitment which is distinctively characteristic, both of Christian spiritual direction itself, and of supervision in such direction.

Many who come our way feel themselves to be on a solitary journey. For such people, one of the fruits of Christian spiritual direction will be a growing ability to see their experience within the tradition that has been handed on to us, and thus in time to become more deeply rooted. Certainly we have much to gain from formal supervision of the kind that has been developed in the therapeutic professions. But the Christian tradition itself also provides an element of supervision—often implicit, but indispensable if spiritual direction

and other Christian ministries are to retain their specific character. This we need to acknowledge, maintain and cherish.[6]

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[6] This article is an edited version of an address given to the Spiritual Exercises Network Conference at Swanwick, Derbyshire, in August 2004.