VOCATION, FREEDOM AND DISCERNMENT

Klaus Mertes

LET US START WITH ONE WOMAN'S ACCOUNT of a 'vocation crisis' that arose during a retreat she made when she was young:

> At the end of the retreat, I was in floods of tears and full of anxiety. I seemed confronted with a dilemma: either I had to break off my engagement and leave my *fiancé*, or else I would get married in the knowledge that I had not answered God's call, that I had not been generous to God.[1]

Before the retreat, her mood had been quite different:

> I was 22, and the world was my oyster. I was a happy woman, proudly radiating a secure childhood and youth. I was enjoying life. I was optimistic, always inquisitive, a voracious reader, ready for any challenge. I was in love, and felt myself strengthened as a person by this relationship.

What happened during the retreat? Read in retrospect, her account comes over as a kind of rake's progress into unfreedom. At the beginning she trusted her director absolutely. But, during the retreat, the manager of the retreat house began to intervene: 'if you have any doubt about any spiritual issue', she said, 'don't hesitate to ask me'. Then the director gave a talk alluding to a poem in which a woman was faced with the choice between entering a convent and getting married, and opted for the first of these. The young woman making the retreat heard the allusion as a deliberate reference to her own situation:

> It goes without saying that the meditations, the examples, the stories all had their effect: generosity, readiness for sacrifice ….

[1] This account is based on personal testimony given to the author.

> What was the priest really trying to get us to understand with these literary examples?

After the talk, the manager of the house approached the young woman, asking her: 'how did you relate that meditation to your situation?' The young woman tried to resist the question, but the manager would not let go. 'The gospel always has to be read in conjunction with our own situation. It's all a matter of generosity.' And when the woman asked the retreat-giver about the meditation in one-to-one conversation, the message was reinforced: 'it would be wrong for me to think of this meditation as something that wasn't about me and about the chance I had to give my whole life to the service of God'.

The result was that 'the idea of generosity to God became a huge burden for me', and she ended the retreat with this sense of being burdened. Even after the retreat, the retreat-house manager did not give up. She phoned the young woman, and asked 'wouldn't you like to talk about *your problem* with me?' And so the young woman's defences began to cave in. She ended up deciding that the question of a religious vocation was one directed specifically to her. She came to see it as an alternative between a total gift of self to God (generous) and a gift of self to her *fiancé* (not so generous). And so she broke off her engagement and entered the community.

Standing at a Balance

This account might help us read the fifteenth Annotation of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* with a new level of care:

> … the one who is giving the Exercises ought not to influence the one who is receiving them more to poverty or to a promise, than to their opposites, nor more to one state or way of life than to another. For though, outside the Exercises, we can lawfully and with merit influence every one who is probably fit to choose continence, virginity, the religious life and all manner of evangelical perfection, still in the Spiritual Exercises, when seeking the Divine Will, it is more fitting, and much better, that the Creator and Lord Himself should communicate Himself to His devout soul, inflaming it with His love and praise, and disposing it for the way in which it will be better able to serve Him in future. So, the one who is giving the Exercises should not turn or incline to one side or the other, but, standing in the centre like a balance, leave the Creator to act

> immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord.

To understand the image, you have to imagine a balance, with a vertical beam either standing on the ground or suspended from some point above. To this vertical beam, a second beam, a horizontal one, is attached, and at each end of the second beam there is a scale-pan. When Ignatius says 'standing in the centre like a balance', he is referring to the central point of the horizontal beam, the one point in the structure from which the movement between the two pans cannot be influenced. When there is a question of an Ignatian election, the one giving the Exercises (and indeed, according to Exx 179, the exercitant)[2] should place themselves inwardly at the point from which they cannot influence the outcome. The one giving the Exercises should make themselves 'indifferent'. Only so can the movements on the scales take place in ways determined solely by the weights placed upon them.

What is at stake here is the maintenance of a point of neutrality between two possibilities open to our choice. But the image also implies a certain calm, a certain stability on the part of the one giving the Exercises. That person needs, gently but firmly, to be occupying neutral ground, not only as regards what they themselves might choose, but also as regards what the retreatant might choose. If those who give the Exercises let their own preferences interfere with the exercitant's choice, then they are moving away from the neutral centre, and

[2] 'It is necessary to keep as aim the end for which I am created, which is to praise God our Lord and save my soul, and, this supposed, to find myself indifferent, without any inordinate propensity; so that I be not more inclined or disposed to take the thing proposed than to leave it, nor more to leave it than to take it, but find myself as in the middle of a balance, to follow what I feel to be more for the glory and praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul.'

diminishing the exercitant's scope for choice, undermining the exercitant's indifference, ultimately restricting the exercitant's freedom. When, however, the one who gives the Exercises provides a firm and stable presence on neutral ground, this promotes the exercitant's freedom to find in a situation of election 'what I feel to be more for the glory and praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul' (Exx 179).

The stability in question here is not to be confused with harshness or stubbornness. It is rather a deep attentiveness to the exercitant and to their situation of choice, allied with a firmness of the kind that parents show to their children, teachers to their students, therapists to their clients. This stability is an expression of love.

Ethics, Freedom and Grace

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius distinguishes between 'all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it' (Exx 23) and other things where some ethical or ecclesiastical restriction applies. When it is a question of vocation, we therefore need to observe the rules 'to get knowledge as to what matters an election ought to be made about'. And the first of these runs:

> It is necessary that everything about which we want to make an election should be indifferent, or good, in itself, and should be allowed within our Holy Mother the hierarchical Church, and not bad nor opposed to her. (Exx 170)

Now, the choice between getting married and entering a religious order is, following this doctrine of the *Spiritual Exercises*, entirely appropriate material for an election in the full sense. Both possibilities are good in themselves; both are properly, and equally, matters of indifference. It is another matter when we are dealing with things not

good in themselves. The distinction between 'generous' and 'mean' (or 'less generous'), for example, is not a matter of indifference. Before God, I obviously have to prefer the generous alternative to the mean one. If one alternative (the engagement, say) comes to be labelled 'less generous', and the other (entering a religious order) is labelled 'generous', then—in terms of the guidelines for election in the *Spiritual Exercises*—the choice is no longer being framed as a matter of indifference, and therefore the situation is no longer really one of election.

'Election' is a religious concept, not to be understood in moral terms. There are certainly moral choices to be made between the good and the bad, the generous and the mean, the haughty and the humble. But in the Exercises, we are asking quite specific, religious questions. Which of the different calls upon me is the call of God? What is God saying to me in the many human calls addressed to me? To which life-choice is God calling me? The freedom even to ask such questions can be found only by someone who is already morally serious and responsible, someone living according to the fifth Annotation:

> … for the one receiving the Exercises, it does much good to enter into them with great courage and generosity towards their Creator and Lord, offering Him all their will and liberty, that His Divine Majesty may make use both of their person and of all that they have according to His most holy will.

The distinction may be a subtle one, but it is crucial. Moral decisions clearly do have religious significance. God liberates people from unfreedom because God rejects unfreedom. God holds unfreedom to be wrong in a moral sense. Israel is led out of the house of slavery in Egypt, and receives in the desert the law of freedom. God also frees the human heart from its dependence on money, prestige and power, and leads all humanity into a way of life in which the love of God is of greater value than the recognition which comes from wealth, from reputation or from a position of power. And to this kind of freedom it is God's will to lead all human beings. But the religious question is *how* God is calling the people already led into freedom (and always being led anew into freedom)—how some are called to one service and others to another. The Election in the Exercises is about *this* kind of question, and the choice involved is something other than a simple choice between the morally right and the morally wrong. As the

Persian Sufi, ar-Rumi, once put it: 'There is a place beyond right and wrong. That's where we meet.'[3]

If a retreatant begins to sense that this freedom is being endangered by other people presenting the alternatives in a manipulative way, one that constrains their freedom, then they need to get out and go elsewhere. If the moral and the religious begin to be confused, if a religious alternative is presented in moralising terms, then this is a quite clear sign that the 'enemy of human nature' is at work, an enemy who characteristically sows confusion. This kind of confusion can come from the one who gives the Exercises; it can equally well come from the unresolved problems within the exercitant's own psyche that arise if they are embarking on the Exercises with a primarily moralistic understanding of spirituality. Confusing the moral and the religious leads to nothing but unfreedom.

The reason why the rules for discernment of spirits are divided into two groups, one for the First Week and one for subsequent Weeks, is that the process of the First Week is about the step that God enables the human person to take into freedom, whereas the subsequent Weeks assume that this step has been taken. Ignatius places the Election at the end of the Second Week, and this timing is very significant. Questions about vocation are precisely not for the First Week. Rather they are about how to respond to the Word of God, which has come to us through the Incarnation of God's Son. And they are to be answered at a 'place beyond right and wrong'.

Danger Signs

In the actual process of the Exercises, what is decisive is that the one who gives the Exercises should respect the exercitant's freedom—the image of the scale makes that quite clear. What are the signs that enable an exercitant to recognise a director who has no feeling for this freedom that is so central to the process?[4]

One danger sign is when the director approaches the exercitant in a way that suggests that it is the director who is responsible for leading

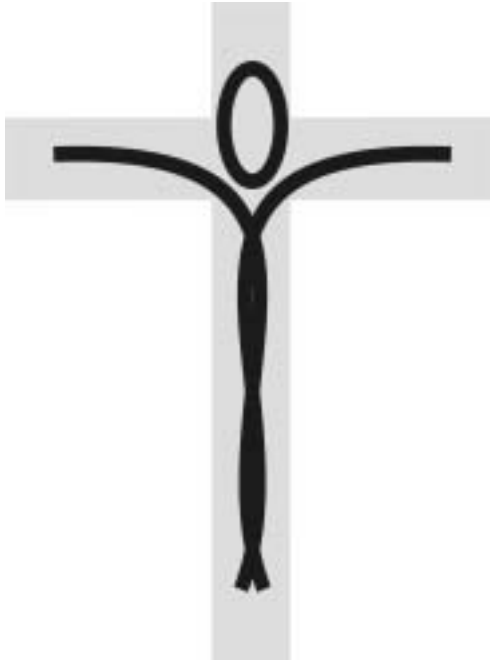
[3] Quoted in Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Gewaltfreie Kommunikation* (Paderborn: Junfermann, 2003), 31.

[4] The question could obviously be reversed, and we could ask—perhaps more conventionally—how a director recognises a lack of inner freedom in the exercitant. But here we are concentrating on the highly sensitive issues raised by the story with which this article opens.

the exercitant from bondage into freedom, from uncertainty into a sense of vocation. 'The one who gives the Exercises' does indeed have a special responsibility for the exercitant's freedom, and as such stands in a quite particular relationship with the person entrusted to them by God. But the principal way in which they practise indifference, the chief respect in which they are like the middle point in a balance, consists in their resisting any dependence on the part of the exercitant. As for themselves, they must be careful not to put forward their own agenda. The first sign that the exercitant must look out for, then, is a director who is not in a position of indifference, not 'in the centre of the balance'.

A second sign concerns the relationship between the person and the role. A spiritual director who constrains freedom tends to let their own personality interfere with their role. In the Exercises, the retreatant must trust the retreat-giver, and, of course, at the outset this has a great deal to do with the retreat-giver's personality. But the one who gives the Exercises needs to be clear in their own mind that the trust they are receiving is based on something other than the confidence they inspire, or their competence, or their closeness to God, or their spiritual intuitiveness. This trust, rather, should be based on the fact that they are serving as 'the one who gives the Exercises'. It is given, not to the person as such, but to the person who is exercising the office.

All this is a matter of how the director understands their role—the retreatant should not have to be sorting out the distinction between the director's role and the director's personality. It may well be that the director happens to have a personality that is reassuring or charismatic, and on that basis initially attracts retreatants' trust. With that much, there is nothing wrong. But what the director does with that reality is crucial. They need to be clear that the basis on which they are accepting the confidence of another is their role as a spiritual



director; and it is on this, not on their own personal qualities, that they must ground their ways of proceeding.

On the one hand, the person disappears into the role. Giving the Exercises is a service to the exercitant, and has nothing to do with the personal preferences or impulses of the director. On the other hand, the personality of the retreat director can and should be visible, both in how they take on the role and in their testimony to their own convictions and enthusiasms. The person, then, has to be present, but in such a way that it is clear that they remain within the role. The position of indifference, at the centre of the balance, is not one of coldness, uncommittedness or mere formality. A humane relationship between the one giving and the one receiving the Exercises is warm, committed and flexible. But it will never, as it develops, lead to any kind of domination of the exercitant—it is precisely through respect for this principle that the 'office' becomes visible.

One criterion by which a person making the Exercises can evaluate whether their director is helping them find the will of God is how far the director is consciously listening, not just to the exercitant but also to the Word of God. The humility proper to the retreat-giver should consist in a recognition that the trust of the exercitant is a gift, a gift not only from the exercitant but also from God—quite independently of how the exercitant thinks and feels about that trust.

If that humility is there, then God—within the triangular relationship of God-director-directee—will be dealing with the director as well as with the directee. Directors do not accompany the communication between the retreatant's soul and God merely as observers, as though they had nothing to do with the God whose will and whose intimacy the exercitant is seeking. It is obviously not their

role to interfere in the balancing that goes on between the two scale-pans. But, nevertheless, they should be open to what they themselves might be receiving from God in the process of the Exercises for their own progress. And just as directors should not interfere between the exercitant and God, so exercitants should not interfere with what God might be doing for their directors. If directors remain firm in this basic attitude of openness towards God, then they are not looking to the exercitant to satisfy any need in themselves. If their own relationship with God is well ordered, this in itself is liberating for the exercitant.

In practice all this is quite simple, however complicated the theory may sound. For the exercitant, the whole business can reduce to a simple question: 'Faced with this man or woman who is directing me, do I feel myself free? Or do I feel somehow inwardly constrained in their presence—that they are disappointed when I say this or that; that they are angry when I share this or that thought; that they regard me as somehow unhealthy, or lacking in insight, when I put a difficulty before them; that they become suspicious if I tell them a particular story; that they are exploiting my insecurity and coming to dominate me?' When such things happen, the one being directed always has the right to break off the retreat and the relationship, and go away.

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