THE SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR AS A CULTURAL TRANSLATOR

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THE MAIN FOCUS of spiritual direction must be on the directee, not on the director. It is necessary, therefore, that images and symbols used in spiritual conversation touch the foundational myths that inform and sustain the directee's sense of identity. Only this way can the directee be stirred up, first to recognising the resources inherent in him or her, and then to putting them to use in the service of Christ's mission. For this to happen, these images and symbols, whether referring to the environment or to history and legend, have to be taken from the directee's context.

When the spiritual director is equipped with images and symbols from a context such as St Ignatius' sixteenth-century Europe, their translation into instinctively recognisable local equivalents is imperative for a directee from a different culture. This kind of cultural translation is essential to assure the directee of a contextualised focus. But only what is well known can be translated. This approach to spiritual direction entails more work for the director, who must be not only well informed about the context from which the Ignatian spiritual tradition originates, but also well acquainted with the historical and cultural context of his or her most regular directees. Thus, if the director is to be helpful to a Zulu directee, a working knowledge of the Zulu culture will be just as important as an understanding of the culture in which the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius were first conceived.

Ignatius and Inculturation

It is not a waste of time to stretch our imagination for a while and think of Iñigo, the proud sixteenth-century Basque *hidalgo* at Loyola, as a contemporary Zulu youth. Our imagination would have to be informed by two significantly different cultures: one Basque in its narrow context

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and European in its broader perspective, another Zulu and African in commensurate extensions. There are certain elements we would have to keep as constants in Iñigo, whether Basque or Zulu—his natural endowments, for example, and his love of culture, his waywardness and his 'vulnerability' to a greater spiritual force, about which he initially knew nothing. But there are other things in him we would have to perceive differently. For example, rather than picture him as a *knight*, we would probably think of him as a *warrior* in the better sense of that term. Almost certainly, the Iñigo who enjoyed warlike sports involving the use of swords would have been absolutely exhilarated by the ancient Zulu pre-wedding mock-combat with spears.

This is not useless imagination because it forces us to compare and contrast, to go back in history and look at the Zulu culture just as we dig into the past that nurtured Iñigo—or, as we must call him now, St Ignatius of Loyola—providing him with a wealth of language and symbols. We know that Ignatius drew from this wealth to communicate his deepest feelings, emotions and spiritual experiences. We also know that he employed words and images not simply to make himself understood, but to evoke in others feelings similar to his own. Yet those words and images belong to his cultural context and, in some aspects at least, bear the usually unavoidable spatial-temporal limitations of that context. 'As

An ancient Zulu pre-wedding mock combat

a former courtier and soldier born at the end of the Middle Ages', says Ronald Modras, 'Ignatius used the metaphors of warring kingdoms, battlefields, and banners'.[1] It should not surprise us, then, when such metaphors fail to bring forth in another context what Ignatius intended to achieve with an audience situated in his own place and time.

I say this not to diminish Ignatius' broadmindedness or the universal applicability of the spirituality he bequeathed to the Church and the world, but to highlight a limitation that he would have hastened to admit. My attention was recently drawn to the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, whose authorship is credited to Ignatius, and to just how detailed they are in their treatment of vast subjects—instructing one on exactly how to act in nearly all circumstances—yet how frustrating they must be to those with a legalistic inclination, allowing, as they do, for creative adaptation in just about every situation. As Nicolas Bobadilla wrote, 'The Constitutions and Declarations are a labyrinth altogether confused. They are so numerous that no one, either subject or superior, can come to know them, much less to observe them.'[2]

In a way, the openness to adaptation manifested in the *Constitutions* is an expression of the author's trust in the Holy Spirit, who operates in human contexts without being limited within or by them. It is a testimony to his confidence that the same Spirit will inspire, move and guide beyond stagnant cultural media. This Ignatian openness has its roots in the very core of the saint's spirituality. In his instructions on how to make the Spiritual Exercises, which constitute the kernel of his spiritual heritage, Ignatius advises us to make the most of what is locally at our disposal, including mental disposition, physical fitness, professional engagements and weather conditions (Exx 18–20, 129–130, 205, 229). The basic principle is to know when and how to adapt to circumstances.

An even more obvious testimony to Ignatian openness to adaptation is what we might call the appropriate fruits of Ignatian spirituality—and they come forth in all forms and colours. They are about our ability freshly to perceive the mission of Christ in its broadest perspective (Exx 102–108) and to be inflamed by a desire to take part in it in any capacity whatever. Ignatius himself viewed the mission of the Jesuits who

[1] Ronald Modras, 'The Spiritual Humanism of the Jesuits', in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader,* edited by George W. Traub (Chicago: Loyola UP, 2008), 4–17, here 9.

[2] Nicolas Bobadilla to Paul IV, 1557, quoted in *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, translated by George E. Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970), 55.

were formed by the Exercises as one that extended to 'even those who live in the region called the Indies', referring to places barely known to Europeans at the time.[3] When he sent men to these far-off frontiers, he instructed them to learn from new realities and adjust themselves accordingly. To those that he sent to Ethiopia he said: 'do everything gently, without any violence to souls long accustomed to another way of life'.[4] And most of those who went to the missions did not disappoint. The works of Alessandro Valignano in Asia and, more specifically, of Matteo Ricci in China, of Pedro Paez in Ethiopia and Roberto de Nobili in India continue to fascinate many today because they manifest an effort, unusual for the time, to use languages and symbols found in those foreign lands as media for communicating the message of Christianity. Modras says of de Nobili and Ricci that,

> They had come not only to respect but to love the cultures of India and China, not as something alien but as something human and hence not without God's spiritual presence.[5]

For their part, the Jesuits who moved to the Americas so identified with the indigenous populations that they became an embarrassment to their European colonial patrons. The openness we observe in all these men is rooted in the spirituality that formed them.[6] Through the means of the Ignatian Exercises, they were trained to transform almost any human material into saved instruments of Christ's mission.

Ignatius and the Zulus

To return to the Zulus, I wish to raise a question that I am not competent to answer: in a context of spiritual direction where the directee is a South African Zulu man or woman, what expressions, what images and symbols would Ignatius have used today to pass on the same message and evoke the same spiritual and emotional feeling he intended to evoke in his sixteenth-century directee? My incompetence to respond to this question comes from the fact that I have not devoted as much time to

[3] *Formula of the Institute*, n. 4.
[4] Ignatius to João Nunes Barreto, February 1555, in *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola,* translated by William J. Young (Chicago: Loyola UP, 1951), 387.
[5] Modras, 'Spiritual Humanism of the Jesuits', 12.
[6] Pedro Arrupe, 'On Inculturation', *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu*, 17/2 (1978[1979]), 256–263, here 258–259.

understanding the Zulu culture as I have done to comprehending the context that moulded the Ignatian Exercises.

A visit to Montserrat, for example, and a chance to view the stunning geological monuments surrounding the Benedictine monastery, which Ignatius visited in 1522, helped me to understand why a brave, sword-carrying knight would be so overawed as to surrender his weapon to a statue of the Black Madonna (*Autobiography* n. 17). One could not stand at Montserrat and fail to put one's finitude into right perspective, with a modicum of spiritual openness. I wonder what the awe-inspiring Drakensberg Mountains or, as the Zulus called them, the *uKhahlamba* (Barrier of Spears), might have brought out of a spear-bearing warrior who was equally open to the Spirit. Such easily accessible local scenery, and an environment with which people have an emotional connection, could be brought into the imagery and vocabulary employed in spiritual conversation.

We can learn a lot more from the way Ignatius employed the traditional or cultural practices of his time in order to attain his spiritual goal. When he placed before the directee a cowardly knight who failed to join his earthly king in a battle and who thus worthily incurred 'the scorn of everyone' and was 'reckoned a disgraceful knight' (Exx 94), Ignatius was doing more than simply asking the directee to imagine something foreign to himself or herself, much less inventing an image; he was using

A section of the Benedictine monastery on the rocky slopes of Montserrat

something that was almost certain to elicit the directee's 'instinctive response to the idea of a noble but exigent human enterprise', to quote Michael Ivens, 'and make him or her aware of the resources of energy, love, ambition and idealism which Christ wishes to enlist in the service of the Kingdom'.[7] Ignatius was making creative use of a traditional image with which the directee was already familiar in order to stir up feeling and stimulate a spiritual response.

However, Ignatius' creativity fails to achieve its goal in cultures that know little of the very personal tie between medieval knights and their crusading kings. In such other cultures, a directee may still be asked to imagine the knight–king relationship, but that imagination can hardly bring him or her to the level of felt response. Spiritual directors today will have failed if they do not encourage the use of local alternatives to this and similar images.

In many African cultures where defence and conquest were societal roles assigned to an entire age-group, a warrior owed loyalty to his age-mates more than to his chief. In those cultures where surgery marked the group's transition from boyhood and girlhood to manhood and womanhood, young people braved the operations done on them without anaesthetic because they imagined the indelible humiliation that attended those who cried during the painful process. Such cowardly initiates became the scorn of everyone, especially of their peers, and, if male, were reckoned as disgraceful warriors. Invoke the image of a crying initiate in these cultures and make a youth's blood boil with courage!

The effectiveness of the sort of cultural translation I am proposing is almost certainly assured. Those who come for direction need not even know the places they bring to their imagination. They do not need to have experienced the cultural practices to which they refer. People tend to have emotional connections with things they have never seen. As long as those things constitute at least an aspect of the myth that sustains their identity, the connection is as real as anything can be. I could not help admiring Joshua Titus, a nineteen-year-old Zulu servant in Carel Birkby's non-fictional, but extremely racist, 1937 book, *Zulu Journey.* When Carel tells Joshua, 'tomorrow we go into Zululand', he responds: 'Tomorrow, into Zululand, *inkosi* [*sic*] …. Then perhaps we shall see the place where my mother's father's mother's father fought with Dingaan and Chaka, sir.'[8]

[7] Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1989), 78.
[8] Carel Birkby, *Zulu Journey* (London: Frederick Muller, 1937), 17.

The Drakensberg Mountains, Zululand

Joshua Titus had never been to Zululand before. However, a mere mention of the land of his ancestors triggered the kind of memory and myth that made the young Zulu shiver with emotion.

It was enough for Joshua Titus to have been brought up with stories about his ancestors and their land for him to have such an emotional connection with a place he had never known. In a similar context, Nelson Mandela recounts how his 'childish imagination' was stimulated by his father's 'stories of historic battles and heroic Xhosa warriors' as well as by his mother's enchanting 'Xhosa legends and fables that had come down from numberless generations'.[9] Doubtless such stories and legends provided a foundation for Mandela's proven courage and moral stature. But Joshua Titus and Mandela are just examples, not exceptions. It would be a failure on the part of spiritual directors if they did not use such ready cultural foundations to win servants for Christ's mission.

For directors in Africa, what I am calling cultural translation in the area of spirituality is probably one thing that Jesus would want to see us learn from good, and not-so-good, politicians. In one of his most puzzling examples, Jesus commends the wisdom of a dishonest steward, admitting that 'the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own

[9] Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (London: Abacus, 1995), 12.

generation than are the children of light' (Luke 16:8). It has to be admitted that politicians translate culture better than those in religious practice do. The use of local images and symbols to stir up feeling and mobilise support is an art that African politicians have perfected. My mind reaches back to Thabo Mbeki's 1996 speech in the South African Constitutional Assembly, in which he gave moving expression to his identity as an African, entirely without recourse to the discredited categories of race and colour. Simply by referring to scenery and nature, and to heroic ancestors about whom he must have heard from stories and legends, Mbeki solemnly declared his African identity as an incontestable fact. So essential was nature in the formulation of that identity that he said:

> At times, and I fear, I have wondered whether I should concede equal citizenship of our country to the leopard and the lion, the elephant and the springbok, the hyena, the black mamba and the pestilential mosquito.[10]

For Mbeki, these are the images and symbols at the very foundation of his identity as an African and a man. They are the foundational images and symbols which a spirituality must also touch if a man or a woman in the same context is to be at once saved and stirred up for the mission of Christ.

More controversially, perhaps, I could also mention President Jacob Zuma's public performances in leopard skin, which receive broad media coverage the world over. Probably some of us dismiss them as merely comical. Yet, in this regard, President Zuma qualifies as a wise son of this world, from whom Jesus would want to see us take a lesson. He uses images and symbols that go deep into the foundational myths of his target audience, which he thus mobilises for political support. Most of his admirers come in ordinary costumes and may never have worn a leopard skin in their lives. They may not even wish to wear one now. However, that the image with which they are presented elicits an instinctive response from them is almost indisputable. It is becoming increasingly clear that such images have a greater appeal to Africa's urbanised middle classes, the

[10] 'Statement of Deputy President T. M. Mbeki, on behalf of the African National Congress, on the occasion of the adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of "The Republic of South Africa Constitutional Bill 1996"', Cape Town, 8 May 1996, at http://www.unisa.ac.za/contents/colleges/docs/tm1996/sp960508.pdf, accessed 2 June 2013.

President Zuma uses culture to win political support

educated and the diaspora than to the man and woman in some remote village. They are more attractive to those who have idealized them than to those who have experienced them in life. For this reason, if directors translate the images and symbols they use, their target audience will be broad indeed.

I have thus far focused on the directee, highlighting the importance of cultural images and symbols likely to touch on the foundational myths that inform and hold together his or her identity. These are the images and symbols that the spiritual director must allow into a spiritual conversation if the directee is to be stirred up to respond instinctively to the mission of Christ. I now wish briefly to look at some likely implications of what I have just proposed for the spiritual director.

Implications for Spiritual Directors

Spiritual direction, said Daniel Shine, is concerned not only with 'problem solving' (and I would say not so much with problem-solving), but also with the attempt, by both the director and the directee, constantly to advance the intelligibility of the mystery that is the life of the directee.[11]

[11] Daniel J. Shine, 'Direction and the Spiritual Exercises', *Review for Religious*, 25/5 (September 1966), 888–896, here 891.

Piet Penning de Vries—another experienced hand in spiritual direction—said that the director 'does not really lead, but tries to have [the directee] led by the Holy Spirit, and in such a way that the [directee's] sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's direction grows'. The director helps the directee 'to find his bearings within his own experience'. When the directee comes searching for advice about the questions of life and wanting to make choices that might entail personal commitment, or even restriction on personal freedom, then it is the directee's experience that should lead to an intrinsic degree of certainty that is sufficient for discriminating options, not the director's knowledge to extrinsic assurance.[12] The Holy Spirit, who makes that intrinsic certainty possible, will want to use a language that is familiar to the directee. The same Spirit will want to build upon images and symbols already extant in the foundational myths of the directee. Obviously, the implication of this manner of proceeding in spiritual direction is enormous for the director. Whether in a retreat or in regular conversations about a directee's spiritual welfare, the director will be immensely helped if he or she knows something about the context from which the directee is coming.

The Holy Spirit ... will want to use a language that is familiar to the directee

The consequences of what I have said to the director could be summarised in three points. This is a way of focusing on three elements rather than a statement of something new. First, a spiritual director who has not read a single book on spirituality in the last five years might consider giving up the trade. Spiritual directors, whether in Africa or in Alaska, must also be searchers alongside their directees, not people who are satisfied with an immature *guru* status. Spirituality exposes us to bottomless mysteries, whether of God or of our human nature. These we can always understand better without exhausting what is there to be understood. Directors are well advised, therefore, constantly to deepen their understanding of the sources that inspire their practice.

This is hardly a new insight. Early in the nineteenth century the French Jesuit Francis Renault—a renowned retreat director—lamented the ignorance about the book of the *Spiritual Exercises* that some of those who directed Ignatian retreats betrayed. According to his observation, the partially informed directors made all retreats look alike, presenting nothing new no matter what the context. In so doing, they hindered the

[12] Piet Penning de Vries, 'Friendship in Spiritual Direction', *Recherches Ignatiennes (CIS)*, 4/6 (1977), 1–6.

fruitfulness of the retreat, and ended up disgusting their retreatants and ultimately themselves. By contrast, a better understanding of the Exercises made directors nimble, appreciating contexts promptly and adjusting or even adapting contents appropriately. Comparing the director to someone who played a musical instrument, Renault said:

> The marvel, the masterpiece we do not weary of considering. Such are the beauties of nature, and, in the order of grace, the mysteries. Let but a master teach us how to see them, and we cannot tear ourselves away from them. The misfortune is that some among us are not familiar enough with the Book of the Exercises. We are like a beginner, before a fine instrument on which every air can be rendered, the sweetest, or the most intricate, in fact a celestial harmony. But of what use is the instrument to the beginner? He plays his tune indifferently, and if you ask of him for a variation, he complains of the instrument and wants another.[13]

Spiritual directors in Africa need not ask for new instruments, nor even invent them. The major spiritualities that have inspired the practice of direction over the centuries belong to the Church and to humanity, not to 'the West'—whatever is meant by that. Africans must not allow themselves to be excluded from these spiritualities, nor must they exclude themselves from the traditions that are believed to have been specially inspired by God for human use. In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council we all strive to drink directly from the sources of our inspiration, and we do so by constantly seeking a deeper understanding of those sources. In Africa—probably more than in other places—direct access to the original inspirations without dependence on translated media may even facilitate a better transposition into Africa's own cultural contexts. For spiritual directors in the Ignatian tradition, the bottom line is to become masters of the Exercises.

Secondly, every other retreatant or directee who comes to us is as new as a new mission territory. This makes the director's vocation a missionary one, implying the crossing of frontiers and the making of appropriate adjustments. For the director, as for the missionary who goes beyond the limits of the home culture, the ability to adjust will be founded on openness to a new meaning of things already known, to a deeper

[13] Francis Renault, 'On the Study of the Exercises and the Manner of Giving Them: A Letter of Fr Francis Renault to Fr Xavier de Ravignan', 8 December 1831, *Woodstock Letters* (October 1895), 6–7.

understanding of familiar mysteries and to an ever-present need to learn again from scratch. Modras makes the point that,

> To have an impact on people, an effective Jesuit missionary or spiritual director, no less than an effective speaker, had to know when and how to adapt to circumstances.[14]

The importance of the long and arduous preparation through which effective missionaries go before they undertake ministries in foreign cultures cannot be overemphasized. When he said farewell to four Maltese Jesuits who were on their way to Uganda in 1969, Fr Pedro Arrupe, then Superior General of the Society of Jesus, asked the new missionaries to master the local language, saying: 'Even if you have to spend a year and a half learning it, it is worth doing so'.[15] Spiritual directors need enough time to understand the context from which at least their most regular directees come.

It should be obvious that cross-cultural direction demands more preparation. By cross-cultural direction I mean a spiritual encounter where the director and the directee come from two fairly different cultures. It is not my intention to suggest that this kind of direction is impossible. Our shared humanity and our Christian faith connect us in ways that cultures cannot put asunder. In the words of de Vries, 'the meeting between a spiritual director and someone looking for direction' occurs within the space of a 'great ecclesiastical happening' and, thus, 'is never one between two persons who are completely unknown to each other'. Faith, continues de Vries, 'creates a real human bond between people, independent of feelings of personal familiarity or intimacy'.[16]

In fact, if cultural disparity can make the director depend more on the Holy Spirit and be prepared to learn from the process, this could become the best experience of spiritual direction for both the director and the directee. But openness to the Holy Spirit does not take away our responsibility to prepare. While we may read a book or two on spirituality in general, we must also inform ourselves about the histories and cultures of the people we frequently meet in spiritual direction. An active interest in local news, with special attention to events that are likely to have

[14] Modras, 'Spiritual Humanism of the Jesuits', 12.
[15] Archives of the Eastern Africa Province of the Society of Jesus, Paul Mallia, 'The Society of Jesus in Uganda: The First Seven Years, 1969–1979', unpublished memoir, 1991, 4.
[16] de Vries, 'Friendship in Spiritual Direction', 1–2.

an impact on people's spiritual welfare and general well-being, could be equally formative for the director. In an urban context, riding in public transport and spending some time in town squares could be just another way of preparing for spiritual conversation with local people. In one way or another, what one learns in these ways is certain to come up in any serious spiritual conversation.

If time allows, and especially if they are committed to spiritual direction in a place for a fairly long time, spiritual directors will be helped by at least a working knowledge of the local language that is likely to influence their directees' communication, even when their medium of conversation is an international *lingua franca* such as English or French. Such linguistic insertion will save directors from being overly formal and allow their directees to express themselves instinctively. Joshua Titus' spontaneous response, 'Tomorrow, into Zululand, *Nkosi*!' would have sounded weaker and more impersonal if he had simply replaced the Zulu name *Nkosi* with the English *God*. Many will be familiar with the often repeated fact that the terms that Africans use to swear in English are literally unutterable in their mother tongues, except in carefully controlled contexts. In many African cultures, for example, grandparents and aunts have a certain liberty of communication with grandchildren and nieces which parents do not enjoy. Their kind of relationship permits the use of otherwise unutterable terms. Directors in Africa could work to develop spiritual direction as a controlled context in which directees feel free to use restricted terms and images to communicate feelings and emotions.

My third and final point can be taken as an acknowledgement of the great work done by the organizers of the 2012 International Spirituality Conference in Johannesburg, for which this paper was originally written.

Their focus on 'Spiritual Direction in the African Context' was both innovative and commendable. The cultural translation I have proposed will not be attained by individuals acting singly in their own little corners. Spiritual directors in Africa need fora through which they can share their experiences and learn from each other. They need to bring their observations together so that what stand out as challenges and opportunities that are genuinely specific to Africa can be given due attention.

For the moment there is a dearth of sufficiently contextualised material for reference or for the training of spiritual directors in or for Africa. The danger with all pressing needs is that they tend to admit of almost any solution, and the need for spirituality material that is informed by African experiences is not an exception. People involved in spiritual direction can do a lot to promote good-quality research and serious reflection leading to helpful publications in this area. Such publications need to be the fruits of critical reflection on practical experience, not of armchair speculation that is not sufficiently grounded in Africa's spiritual soil.

The only convincing argument Africa will make for changing time-proven traditions is the argument of experience—first, to show that what may have worked elsewhere is not working as well as it should here and, second, to put forward compelling African alternatives. Admittedly, except in some few cases, good spiritual directors with first-hand field experience may not be the best authors, nor good authors the best spiritual directors. If director and author are different individuals, some form of interaction between them will be indispensable. In the long run, the alternatives proposed through such a thorough process will not be restricted to Africa alone. Instead, having being gathered from the African experiences that are genuinely human, they will be offered to the whole of humanity as a development in the understanding of cherished old traditions and a contribution to the ways through which spiritual growth can be sought and found.

To conclude, I take it as charitable to presuppose that people who willingly seek direction have a sincere desire to make progress in their spiritual life. Directors render service to such people, and it is for this reason that I suggest the directee, rather than the director, remain at the centre of spiritual direction. Moreover, directees come trusting that the practice of spiritual direction is based on and sustained by proven, even inspired, traditions, not on theories that are being tried out as they watch.

While the Holy Spirit can still inspire entirely new practices, probably spiritual directors should not be persons overly driven by the zeal to invent. Rather, they should be grounded in traditions they know well, which they apply in contexts they equally know well. In that application, directors render intelligible in one language that which was said in another language, put into new form that which existed in an older form, and make usable in one culture that which was conceived in another culture. And, by thus allowing for the use of words, images and symbols that are instinctively meaningful to directees in a particular context, spiritual directors truly become cultural translators.

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