FORMING DIRECTORS

Training Programme or Apprenticeship?

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HOW SHOULD ONE BEST LEARN to direct the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius? According to John O'Malley's magisterial study of the work of the Society of Jesus in its first decades, the answer initially seemed clear: 'in the early years, therefore, the Jesuits who were deemed suitable for the role [of director] learned it in an apprenticeship system from other Jesuits, with Ignatius being the first master-teacher'.[1] He contrasts this with a slightly later practice recorded in Vienna in 1560 when a certain 'Juan Alfonso Vitoria, who had himself been supervised by Ignatius in Rome, gave to his fellow-Jesuits a series of conferences on the director's role, after each of which they turned in a written composition to show they understood what they had heard and how they would apply it to particular cases'. However, O'Malley notes, this later practice did not become widespread.

If I may start with a personal reflection, my own training to direct the so-called Long Retreat fitted the apprenticeship model.[2] After joining the novitiate in 1978, between 1983 and 1985 I made my 'regency' (an interlude of two or three years' full-time apostolic work that punctuates the protracted period of Jesuit studies) in a retreat house, Craighead, outside Glasgow. There I worked alongside other members of the team, two of whom, Tom McGuinness and a Columban sister called Elizabeth Moran, took particular responsibility for my training. In my first year I was involved mainly with groups: working men attending weekend parish retreats, religious sisters at congregational meetings, students at outreach events in schools and universities.

At the beginning of my second year I took part in the three-month course then offered by St Beuno's, the Jesuit spirituality centre in North Wales. Although this was then principally a sabbatical programme (with

[1] John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1993), 131–132.

[2] The name by which the full Spiritual Exercises in their enclosed, month-long form, made twice by Jesuits in the course of their formation, are commonly known.

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the consequence that I was about thirty years younger than almost everybody else on the course!), it involved making the full Spiritual Exercises again—I had already done so as a novice five years previously—followed by a lengthy shared reflection on the experience. This gave me the invaluable opportunity to hear a large number of other people talk openly and in some depth about what it had been like for them to make the Exercises, and how they had responded to them. Back at the Scottish retreat house, in my second year I gradually did more one-to-one work, under careful supervision.

However, I left to move on to my theological studies, still without ever having directed a full thirty-day retreat. In the remaining years of my Jesuit formation I took what opportunities I could to keep my hand in at spiritual and retreat direction. One year the comparatively short time that I had available for apostolic work was spent as spiritual director to a group of pre-seminarians, studying on the outskirts of London. Later on I had a chance to work on weeks of guided prayer in the Lancaster diocese in north-west England. Eventually, not long before I was ordained, the opportunity to lead two people through the month of the Exercises came up, as part of a group who were doing so under supervision one summer back at St Beuno's. Even with all that, I learnt much more after I was, in 1999, appointed to the team of the Loyola Hall spirituality centre. Engaging in the ministry of retreat direction day in, day out for six years gives a level of experience that is difficult to build up in any other setting.

I offer this perhaps prolonged autobiographical aside not to suggest that this is the only way in which directors of the Exercises can be formed, still less to boast of my own skills, but to illustrate what the idea of an apprenticeship model of formation can look like in a context very different from that of Ignatius and his first companions in the middle decades of the sixteenth century. There is currently no clear and agreed categorisation of the different ways of forming directors, nor a sharp dividing line between apprenticeship and other models. But by way of contrast, I will briefly outline three other possible approaches. Note that, although it might be interesting, and indeed worthwhile, to explore these in the same detail as the apprenticeship model, that is not my intention here.

First, at the time of writing this I am halfway through leading a programme in which six British Jesuits, each of whom joined the Society in the 1990s and was ordained between 2003 and 2008, are directing the full Spiritual Exercises in their enclosed, thirty-day form, mainly for the first time. They are being offered daily supervision, weekly group

reflection, and regular seminars on papers they have read detailing aspects of the Exercises and of the direction process. Each of these men has proven pastoral skills, and has already offered others forms of spiritual and retreat direction. For none, though, has such direction yet been the principal focus of his ministry. For the Jesuit Provincial who called this gathering together, the aim of the programme is to bring the men to a deeper practical knowledge of the Exercises, so that they will be better able to apply this understanding in a wide variety of different ministries and settings. Few are expected to become, in the short term at least, full-time retreat directors. Rather it is hoped that they will be able to reinvigorate their varied apostolic works by drawing on the experience they gain in directing the Exercises in this way.

Another approach to the challenge of forming directors can be illustrated by the example of a group of laypeople who are already members of a strong regional network that has, over recent years, built up much expertise in training people to give weeks of guided prayer. Some of this group would currently like to move on from what they have been doing to become directors of the full Spiritual Exercises, either as enclosed thirty-day retreats or in the form in which they are given 'in daily life', with the guided prayer spread out over a number of months. These members have taken whatever opportunities arise to take part in such training courses as they hope will lead them to this end, and are regularly looking out for further courses of this kind in an attempt to consolidate their developing skills.

Finally there is the rather more radical outlook of Kenneth Leech, an Anglican theologian and Christian socialist. Writing in *The Tablet* in 1993, he argued against what he already saw as the professionalisation of spiritual direction, a trend that has certainly both continued and intensified.[3] Referring back then to his own book *Soul Friend*, originally published in 1977, he wrote 'I stand by my suggestion that the role of "training" is extremely limited, and that this ministry is essentially a by-product of a life of prayer and growth in holiness'.[4] Admittedly, he was not referring specifically to those preparing to direct the Spiritual Exercises, yet what he has to say touches on a number of the concerns of this article. Positively, the apprenticeship model, with its protracted timespan,

[3] Kenneth Leech, 'Viewpoint: Is Spiritual Direction Losing Its Bearings?' *The Tablet* (22 May 1993), 2.
[4] Kenneth Leech, 'Introduction to the Revised Edition', in *Soul Friend: A Study of Spirituality*, rev. edn (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), xvii.

A journeyman and an apprentice, by Johann Andreas Endter, 1600

allows for 'a life of prayer and growth in holiness' to develop alongside, and become the foundation of, those practical skills that I believe can be taught. Negatively, I consider that there are issues about the assessment, and possibly even accreditation, of directors to be faced that I suspect Leech would find inappropriate and perhaps even intrusive. One of his conclusions is that 'Directors play an important but quite a lowly and limited function within the wider context of pastoral care and theological formation'.[5] In the context of Church and society at large this is certainly true, and even within the protected and limited setting of the enclosed Spiritual Exercises the relationship between the exercitant and God is hugely more important than that between the exercitant and the director.[6] Nevertheless here directors do have a significant role, which they downplay at their peril.

To return to the concept of apprenticeship, there is an interesting discussion of this, particularly as it is understood in law, to be found currently on the British government's Revenue and Customs website.[7] It first notes the definition to be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. An apprentice is: 'one who is bound by legal agreement to serve an employer for a period of years, with a view to learn some handicraft, trade etc., in which the employer is reciprocally bound to instruct him'. It develops this idea by outlining a Court of Appeal judgment made in the year 2000, in which the Lord Chief Justice stated:

> A contract of apprenticeship or any equivalent contract is in our judgment a synallagmatic [mutually binding] contract in which the

[5] Leech, *Soul Friend*, xvi.

[6] Ignatius tends to refer to the one who makes (or receives) the Exercises, rather than the retreatant. This is often reduced to the single word 'exercitant', a practice followed in this article.

[7] See www.hmrc.gov.uk/manuals/esmmanual/esm1112.htm, accessed 4 August 2014.

> master undertakes to educate and train the apprentice (or pupil) in the practical and other skills needed to practise a skilled (or learned) profession and the apprentice (or pupil) binds himself to serve and work for the master and comply with all reasonable directions.[8]

There are three points to be found in these definitions that are in my opinion relevant to any discussion of how those who are to direct the Spiritual Exercises might best be formed. They are:

1. that what is being aimed at is the development of 'the practical and other skills needed to practise a skilled (or learned) profession';
2. that the apprenticeship will normally last for 'a period of years';
3. and that central to this formation process is the mutual relationship between the master and the apprentice.

I will consider these in turn.

Firstly, then, although it is certainly true that some degree of theoretical knowledge in such fields as theology, the history of spirituality and psychology can be useful to directors of the Exercises, at the heart of such work is a set of practical skills that can be learnt and refined with practice. Some of the basic skills here are those shared with counselling: accurate and empathetic listening, the capacity to feed back to the one speaking what has been heard, and so on. Others belong more specifically to the sphere of spiritual direction. These are principally skills of discernment, of being able to recognise where God is at work in your own experience or in that of another and stay with that recognition in a way that allows it to deepen. A third set of skills are those proper to the Exercises. These consist of a familiarity with the dynamic of the Exercises as a whole and of the details of their particular meditations and contemplations. These skills will usually be gained through reflection on one's own experience of having made the Exercises, as well as (and normally before) any formal study of them. Such familiarity is what enables the adaptation and application of Ignatius' written text to the personality and circumstances of the particular individual whom you are directing. It is this ability to adapt and apply that is the essence of what it means to be a good director in the Ignatian tradition.

The second feature of an apprenticeship is that it is a long and slow process, refining these practical skills, usually over a period of years.

[8] Edmunds v. Lawson and Others [2000] ICR567.

This is perhaps the key feature that distinguishes an apprenticeship from a training programme, since most such programmes last only for weeks or months (or, if spread over a period of years, are very much part-time). Contemporary popular wisdom suggests that to master a skill it is necessary first to practise it for 10,000 hours, an idea set out in Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers: The Secret of Success*.[9] Certainly a major factor in learning to direct the Exercises is the opportunity *to* direct them, on a number of occasions, with a variety of exercitants, and ideally on a regular basis. It is this, rather than simply an ever-closer scrutiny of the text, that will show trainees, for instance, the variety of forms that the First Week grace, of knowing oneself to be a loved sinner, can take, so preparing them to meet this variety, when encountered, with a flexible range of responses. This kind of long, slow formation also allows ample opportunity for reflection upon the practice as, and after, it is being acquired.

Ample opportunity for reflection upon the practice

The necessity of this reflection points to the third characteristic of formation by apprenticeship noted above, namely the importance of the relationship between the 'master' and the apprentice. (Obviously the master may also be a mistress, and in any case is unlikely to think of him- or herself using either of these terms.) Masters of apprentices are not simply teachers, in the narrow sense of those who pass on a body of knowledge from a syllabus. They will also demonstrate the skills to be acquired, oversee the apprentices' first attempts to implement these, and may well act themselves as role models, giving a sense of what someone who has to a certain degree mastered these skills looks like, how such a person acts and reacts in different situations. In the case of those being prepared to direct the Spiritual Exercises, there are two roles in particular that this calls for, those of consultation and supervision.

Consultation recognises that there are things that those with less experience do not know and can be told: how, for instance, you might best help an exercitant appropriate the sometimes unfamiliar imagery of some of the Ignatian 'set-piece' exercises, such as the Call of the King or the Two Standards. Supervision focuses rather on what the reactions of the director are as he or she works with an exercitant, where the director was engaged, where bored, where feeling anxious or personally consoled. In many ways supervision for the director is a process analogous

[9] Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Secret of Success* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), chapter 2.

to direction for the exercitant, and it serves in part to ensure that the exercitant's journey is not diverted by the cares and concerns of the director being elicited in the course of the direction process and then getting in the way.

Anyone arguing for an apprenticeship model of formation for directors of the Exercises will have to face two related objections: that such a process takes too long, and that it is elitist. There is enough truth in both of these to make them worth addressing.

The kind of formation that I have described here takes years to reach a point where a director might be fully confident of leading another through the programme that Ignatius lays out. In the past, perhaps, this was not seen as so much of a difficulty. Most directors were clerics, members of religious orders or both. Those with the kind of temperament likely to make them good directors could be identified early on in the course of more general clerical or religious formation, and encouraged (or instructed!) to acquire the further skills they would need to pursue this work. At a later stage they might be given opportunities to do this in a way that was closer to full time. This is the kind of path that I have described myself as taking.

Today there are more laypeople who would hope to become directors of the Exercises, many of whom are older when they discover this desire within themselves. They may find it difficult or even impossible to access longer-term apprenticeship training. Is it fair or even just to deny them this ministry on that account? My (unpopular?) answer is that I think it is. No one would expect, at the age of fifty, to set out to become a surgeon if up to that point he or she had had no medical experience whatsoever. Of course, it is possible to pick up many of the skills needed for effective direction of the Exercises in situations other than that of retreat direction or training, and so a relative beginner in these areas might be very far from starting from scratch. But such competences should be checked and assessed, rather than simply assumed to be present in those who offer themselves for this work.

It could be argued that making the apprenticeship model the norm for those desiring to direct the Spiritual Exercises would greatly restrict the number of those able to do so, and that this in turn would severely limit the number of people able to make the full Exercises. This is the basis of a possible charge of elitism. That such direction is a highly labour-intensive apostolate was acknowledged from the outset. Ignatius' response was to be very selective in choosing whom he and those around him would direct. You can see evidence of this within the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* itself. After outlining ways in which something less than the full month-long

experience can be profitable for many, the concluding lines of the Eighteenth Annotation suggest that in many situations limiting what is offered in this way might be worthwhile 'especially [in] the case when there are others with whom greater results can be achieved. There is not sufficient time to do everything.' One response of the Jesuits of the generation after Ignatius was to adapt the Exercises into a series of talks that could be delivered to large numbers simultaneously. This procedure was so successful that it became the norm for the following four centuries, almost totally eclipsing the one-to-one direction that Ignatius himself had so highly valued. Now that the latter has been restored, we again have to face the challenge of the need to select exercitants with great care.

It would take another article to consider adequately the proper place of academic (or quasi-academic) study in an apprenticeship model of director formation. Clearly, for instance, it will not be wise to form directors who are wholly ignorant of theology, not least because they may then tend to regard whatever view of God, and of how God works in the world and in the lives of individuals, they have picked up from their religious education or church membership as self-evidently correct or even normative. In this case they will be ill-prepared to work effectively with the range of outlooks that they are likely to encounter while directing the Exercises.

Yet it is not surprising that Juan Alfonso Vitoria's training programme, consisting of talks and written responses, failed to win widespread support. For direction remains, as outlined here, principally a practical skill, and a neophyte director is more likely to want to address more practical questions of how best to respond to the material offered by the exercitant than to have a detailed comprehension of the theoretical positions that might underpin this material. Nor are exercitants themselves normally helped by the director responding to what they bring in too academic a fashion. The result of all this has been to establish something of a gulf between the teaching programmes in direction favoured and run by practitioners, and the courses in spirituality offered by universities and seminaries. Although attempts have been made to bring these together (the three-year course currently offered by the London Spirituality Centre is a good example of this), much remains to be done in this regard.[10]

A perceptive reader[11] of an earlier draft of this paper asked whether I was intending here simply to describe an apprenticeship model of the

[10] See www.spiritualitycentre.org/index.php/developing/artsd, accessed 6 August 2014.
[11] Rob Marsh SJ.

formation of directors of the Exercises, or to advocate it. I find this a difficult question to answer. I certainly believe that apprenticeship has much to commend it, not least in that it is the method with the longest history and is to that extent tried and tested. Yet it was originally rooted in a culture of more general clerical and religious formation that scarcely exists any longer. In those parts of the world where numbers entering seminaries and novitiates are small, there is a pressure to move those being formed into ministry more quickly than this somewhat leisurely method allows. And where the numbers entering are still large, there are often too few formed and skilled 'masters' to mentor the apprentices in this way. It will certainly be difficult, although not perhaps impossible, for any layperson to have access to the length and level of experience that this pattern of formation presupposes.

I have argued, nonetheless, that it may be more useful to think of the process involved in forming people to direct the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises as an apprenticeship, rather than as a training programme. This does have particular implications for the length of such formation, for the content being offered and for the relationship between the one offering the formation and the one being trained. Such an understanding is likely to limit the numbers of those who can be formed in this way, which may in turn reduce the availability of opportunities to engage in the full Exercises themselves. If this meant that directors would have to become more selective in deciding who might be offered the experience, in my view this conclusion would not worry Ignatius. Towards the end of his life, he is said to have regretted only having let so many men enter the religious order he had founded (numbers increased from 10 in 1540 to around 1,000 at the time of Ignatius' death in 1556). Might he perhaps not look at our present situation, and regret that so many people are today being encouraged to make the Long Retreat?

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