

FORMING SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS THROUGH AN ACADEMIC COURSE

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IN 2000, SENTIR GRADUATE COLLEGE of Spiritual Formation, one of the ten colleges of the University of Divinity in the south and east of Australia, became the first tertiary institution in the country to offer a Master of Arts in Spiritual Direction (MASD), with an initial group of eight students.¹ Sentir, of which I am dean, now has 132, mostly part-time, students enrolled in its various courses.² With fourteen years of experience on which to reflect, what have we learnt about forming spiritual directors through an academic course? I shall begin by exploring the major changes that have occurred in the ministry of the Spiritual Exercises over the last fifty years with regard to laypeople. Then, drawing on our experience at Sentir, three questions will be addressed:

1. How have we responded to the desire of laypeople, Jesuits and other religious to be formed as givers of the Spiritual Exercises?
2. Are there benefits to forming spiritual directors under the auspices of a tertiary institution?
3. Does formation as a spiritual director fit well in an academic course?

One Woman's Question

In 1957, Hildegard Ehrtmann, a 26-year-old social worker from Hamburg, travelled to Cleveland, Ohio, to attend a three-month study programme

¹ Sentir Graduate College of Spiritual Formation was at that time called the Christian Spirituality Centre. The University of Divinity—which gained university status in 2012—was then called the Melbourne College of Divinity. Sentir is a work of the Australian Province of the Society of Jesus and now operates from three sites: Campion Centre of Ignatian Spirituality (Melbourne), WellSpring Centre (Melbourne) and Faber Centre of Ignatian Spirituality (Brisbane). We also teach from time to time at Xavier Retreat House (Cheung Chau Island, Hong Kong) and the Centre for Ignatian Spirituality and Counselling (Singapore). To learn more see: <http://www.sentir.edu.au>.

² About 20 per cent of our students are from Asia-Pacific. We currently have overseas students from China, Hong Kong, Singapore, East Timor, Japan, the Philippines and New Zealand.



Hildegard Ehrtmann

offered by the Council of International Programs for Youth Leaders and Social Workers. There she discovered the Cleveland Alumni Sodality,³ a group of young professional men and women who met under guidance of a Jesuit, Joseph Schell, from John Carroll University. Hildegard was attracted by their commitment to social justice and spirituality, and asked to join the group. They agreed and suggested that, rather than try to understand Ignatian spirituality theoretically, she make a retreat, which she did. She stayed on in Cleveland at the end

of her study period to take a two-year introductory programme about Ignatian spirituality. She hoped to discover whether the Ignatian way of life was for her.

Although the young men and women of the Cleveland Alumni Sodality had made annual eight-day retreats since the early 1950s, none had made the thirty-day retreat. Hildegard, having heard about the full Spiritual Exercises, asked why the laity did not make them. Inspired by Hildegard's question, the group decided that they wanted to make the full Spiritual Exercises themselves. They asked a Jesuit if he would direct them. Faced with this unusual request, the Jesuit asked his Provincial. He did not know how to respond either, so he asked the local bishop. The bishop was sufficiently disturbed by the suggestion that laypersons be allowed to make the thirty-day retreat in his diocese that he suspended the Cleveland Alumni Sodality. Undaunted by his 'No', the group simply moved to another diocese. In June–July 1959, Hildegard and the other nine members made the thirty-day retreat with a Jesuit, Fr Mulhern, at the convent of the Precious Blood Sisters in Marywood, Ohio. According to Joseph Tetlow, who was the head of Fr General's Secretariat for Ignatian Spirituality in Rome for eight years, they were probably the first lay people to make the thirty-day retreat in the modern era.

Returning to Germany in 1960, Hildegard gave the Spiritual Exercises to individuals, and from 1964 worked with the Christian Life Community

³ Sodalities were the forerunners of Christian Life Community.

(CLC), and helped Jesuits to give the Spiritual Exercises to laypeople. In 1971 she and a Jesuit, Alex Lefrank, developed a one-year programme to form laypersons and secular priests to give spiritual direction and the Spiritual Exercises. Later improved and extended to two years, this programme has subsequently been given many times. As a member of the Executive of the World CLC from 1970 to 1979, Hildegard's major concern was to form laypersons in the Ignatian way of life and to develop international formation programmes for lay givers of the Exercises.

Hildegard's story illustrates the major changes in the ministry of the Spiritual Exercises over the last fifty years:

- Laypersons now make the full Spiritual Exercises, either over thirty days or in daily life.
- Laypersons now give the full Spiritual Exercises.
- Laypersons, Jesuits and other religious now work together in the ministry of the Exercises.
- Laypersons, Jesuits and other religious now work as colleagues to form givers of the Exercises.

It is clear that spiritual direction, which has a long and revered history in the Christian tradition, is a ministry in the Church that is becoming increasingly open to properly formed laypersons, who now work alongside vowed religious and ordained ministers. This is a major shift. How has the Society of Jesus responded to this changing context?

Cooperation with the Laity in Mission

General Congregations are usually called when the Society of Jesus needs to elect a new General. They also address other issues, such as helping Jesuits understand their shared identity, vocation and mission in a changing world. There have been 35 since the Society of Jesus was founded. From January to March of 1995, 223 Jesuits from 61 countries met in Rome for the 34th General Congregation (GC34). Their task was to chart a vision for the Jesuits in a changing context.

Decree 13 of GC34, 'Cooperation with the Laity in Mission' states that 'A reading of the signs of the times since the Second Vatican Council shows unmistakably that the Church of the next millennium will be called the "Church of the Laity"'.⁴ The decree goes on to explore what this is likely to mean:

⁴ General Congregation 34, decree 13, n. 1, in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today*.

The present moment is a moment of grace. As lay people continue to grow in their service to the world, the Society of Jesus will find opportunities for cooperation with them reaching far beyond our present experience. We will be stretched in our creativity and energy to serve them in their ministry. We will be called upon to take a supportive role as they become more responsible for our own apostolates. We will be challenged to live out more fully our identity as men for and with others For this we must increasingly shift the focus of our attention from the exercise of our own direct ministry to the strengthening of laity in their mission. To do so will require of us an ability to draw out their gifts and to animate and inspire them. Our willingness to accept this challenge will depend on the strength of our Jesuit companionship and on a renewal of our response to the call of Christ to serve his mission.⁵

Decree 13 also affirms: 'Putting ourselves at the service of the apostolate of the laity challenges us. We need to respond to their desire for formation so that they are able to minister as fully as possible according to their call and gifts.'⁶ Formation of the laity remains one of the key challenges for Jesuits.

In the mid-1990s two trends became clear in the Australian context. First, some laypersons who had made the Exercises were beginning to ask how they could be formed to give them. Second, the Australian Province of Jesuits was aging and, as a result, the number of Jesuits available for the retreat ministry was diminishing. It was obvious that forming the laity to give the Spiritual Exercises was critical if the ministry was going to flourish in the future. So a group of us from the retreat team at Campion Centre of Ignatian Spirituality in Melbourne began to shift the focus of our attention from our own direct ministry to strengthening the laity in their mission as givers of the Spiritual Exercises.

In 1997 we designed what we called the Arrupe Program for Forming Spiritual Directors in the Ignatian Tradition. Initially we gave our own certificate on completion of this non-award course. However, in 1999 we negotiated with the University of Divinity for the Arrupe Program to become a recognised tertiary award—a Master of Arts in Spiritual Direction. The MASD has, to some extent, been at the forefront of professionalising the ministry of spiritual direction in Australia.⁷ But is that a good thing? Is spiritual direction not a charism rather than a profession?

⁵ General Congregation 34, decree 13, nn. 18 and 19, in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today*.

⁶ General Congregation 34, decree 13, n. 8, in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today*.

⁷ For an excellent article on this topic see Bruce Lescher, 'The Professionalization of Spiritual Direction: Promise and Peril', *Listening*, 32/2 (1997), 81–90.

Spiritual Direction: Profession or Charism?

In February 2003 I attended a week-long meeting in Rome on Ignatian spirituality. Fr General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach gave the keynote address and, after he had spoken, he took questions from the group. One Jesuit asked him, 'Fr General, should every Jesuit be formed to give the Spiritual Exercises?' 'Thank you for that question', Fr General replied, smiling. 'I think it would be better if some Jesuits did not give the Spiritual Exercises.' There were chuckles in the lecture hall, but Fr Kolvenbach was not in any way denigrating certain Jesuits. He went on to explain that giving the Spiritual Exercises is a charism and that not all Jesuits have that gift. They should, of course, be formed in the Exercises and have their lives transformed by experiencing them, but not all are called to give them. Some Jesuits are called to express their ministerial identities as administrators, others as educators, pastors, refugee advocates, missionaries, academics, writers, journalists, psychologists, social workers, chaplains and so on. Others are called to give the Exercises—and so are some laypeople.

Accreditation of Spiritual Directors

In the past it was normally vowed religious and priests who gave spiritual direction. In the eyes of a person coming for direction, membership of a religious congregation or priestly ordination authorised the person for that ministry and was regarded as a sort of guarantee of the spiritual director's good standing, skill and competence. But as the number of vowed religious and priests giving spiritual direction has declined and the number of laypersons being formed as spiritual directors has increased, it has become clear that other structures are needed so that the quality of spiritual direction and the good standing of spiritual directors can be assured.

I see four main structures of quality assurance for spiritual directors: a code of ethics to guide the ministry of spiritual direction; standards for the formation of spiritual directors against which formation programmes can be evaluated; recognised qualifications from a higher education provider; and supervision of ministry practice.⁸

Forming Spiritual Directors through an Academic Course

Forming spiritual directors through an academic course in a university setting has a number of educational and organizational benefits, particularly in relation to this need for quality assurance.

⁸ The Australian Ecumenical Council for Spiritual Direction, which is the central association for the spiritual direction community in the country, has produced a nationally recognised Code of Ethics and Standards for the Formation of Spiritual Directors. To learn more see: www.spiritualdirection.org.au.

A recognised qualification. Students who graduate from Sentir receive an official *testamur* and an academic transcript from the University of Divinity. When the majority of spiritual directors were priests and religious there was little need of such accreditation. As more and more laypeople are being formed as spiritual directors, it is becoming increasingly important. And this is becoming relevant to priests and religious as well as laity, as professional standards become an important issue for our Church today.

Financial help. Many students on our spiritual direction courses are eligible for student loans from the Australian Federal Government. These loans make it possible for Sentir to charge realistic tuition fees that students only begin to repay when their incomes reach an indexed threshold. Without these the cost of tuition would probably discourage students, or limit intake to those who could find funding from other sources, such as religious congregations.

Academic rigour. Being part of a university helps maintain the academic standards of courses. At Sentir, our units of study are subject to scrutiny by the university's Learning and Teaching Committee. We are required regularly to update and refine our unit descriptions, learning outcomes, assessment tasks, bibliographies and so on. Scrutiny by academics from other colleges within the university challenges us to maintain academic rigour.

Audits. Sentir has been audited three times by the university over its fourteen-year history. Audit panels have reviewed our governance, evaluated our courses and interviewed our faculty and students. Although onerous, compliance with the recommendations of audit panels has helped us become more professional and offer better formation to our students.

Research. A university setting allows students to undertake serious research at masters and doctoral levels. Such research is essential for the growth and development of the ministry of spiritual direction.

Academic cooperation. Within the University of Divinity students are able to access units of study offered by other colleges, especially in scripture, and systematic and practical theology, disciplines that are important in the formation of spiritual directors.

Development of new courses. At Sentir we have developed a Graduate Certificate in Supervision, because we see competent supervision as vital for the flourishing of the ministry of spiritual direction. We have also developed a Graduate Certificate in Leadership that helps students integrate Ignatian spirituality and organizational practice.

Administrative systems. The administrative systems of the university enable those providing formation to keep accurate records of students and the units they have studied, their results and so on. Students also have the opportunity to access online teaching resources.

Does Formation Fit Well in an Academic Course?

It would be an easy fit if spiritual direction was just a series of listening skills and helping competencies that could be taught to almost anyone who enrolled in the relevant academic course. But formation as a spiritual director is not that simple. Spiritual direction is more than a set of skills and competencies. As Fr Kolvenbach noted, being a giver of the Exercises is a call. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit that has to be discerned. The Jesuit spiritual writer David L. Fleming states, ‘spiritual direction is rooted in God’s call first and our response to God’s call’.⁹ Spiritual direction is a charism given to a particular person for use in serving the people of God. Fleming notes:

Persons also receive confirmation of this gift in a normal human way by means of other people with whom they live and work identifying it and calling for its use. Commonly, people who have some intimations of a God-given discerning ability find that others seek them out and want to share their life situation, joys and difficulties with them and value their counsel, advice, and support in their own attempt to grow as Christians.¹⁰

At Sentir we place a high priority on carefully screening applicants for our courses in spiritual direction.¹¹ Can they demonstrate a calling to this ministry? Do people seek them out for spiritual conversation? Are they kind and generous in relating to others? Can they ‘help souls’, as St Ignatius would say? Do they have a deep life of prayer? Do they—whether layperson, Jesuit, religious or secular priest—have the personal and interpersonal gifts that could be developed and honed in a formation programme for spiritual directors? The authenticity of a student’s call needs to be discerned by the faculty in conversation with the student, not only when he or she applies but also during the course. An academic course may assist a student to develop the skills necessary to be a spiritual director, but only if he or she has a call to this ministry. In the final analysis, God is the one who forms a spiritual director and the course facilitates that process.

One example of the importance that Sentir attaches to a person’s relationship with God is that all candidates who wish to be formed as directors in the Ignatian tradition must have made the full Spiritual Exercises before they apply. If they have been open to encountering God in the Exercises, they will have already had a formative, even transformative,

⁹ David L. Fleming, ‘Spiritual Direction: Charism and Ministry’, in *The Christian Ministry of Spiritual Direction*, edited by David L. Fleming (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1988), 4.

¹⁰ Fleming, ‘Spiritual Direction’, 5.

¹¹ At Sentir we also screen students who apply to enter our supervision course. We do not screen those who apply to study spirituality as an academic discipline.

experience. As Fr Kolvenbach notes, God can work through the Exercises: ‘to convert, to change, to transform utterly in love’.¹² That is what we look for in an applicant: one who has had a transformative encounter with God, who knows the inner landscape of his or her soul, and who has the capacity to help others on the journey. Clearly, not everyone who has made the Exercises has the ability to ‘help souls’, but for those with that aptitude, the transformative experience of making the full Spiritual Exercises is an excellent foundation for formation as a spiritual director.

Three Interrelated Dynamics of Formation as a Spiritual Director

So, does formation as a spiritual director fit well in an academic course? We think it can if the following three interrelated dynamics are in place.

The first of these is personal spiritual formation in a supportive faith-learning community. The hub of Sentir is located in Melbourne at the Campion Centre of Ignatian Spirituality. Students come from all over Australia and overseas, and live in during our five-day intensive courses. During these courses we strive to create a community centred on the Eucharist, prayer and faith-sharing, in which students feel safe and supported in their spiritual formation. We believe that the important questions of formation are best addressed in a respectful and encouraging atmosphere. In such an environment faculty can ask whether the student is:



Interrelated Dynamics of Formation as a Spiritual Director in the Ignatian Tradition

¹² Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, ‘Discourse on Exercises and Co-workers, 18 February 2002’, *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* (CIS), 99 (2002), 25–33, here 33.

- open to God's transformative love;
- willing to relinquish false images of God and self and take on truer ones;
- transparent in conversation;
- willing to change his or her view of the world, given new evidence;
- willing to be vulnerable;
- open to experiencing the intimacy of deep spiritual conversation;
- willing to have his or her frames of reference challenged;
- willing to take risks in his or her spiritual direction practice, make mistakes and learn from them.

We think that a student will be more open to addressing such questions in a supportive faith-learning community. Many of our former students remain friends long after they have completed the course. We attribute this in part to their positive experience of the community at Campion.

The second dynamic is supervised practice of abilities, skills and capabilities as a spiritual director. Spiritual direction is an art that needs to be learnt under careful supervision. Those who form spiritual directors in the Ignatian tradition need to see the student in action and give him or her feedback. This is done in supervised triad groups, in role-plays and, most importantly, in supervised giving of the Exercises themselves. It is in supervision that the capacity to adapt the Exercises to the needs of an exercitant, and to focus on and respond sensitively to religious experience, is best learnt. When students return home they are supervised at their local Centre of Ignatian Spirituality, or remotely by Skype. In this way we remain in close and supportive contact with our students.

The third dynamic is knowledge and understanding. Spiritual directors in the Ignatian tradition must know the language and the schemas of the Spiritual Exercises, and must have read about, appropriated and written on their structure, dynamic and process. But that is not enough. There are other frameworks that have to be appropriated. Theological learning is one of these. Ideally, a student who applies to be formed as a spiritual director in one of our postgraduate courses will already have a degree in theology. Students whose undergraduate degrees are in disciplines other than theology are required to study foundational units in systematic theology and biblical studies in addition to their studies in spiritual direction.

Theological Foundations for Spiritual Direction

What did Saint Teresa of Ávila look for in a spiritual director? She thought that a director had to be experienced in the spiritual life, but she also

greatly valued the guidance of a person who had solid theological learning. David L. Fleming notes:

There is a tradition that St Teresa of Avila identified that a director should possess a certain theological foundation as the most essential quality for giving good spiritual direction From her experience, Teresa knew that pious sanctity or the good-willed attempt to help another was not enough for proper spiritual direction. And so her careful distinction about the more essential quality in a spiritual director was not to deny the good of a certain holiness of life lived by the director, but to stress that the director must also possess a certain theological acumen. Teresa's sense of criteria I would hold to be even more essential for today's spiritual director than in previous ages.¹³

St Ignatius Loyola, Teresa's contemporary, had his conversion experience at the age of 31. He then made a pilgrimage from Loyola to Montserrat. He settled in the small town of Manresa where he spent eleven months—from March 1522 to February 1523—composing the *Spiritual Exercises*. He also began to engage in spiritual conversations with laypersons, using his Exercises as a basis. He was later brought before the Spanish Inquisition and quizzed about what he was doing. While the Inquisition could find nothing unorthodox or inconsistent in his Exercises, when he was released he was told to avoid ministering to others and teaching about prayer.

Ignatius realised that he needed a solid theological education. So he spent ten years studying. Beginning with schoolboy Latin and Greek in Barcelona, he progressed to the University of Alcalá, then to the University of Salamanca. He finished his studies at the University of Paris, at that time the premier university in Europe, where he gained a masters degree. Did Ignatius study theology for the sake of his personal credibility? Was it to defend himself against the Inquisition? Did he study in order to continue his ministry unhindered by the Inquisition? To each of these questions I would answer yes. But Ignatius also realised that his studies were helping him to become even better at helping souls, and he says so in his *Autobiography*: 'After the pilgrim had learned that it was God's will that he should not stay in Jerusalem, he pondered in his heart what he should do and finally decided to study for a time in order to be able to help souls'.¹⁴ His theological education provided him with the language and frameworks that made him more effective in spiritual conversation, which he saw as the heart of ministry.

¹³ Fleming, 'Spiritual Direction', 8.

¹⁴ *Autobiography*, n. 50.

Our goal at Sentir for all our spiritual direction students to become, like Ignatius, adept at spiritual conversation. To do this they will need to know the inner landscape of their own souls, have a deep understanding of the Spiritual Exercises and have given the Exercises under careful supervision. They will need to know the limits of directing others spiritually and be able to determine when a directee should be referred to other helping professionals. We also expect that they will have an informed understanding of sacred scripture, systematic theology, the theological agenda of Vatican II, the communal dimensions of sin and justice, and the primary authors in the Christian spiritual tradition, as well as relevant psychological frameworks.

A Personal Encounter with Jesus

In 1548 Pope Paul III gave canonical approval to the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*. He wrote that ‘they are filled with godliness and holiness, and are highly appropriate for the improvement and spiritual edification of the faithful’.¹⁵ In *Evangelii gaudium* (‘The Joy of the Gospel’), 465 years later, Pope Francis wrote: ‘I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them’.¹⁶ The Spiritual Exercises invite the one who makes them to an intimate and life-transforming encounter with Jesus. But how can this precious resource be made more available? The vision of GC34—that the Church of the next millennium would be the ‘Church of the Laity’—is being borne out in the ministry of the Spiritual Exercises. Not only are laypersons making the Exercises, they are also giving them and forming others to give them.

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¹⁵ Paul III, *Pastoralis officii* (31 July 1548), MHSJ MI Exx, 77.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n.3.