

THE COUNSELLOR, THE DIRECTOR AND THE ANNOTATIONS

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THE SCOPE of this paper is extremely limited. All that I wish to establish is that the basic personal qualities and attitudes that make for good and effective counselling are the same as those that make for good and effective spiritual direction; and that this is especially true of the spiritual direction in the interviews between the one who gives and the one who makes the Spiritual Exercises. It will be necessary, then, to focus on the personal qualities, capabilities and attitudes of the director, indicating some of the problem-areas of any 'helper', and hence for the spiritual director. This will illustrate the congruence between counselling and spiritual direction. Next, I hope to elucidate certain misapprehensions concerning counselling and spiritual direction, with reference to the Annotations of the Spiritual Exercises; and subsequently to portray three necessary and sufficient conditions for effective counselling and their application to spiritual direction, in the light of the Annotations. Finally, I will essay a brief judgment concerning the congruence of the attitudes and personal qualities demanded by both counselling and spiritual direction for helpful effectiveness.

For better, for worse?

Decades ago, William James said that few people utilize more than ten per cent of the potential in their lives. Many have since repeated the statement. Few have successfully challenged it. It might be fascinating to relate James's statement to those who come to receive the Exercises, and, indeed, to ourselves. What we ordinarily call 'normal', it has been claimed, is really a psycho-pathology of the average. So widespread, accepted and undramatic is the 'normal', that we do not even notice dormant potential, or worry at the lack of feasible human and spiritual development. Too easily we accept stunted human beings as all that can be expected. We are too readily

satisfied that we simply function, rather than that we be fully-functioning people. It is not hard for us to recognize them when we meet them: the functioning, yet neither fulfilled nor fulfilling, living yet not alive, dying and yet not dead. They walk through our doors and shake our hands, and make (or attempt to make) the Exercises. We are those same people ourselves.

So what are we to say of our daily interview with those to whom we give the Exercises? Research shows that, on the average, those who help others professionally fail because they lack to a significant degree the basic skills required for fostering authentic human relations. We too can be false rather than genuine in our dealings in the daily interview. We can be vague and general rather than concrete and specific. We can fail in human warmth and respect, unable to see the world through the eyes of those we presume to guide. At times, we also do not know how to share ourselves, to be open in our relationships, how gently and responsibly to confront a person, how to help the other to build up a workable plan that might lead to more fulfilling or effective ways of living.

Again, competent research suggests that people in need are as likely to be rehabilitated without help as with it. More grim is the realization that the help given is never neutral: it is for better or for worse. If I find a skilled helper, I am likely to be helped to live more effectively. That is, I improve. However, if the person I meet is a 'low-level' helper, it is quite likely that I shall get worse; and our researchers, out of their objectivity, demonstrate that the average, experienced, academically-qualified helper is a 'low-level' helper: that is, one whose core-skills in the helping-process, such as genuineness, concreteness, accurate empathy and respect, cannot compare with those of the caring parent, for instance, or the old-fashioned family physician.

Inter-personal relations

A recent national study of roman catholic priests in the United States (1971) indicated that seventy per cent of those assessed belonged to the 'under-developed' category. One of the focal areas of deprivation concerned inter-personal relationships. Not that this means priests are poor human beings, or that they are any worse (or better) than other helpers. On the contrary, one of the conclusions was that priests in the U.S.A. are ordinary men. The problem is that 'ordinary men' do not in general make effective helpers. These studies, at least, raise questions about what I do, or think I do, in the daily interview.

How to get to grips with the psycho-pathology of the average in regard to inter-personal relations? There seems to be enough proof

that getting on well with others does not just happen. We have to learn how to interact and how to develop skills in relating well with one another. It would seem important for one who gives the Exercises to be aware of ways of putting people in more effective touch with each other and especially with themselves.

It is a commonplace now to suggest to people making the Exercises that if possible they do not come to make their retreat 'straight from work'; that they take a day or two to unwind. At least the giver of the Exercises will suggest that the retreatant catch up on necessary rest and sleep, and not move immediately into four or five hours of formal prayer daily (cf Annotations 12 and 13, and the Additions); for example, 'as far as age, health, and physical constitution permit the exercitant to do so, he will use five exercises each day, or fewer' (Exx 205); and the retreatant will gradually work up to that, as he or she relaxes and settles into the rhythm of the Exercises. The more relaxed and 'at home' the person is, the more potentially 'in effective touch' with his or her own self, and able to meet the Lord at these deeper levels.

Cognitive versus affective formation?

In the study already mentioned, it was evident that the priests' formation had been concentrated on the cognitive, despite the fact that they were being trained for a profession demanding a range of practical skills. They had received practically no training in human relations skills, and what little they had received was very haphazard or unsystematic. Hardly surprising then, that the training produced 'underdeveloped' or 'ordinary (single) men'. Another research programme discovered that the training-model of most departments of clinical psychology does not produce effective helpers, however well qualified they may be academically. It is an interesting study, in that the students entering the departments studied were relatively highly-skilled in their human relations: that is, they were above the 'average man' of the priests' study. But even for them, in the area of human relations skills, their study had been 'for worse'. After a year they had lost ground significantly. Their original skills in human relations were effectively diminished. One of the reasons why the students had become less skilful was that their instructors were operating at even lower levels of effectiveness. Training or formation programmes weighted on the side of the cognitive, and run by people who themselves lack basic helping skills, do more harm than good. What is needed is not just a good or better formation programme, but a radical and effective planning which takes account of the whole context in which such training should take place.

Why are so few of us more than 'ordinary men'? One reason is that when those unskilled in human relations get together with others similarly unskilled (especially in the intimacy of marriage and family life, or other forms of community living, to which may be added the intimacy of the retreat interview), no human growth takes place; and, moreover, their effects on one another can become destructive. No human contact is neutral: they are all for better or worse. If the important people in my life from my earliest days have been significantly lacking in their ability to express respect, care, genuineness and understanding, then not only do I fail to develop these skills myself, but I also come to see myself, for example, as unworthy of care. After all, no one gives it to me.

When is help genuine?

How then are people helped? One answer is by being trained in the skills they need to live their lives — with all their daily complexities — more effectively. Outstanding here are the skills needed for effective involvement with others. It is a well-known fact, for example, that often marriages break up or at least go sour, because the couple do not know how to get on with each other, or how to cope with children, or share their problems. Carl Rogers, the grand old man of counselling, has defined counselling as a 'definitely structured permissive relationship which allows the client to gain an understanding of himself to a degree which enables him to take new positive steps in the light of his new orientation'. Others would place greater stress than this on the interaction between the counsellor and client, and, within certain limits, on a more positive direction on the part of the counsellor. Spiritual direction might be defined as the attempt to help a person grow in prayerful response to the Spirit, i.e. growth in lived dialogue with the Lord. At the head of the book it is stated: 'Spiritual Exercises to conquer oneself and set one's life in order without being influenced by any inordinate attachment' (Exx 21). David Fleming paraphrases it thus: 'The structure of these exercises has the purpose of leading a person to a true spiritual freedom. We attain this goal by gradually bringing an order of values into our lives so that we make no choice or decision because we have been influenced by some disordered attachment or love'.

It is good to see the similarity or overlap that exists between regular counselling and what goes on in the daily retreat interview. In both, we are trying to assist the other towards what he or she 'desires' (cf Exx 104, etc). It will be useful to consider first what is primarily excluded by both to enable us to eliminate those popular misconceptions which can result in false expectations. There is

always the subtle danger that inexperienced retreat-guides and counsellors are tempted to live up to such expectations, either their own or those of others.

Some good advice

Neither counselling nor spiritual direction is primarily the giving of advice. This would be to presume that each 'client' already possesses their own resources for achieving significant change or even life-choices. With regard to the Exercises, St Ignatius insists:

The one who gives the Exercises must not direct the one who makes them more towards poverty or any promise than to their contraries, nor to one state or way of life more than to another. For although, outside the Exercises, we may lawfully and meritoriously direct all those who are probably fitted for it, to choose continence, virginity, the religious life, and every form of evangelical perfection; nevertheless, during these Spiritual Exercises, in seeking the divine will, it is more fitting and much better that the same Creator and Lord communicate himself to the faithful soul, by taking it up into his love and praise, and disposing it for the way in which it will be able better to serve him in the future; thus he who gives them should not lean or incline to one side or the other; rather, remaining in the middle, like the pointer of a balance, he should leave the Creator to work directly with the creature, and the creature with his Creator and Lord (Exx 15).

The point is that I can derive great satisfaction from giving advice. I can feel constructive. I can see myself as doing something useful. And the danger is that I may be submerging my own feelings of not knowing what to do. In other words, for the counsellor or retreat-giver, the temptation is to think that I must always be in control, and never allow myself to experience any doubt or uncertainty.

Another danger is that I only half listen to the other. I am so busy developing plans and advice that I never listen with real attention to what the other is saying. Unfortunately, he or she may be only too willing to connive with me, only too anxious to have me in the role of advice-giver. At the same time, an interview that begins with phrases like 'I wonder if you can give me some advice about . . .?' may be only a way of starting and not necessarily nor in actual fact a plea for advice. Again, even when the person does *bona fide* ask advice, he or she usually has sought it without profit from many others before me. I am as unlikely as they were to satisfy, by the same means, such a person's need.

Getting things straight

Counselling and spiritual direction are not primarily about influencing beliefs or behaviour by means of persuasive arguments or firmly-uttered convictions, direct or indirect. It is very hard for past or present teachers to appreciate this. Again, the one who comes to see me may be only too happy to allow me the role of persuader. Such people wish to abdicate their responsibility for making their own decisions. Students in particular can operate at the cognitive level, arguing for hours and thereby successfully avoiding the essential aspect of their predicament which lies at the emotional level. As Ignatius has it, 'it is not abundance of knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but sensing and tasting things interiorly' (Exx 2).

There are occasions when it may be necessary to deal with matters of fact at the cognitive level before any real work can be done at other levels. Such discussion needs to be seen rather as a necessary preparation for counselling or spiritual direction. Yet even so, it is much more beneficial once the other has explored and is really 'in touch with' his or her own affective levels. As a general rule, premature argument, persuasion and the like are more inclined to create the situation in which the affective level is closed off and left unexplored.

Problem-solving

When we look at counselling and the retreat-interview more carefully, it often comes as a surprise to discover that neither are concerned, as a rule, with 'problem-solving'. Both as counsellor and giver of the Exercises, I can hardly start solving problems until I have come to know the person better. In other words, problem-solving makes sense only when a good relationship, and good self-knowledge on the part of the other, has been established. In counselling, the relationship is primarily that between the counsellor and the client. In the retreat, it is between the Lord and the one making the Exercises; and the retreatant, in the daily interview, invites the director into his or her relationship with the Lord, thereby creating a secondary relationship of lesser importance.

Despite the different contexts in which they generally operate, both counsellor and spiritual director approach problems and decisions in a similar manner: that is, by helping the other to situate the problem in the personal 'life-context'. I encourage the person in a variety of ways to begin to ask questions such as 'who am I?', 'what do I want of life?', 'what do I want to give to life?'.

This is not to say that the person's problems are unimportant; rather, I must realize that the more one tends to focus or concentrate

on the problem or decision to be made, the more intractable it is likely to become. Often the reason is that problems emphasize the person's weaknesses, insecurities and immaturities. To focus on them can thus undermine confidence and ability to think clearly or to act decisively.

From problem to mystery

A counsellor's questions concerning identity often pose themselves, for the giver of the Exercises, in the form of 'prayer-questions': 'who is the Lord for me?', or 'who am I for the Lord?'. With the Lord as centre, the one making the Exercises senses more clearly (that is, with knowledge of the heart, not merely of the head) not so much the personal weaknesses and the blockage they tend to cause, but rather the Lord's strong love and generous sensitivity, which is seen and experienced personally as the strength of the one making the Exercises. It is a love and sensitivity which accepts the retreatant's own weakness, whilst at the same time calling the person to a new creativity. In the Lord's strength and generosity, the maker of the Exercises becomes free of the bondage of the problem, and senses a freedom and creativity as coming from himself. This would appear to be the purpose of the Principle and Foundation — to assist those who make the Exercises in discovering their own true centres, life-principle, the foundation of their values and attitudes, and in such a manner that they experience the mystery we call God.

A question of focus

In giving the Exercises to someone who comes full of the problem to be solved or the decision to be made, it is good to accept that here is where the retreatant is. My tendency then is gently to suggest casting aside the burden for a time rather than seeking a solution. Better to look at the Lord and to respond to him. Surprisingly, the problem exists simply because the person worries too much about it. A change of focus from myself or my preoccupation, in order to look at the Lord, is often the first step in being able to relax a little, and to discover those deeper levels of self and strengths that have been obscured.

Another helpful suggestion may quite simply be that the Lord himself will let them know whether and when to take up their problem or decision again in the course of the retreat. Often the solution arrives unheralded without any further mention of it in the interview, or even formally in prayer.

Building up the facts

One need hardly say that counselling and spiritual direction are not the same as questioning; certainly not the same as interrogating. The inexperienced have a tendency to direct a flow of questions at the poor unfortunate opposite them. Very often this merely results in the other person feeling cross-examined or under attack, and consequently hostile towards the helper. Where this happens, certainly the information given will not be worth the degree of hostility engendered. Sometimes this resorting to interrogation simply means that the helper is at a loss what else to do. At other times questions are asked in the mistaken belief that one must amass as much factual information as possible about the person, if effective help is to be given. Ignatius suggests that the one giving the Exercises should resist asking about the private thoughts and sins of the exercitant (Exx 17).

Why am I asking this question?

What is to be shunned is the mere extraction of more and more factual information, or the plying the other with questions demanding a 'yes' or 'no'. This is the 'closed' question, which rarely makes for growth. Yet there is the 'open' question, which is not aimed at extracting knowledge about the other, but at helping the person to question themselves, not for the director's sake, but for growth in self-knowledge. It is open, in that it gives the person complete freedom to take it whither he will, thus revealing the values and attitudes of the person to himself. This I believe to be the ignatian presupposition that 'there is much to be gained if the one who gives the Exercises is faithfully informed of the various movements and thoughts which the different spirits bring; because the director can, in accord with the greater or less progress made, give certain spiritual exercises, appropriate and adapted to the need of a soul which is being affected in this way' (Exx 17). The director is not to make demands of the retreatant; but he may reasonably expect that the retreatant will freely share what is happening during his prayer. This appears to be the context of the sixth Annotation:

When the one giving the Exercises perceives that the exercitant is not experiencing any stirrings in his soul, such as consolations or desolations, and is not being moved by different spirits, he ought to question him closely about the Exercises: is he making them at their appointed times? and how?; similarly with the additions: is he following them with care?; he should question him particularly on each of these points (Exx 6; cf 316ff; 73ff).

What Ignatius is asking for is that the retreatant become more self-aware and discerning; it is the open question, posed and answered freely, which is the most valuable. The counsellor or the director may usefully ponder: 'For whose sake am I asking this question — for my own or for the other's?'

Neither psycho-therapy nor analysis

Both in counselling and in spiritual direction, it is taken for granted that one is dealing with people who are experiencing normal difficulties, or who are trying to cope with the ordinary problems and decisions which any state of life entails. Naturally, we are certain to meet people with more severe personality problems; but such clinical disorders are usually beyond the competence of either counsellor or spiritual director; it will be a matter of appropriate referral. I am not suggesting that counsellors or spiritual directors should never concern themselves with the other's family history. After all, my own history is the context and stuff of the Lord's revealing of himself to me and of my response (or lack of it). But neither in counselling nor in spiritual direction are we engaged in the re-activation of a person's past.

From mystique to model

So far we have considered some of the popular misconceptions of both counselling and spiritual direction. What then is the process? Though there can be no universally valid process, it may still be useful to offer a model which will at least rid counselling and spiritual direction of the crippling mystique that continues to surround both. We have already remarked that both are concerned with growth and/or change; but that it is not the counsellor or director who seeks to change the other, who must want, and be allowed, to seek inner change and growth:

It is very advantageous for the one who makes the Exercises to enter upon them wholeheartedly and with great generosity towards his Creator and Lord, offering him all his wanting and his freedom, so that the Divine Majesty may make use of his person and of all that he has, in accord with his own most holy will (Exx 5).

One's task, then, as a director of the Exercises is to collaborate with the exercitant, who seeks the ability to 'love and serve his divine Majesty in everything' (Exx 233). I help the other to a more accurate discernment of spirits: 'According to the need which the one who gives the exercises shall perceive in the exercitant, in the matter of desolation and the deceits of the enemy, and of consolations as well,

he will be able to instruct him in the rules of the first and second weeks which are for recognizing the various spirits' (Exx 8). The annotations which follow are sufficient indication that this process is a shared enterprise (Exx 9,10).

Since, however, it happens not infrequently that the client or exercitant has been told or strongly advised 'to come', the counsellor or director equally needs to cope with the initial hostility such pressure might be causing. Otherwise, the shared enterprise can be a non-starter. It can be countered if the person is made aware of a genuine and appropriately warm welcome. Word, gesture and posture can all combine to convey the counsellor's and spiritual director's desire to be of help and not to control. In so far as this is conveyed, the other begins to experience acceptance and respect on the part of the counsellor or spiritual director; and in such an atmosphere growth and change can take place: 'the Spirit of the Lord is present' (cf 2 Cor 3,17), with a subsequent diminishment of the fear of rejection, disapproval or prior judgment.

It is always useful to give the interview a structure, by stating, in general at least, what help can be given, what aims established, what time is available. This would appear to be the function of the Annotations and Additions: to make clear to the spiritual director (or counsellor) and to the other that what is about to take place is a shared task — one which demands effort from both parties.

Within the interview, the counsellor/spiritual director encourages the other freely to express his or her concerns. It is easier to help those who have some idea of 'what they desire'. Here accurate empathy on the part of the counsellor and spiritual director is vital. Without the awareness of the need to reflect the others' feelings clearly and accurately, and the ability to do so, it is unlikely that the exercitant will be conscious of being heard and understood: with a consequent loss of confidence and the cessation of the helping process. Of particular importance is the recognition and acceptance of the other's negative feelings. Often in a retreat such feelings, let alone their expression, of fear, doubt, anger, despondency are instinctively taken as inappropriate. Even when they are recognized by the director or counsellor, one is often tempted to short-circuit them by vague and pious re-assurance. The sharing of them can be irritating, often painful or embarrassing. Yet frequently, it is only when these distinctly powerful negative feelings have been fully explored that the positive impulses begin to be noticed in the process, often spontaneously. The observations of Ignatius can be applied:

When the person who is contemplating takes the true foundation of what is happening, going over it and reflecting on it by himself, and

thereby finding something which throws a little more light on the situation, and brings it home to him a little more — whether this is through his own reflection or because his understanding is being enlightened by divine grace — he derives greater appreciation and spiritual profit than if the one giving the Exercises had explained and developed its meaning at greater length (Exx 2).

The same is to be said of positive feelings. To insist on approving the good can be just as threatening as the opposite. We are all aware of the 'pat on the head' approach, and how quick we are to resent it, even when it is not meant. Others all too easily assume that we will agree with them when they tell us that the contemplation in which 'nothing happened' was a 'bad' prayer: this is often the result of over-lavish praise or approval (both verbal and non-verbal) of the 'good' prayer periods in which 'something did happen'.

The interview is not the whole of life

The interview is an enabling structure. Its import is easily exaggerated. It achieves its object if, with the lessening of fear and anxiety which many bring to the interview, insight begins to develop: a widening of perspective in life and in the presence of a loving and saving Lord; an alternative framework in which to situate myself, my hopes and failures, my God; a new or better orientation in the face of life, oneself and one's Lord. Always the focus and intention will be on encouraging the growth and acceptance of the 'deep desires' of the other person: certainly not on my own plans and ambitions for the other.

From a self-acceptance experienced in life and in prayer, and from the attitude of the counsellor or spiritual director, will come a greater clarity concerning the person's own needs. The person's deep desire, 'what I really and truly want', undergoes gentle and progressive change: the setting of new goals, both within the retreat and in counselling. Here possibly, the counsellor or spiritual director can become more directive, because the new goals may require factual information or other expertise. Ignatius makes the point:

If the one giving the Exercises sees that the exercitant is going on in consolation and with great fervour, he must warn him against making any inconsidered or hasty promise or vow; and the more unstable in temperament he recognizes him to be, the more he should forewarn and put him on his guard; for though one may legitimately influence another to enter the religious state in which it is understood that one takes the vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity, and though a good work done under vow is more

meritorious than one done without a vow; still, careful consideration must be given to the individual's temperament and capacities, and likewise the help or hindrance he is likely to encounter in carrying out the promise he would like to make (Exx 14; cf 15,16).

An enabling relationship

In the interview, counsellor and spiritual director need the ability 'to be with' the other in a way that helps the person discover his powers, desire and achievement. One needs to be personally involved in what is happening in the private world of the other, within the relationship which one seeks to establish: always remembering that in the retreat, the primary focus is on the relationship (or lack of it) that the other has with the Lord now, and of the relationship which the Lord is in fact now offering. Indeed, it would seem that effective spiritual direction demands the basic counselling attitudes, but extends beyond them. Who, then, is competent to give the Exercises?

The three necessary and sufficient conditions

It has proved possible to isolate the qualities that make for effective counselling and also spiritual direction by comparing 'successful' counsellors with those who 'fail'; three conditions for success are discovered, all of which relate to the counsellor's personality. They do not depend on the client or exercitant, nor directly on the counsellor's qualifications or academic knowledge. They have been named as (1) spontaneity and genuineness in the relationship, (2) non-possessive warmth towards the other person, and (3) accurate empathy. Research has shown that where the counsellor or spiritual director lacks any of them to a significant degree, then the other person will not be helped, and might possibly be harmed. Provided that the other does not suffer from severe personality disorder (requiring specific skills and expertise), then the possession of the above qualities are enough for the person to be helped positively. Of course, if I possess other specific skills or expertise, as well as these three core-qualities of personality, I can be of greater help to the other. For example, a spiritual director will need practical experience in the spiritual life, and be able to communicate it. The same is true of the stages of development of prayer, spiritual discernment, scripture and theology, and so on.

'Know thyself'

Spontaneity and genuineness means the ability to be straightforward and honest in my relationships. It leaves no place for a

merely 'professional' or 'clinical' facade, behind which I hide my true self. Such false behaviour is usually detected and denounced very quickly by children and adolescents. Genuineness is the quality whereby I can talk honestly and openly without pretence when this is for the good or growth of the other. It is appropriate when the other can both hear and accept it, and only then. Spontaneity is the quality in which I can be myself undisguisedly, and be with the other without anxiety; when I can leave behind any remote, authoritative or omnipotent role; when I can accept my own lack of knowledge and, where appropriate, confess this to the other without feeling guilty. It demands, therefore, a considerable strength and maturity to be on such good terms with one's own emotional experience, to be able to be oneself in relationships. The 'being-at-home' with my own self-knowledge and the ability to share it with the other when appropriate, Carl Rogers regards as the most crucial of all the conditions. It involves the capacity to form relationships in which I will manifest spontaneity, non-defensiveness, openness, genuineness, lack of anxiety. This is, furthermore, an ignatian presupposition:

In order that both director and retreatant may work better together, and with greater profit, it must be assumed that every good Christian is more ready to justify rather than to condemn his neighbour's statement; and if he cannot justify it, let him ask what he means by it; and if it cannot be justified, let him correct him with love; and if that is not sufficient, let him seek all suitable means to justify it by putting a good interpretation on it (Exx 22).

Be a warm person

Non-possessive warmth is the ability to show a non-threatening, assured and affective regard for the other. Usually warmth is answered by warmth, hostility by hostility. However, the warmth shown needs to be genuine, or it will come across as the saccharine warmth of the 'do-gooder', or the lady bountiful's condescension. Warmth is an expression of genuine caring, an acceptance of the other as he or she is, a real valuing without any judgment or condemnation for the weakness or need which the other is expressing. 'If the one who gives the Exercises observes that the other is in desolation and being tempted, he must not be hard and brusque with him, but gentle and kind' (Exx 7).

The trouble with warmth is that it can tempt the counsellor or spiritual director to want to possess or make the other dependent in some way. If I am to be effective I must want the other to become

mature, independent, able to cope, have the mind, will and ability to make decisions and judgments for himself. Hence I need the sensitivity to know what the other can accept by way of warmth. Inappropriate and insensitive praise may not only arouse suspicion, but also possibly contempt and fear of being exploited yet again. I need to be able to assess very quickly what is appropriate, and to adapt to the need and personality of the other:

The Spiritual Exercises are to be adapted to the dispositions of those who wish to make them: that is, to their age, education, and intelligence; hence, one with little education or poor health should not be given what he cannot manage without fatigue, or get help from. Similarly, what is to be given to a particular person will depend on the dispositions he wants to achieve, since he can put that to better use and get help from it (Exx 18; cf 19-20).

Know the other from inside

The third necessary quality is the ability to empathize accurately with the other. Empathy is not the same as sympathy and should not be confused with it. With sympathy, the feelings and emotions of the other trigger off my own, so that the focus becomes my feelings and emotions, rather than those of the other. Empathy becomes more accurate in proportion as I foster my capacity to tune into the other's shifting emotions, to 'step into his or her shoes', to see things his way, to be able to get 'inside the skin' of the other, and to sense the meaning of what he is feeling, without being smothered by it. Far from being the rather intellectual exercise it seems, empathy is a type of momentary identification with others. I really do grasp the implications of their events or situations. Empathy is an exercise of my own imagination in discovering the significance for the other.

If I am to grow in empathy, I need to learn how to listen to and to read the verbal, para-verbal and non-verbal messages of the other. I need facility in understanding not just the content of the messages, but also an ability to pick up the feelings and emotions involved. Perhaps the greatest skill involved in these three basic qualities is the ability to communicate these feelings and their meanings accurately and with sensitivity, so that the other knows that he or she is being 'received and understood'. The skill here is to be able to capture the meaning of the other, putting it into words and images that will be recognized by the other as clarifying the communication. I am not much use to the other if I cannot clearly and effectively communicate my empathetic understanding.

Be accurate

Empathy is a dangerous tool. It needs to be accurate in its application, otherwise it can be devastatingly misleading. I am always in danger of pushing out onto the other my own emotionally-based attitudes and reactions. I can too easily ascribe to others feelings and emotions which are not theirs, but mine; and thus I fall into the trap of thinking that the other is bound to react in a certain way. Subtly or grossly, I can impose my own idea of how I think the other ought to feel or respond in a particular situation, directing them into a world that has no real existence for them, but only for me. Hence again the need for self-awareness and self-knowledge on the part of the counsellor and spiritual director. In the Exercises, Ignatius in many places lays the stress on the giver of the Exercises knowing where the retreatant is, and in warning not to move on to new material until it is appropriate. For example, 'while the exercitant is involved in the First Week of the Exercises, it is to his advantage to know nothing of what he has to do in the Second Week. Rather, he should work in the first week to achieve what he is looking for, as though he had nothing good to look forward to in the second' (Exx 11). And so too in the particular hints on prayer given in the Additions. More specifically, as we have seen, Ignatius warns the director against his or her own desires, needs and attitudes being foisted inappropriately on the retreatant.

The fostering of these three personal qualities and attitudes in myself will nurture my own freedom. I become more free in the interview to respect the freedom of the other. In freedom, I become aware of my own desires (subtle or gross) to have others dependent on me. My own fears of loss of control over the other come to the surface, so that I can cope effectively and constructively with them. This freedom allows me movement from my own worry about not knowing what to do if the other goes by a way to which I am not accustomed, or from my desire to 'achieve results'. Growth in this trinity of personal qualities helps to prevent me from becoming rigid and inflexible in my own personal spirituality, and therefore from feeling threatened by the other's freedom. People who are 'low' in these three personal capabilities of genuineness, warmth and empathy are insecure. They should not counsel nor give individually-guided retreats. Insecure people find success too important, or are too dependent on structure (or their own personal structure) to give the other the freedom he or she is seeking. The Spiritual Exercises are a tool. Like all tools, they have their own specific purpose (cf Exx 21). Basically, the purpose is to further and develop a meeting with the Lord in freedom. To use the Exercises for any other purpose in the one-to-one guided retreat is to abuse both the Exercises and the retreatant.

Conclusion

It is my opinion that, in the retreat interview of the individually-given Exercises, the director and the retreatant find themselves in a spiritual counselling relationship within a context of faith. If the retreat interview is to be 'for better' rather than 'for worse', the general findings of secular counselling will be operative, and in particular there will be present in significant degree the fundamental necessary and sufficient qualities of genuineness, warmth and empathy. I hope that I have demonstrated that the Annotations which St Ignatius places at the beginning of the book of the Exercises for the guidance of the retreat-giver, can make excellent reading from a counselling point of view, without in any way distorting either their purpose or function. For the person making the Exercises, the context of faith (or lack of it) saturates every aspect of his life, attitudes and values. What the spiritual director is doing in the interview is counselling, provided and to the extent that basic counselling attitudes are present; but it is a form of counselling that places the primary focus on the relationship between the retreatant and the Lord. Counselling becomes spiritual direction in so far as it takes place within the focus of the faith. So whilst I would claim that good spiritual direction will always need the basic counselling attitudes and qualities, it by no means follows that spiritual direction is merely counselling. Counselling is not necessarily an explicitly christian activity. Spiritual direction, on the other hand, is counselling specified by the additional skills and expertise needed by the director in the context of belief 'in the gospel of God's Son' (Mk 1,1).¹

¹ This article, though the fruit of my own experience, owes much to the labours and publications of many others; to colleagues and brothers of the English jesuit province also involved in counselling: to Dr Peter Daws, formerly of Keele University, and Dr Gerard Egan of Loyola University, Chicago, whose *The Skilled Helper* (Monterey, California), has been of considerable assistance. I would also wish to mention the writings of Audrey Newsome and others of the Keele University Appointments and Counselling Service; Douglas H. Hamblin's *The Teacher and Counselling* (Oxford, 1974); and the articles of Frs W. A. Barry S.J. and W. J. Connelly S.J., in *Review for Religious*. Most of all, I am indebted to my clients and retreatants, whose kindness and patience have taught me, out of my own ineptness, how to put theory into practice for the greater glory of the Lord.