WHEN TO STOP

By LAVINIA BYRNE

PRESENT-DAY interest in the ministry of spiritual direction gives rise to many questions which at first seem peripheral. The more they are asked, however, the more they seem to gain in importance. An objective test of their importance would examine the extent to which the answers to such questions clarify our understanding of the nature and purpose of the ministry itself.

So, certain questions rise and vanish without too much trace: 'How often should I go? What shall I say when I get there? Will I be helped?' They reflect the normal anxieties of anyone facing a new experience, and are quickly resolved. They are questions about when and how to start, outward signs of the newness and more widespread availability of this ministry in today's Church. The task of the present article is to look at the ideas that group themselves around the second wave of questions, those which ask 'When to stop?' Significantly, the questioner is now the director rather than the individual who comes seeking direction. 'I can't sit down to have a cup of coffee without feeling that I am being got at'. 'I'm chatting with a friend and suddenly catch sight of the whites of her eyes, and realize that I have taken the conversation too far'. 'I haven't even begun to think about a holiday this year'. 'S.D.P.? What's that? Oh sorry, I thought you were talking about jungian personality types ...'

The question implicit in each of these comments can be phrased in terms of fidelity. When to stop using the heightened awareness developed in direction sessions, or asking open-ended, non-directive questions in ordinary conversations with one's friends is a question about fidelity to friendship. How to stop someone whom I may be directing, but with whom I am also living in community or college, from wearing some kind of spiritual bandage, eliciting or receiving inappropriate attention whenever we meet, is a question about fidelity to our spiritual relationship. When to stop giving spiritual direction because the individual receiving it is ready for self-direction and I have become redundant, is a question about fidelity to the Spirit. When to stop because I am totally out of my depth and this particular dirigé requires referral to someone able

to give professional or clinical help is a question about fidelity to the individual receiving direction. When to stop because I am exhausted or becoming over-rarified or setting up as a guru is a question about fidelity to myself and to God's call.

Insofar as these questions are admitted, and the possibility of stopping or contracting out of the direction relationship is entertained, then it is possible to take the basic question of fidelity seriously. Where spiritual directors deny the need to stop, they mythologize their ministry and make it their own work rather than God's. Where the need is acknowledged, however, four ideas in particular give such questioning a focus. In turn this promotes our understanding of the exact nature and purpose of the 'act of friendship' whereby we minister to the spiritual formation and growth of those who are with us on the way. For this reason alone we should ask when to stop.

The direction relationship

What style of relationship do we envisage when we set out to give or to receive spiritual direction? What dynamic is operative? We talk about being fellow pilgrims, but a person asking for direction is a person asking the way, momentarily dependent as it were. Our style of spiritual direction may be extremely non-directive, our conviction that the way is carried by each individual in the secret place where God speaks to the heart, but basically we are working out of this momentary dependence.

For this reason, in his Annotations to the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius uses an impersonal image, that of a balance at rest, to describe what a director should be. There is a sense in which the dirigé is swinging to and fro and in which the director is modelling more stable behaviour, a sense in which the director is being asked to be aware of what is going on. Ignatius describes this awareness with a sequence of verbs:

> 'When the one who is giving the Exercises perceives ... (Annotations 6, 8, 10)
> 'If the one who is giving the Exercises sees ...' (Annotations 14)
> 'If the director observes ...' (Annotation 7).[1]

With Lewis Carroll, I am inclined to attribute a certain strength to verbs: 'Words have a temper, some of them—particularly verbs, they're the proudest—adjectives you can do anything with, but

not verbs ...'[2] Where the image of a balance at equilibrium tells the director what to be—one who 'should permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord'[3]—Ignatius's sequence of verbs tells him how to be: one who perceives, sees and observes.

What to do meanwhile, and how to do it, Ignatius lays down quite clearly. A director should give accurate information ('narrate accurately the facts of the contemplation or meditation'—Annotation 2); be prepared to intervene where a retreatant has nothing to report ('to ply with questions about the exercises ... and demand an account in detail'—Annotation 6); to elicit faithful practice ('insist with the exercitant that he spend an hour in each of the five exercises or contemplations which are made every day'—Annotation 12) in order that the retreatant should enjoy the satisfaction of having persevered. In each instance, the focus is upon the needs of the exercitant: his or her need of objectivity, of intervention and of affirmation.

Today's communication and counselling skills give us a different vocabulary, but they have not really developed the insight much further. For what Ignatius is here describing is a *contractual relationship,* a relationship built around a certain agenda. So the director is not to manipulate—'to urge the exercitant more to poverty or any promise than to the contrary, nor to one state of life or way of living more than to another' (Annotation 15)—for the exact content of this agenda is not known and it lies in God's gift. Both director and dirigé are invited to work out of Ignatius's understanding that 'it is more suitable and much better that the Creator and Lord in person communicate himself to the devout soul in quest of the divine will, that he inflame it with his love and praise, and dispose it for the way in which it could better serve God in the future' (Annotation 15). This is their contract, and only in terms of this shared understanding or contract may the relationship itself be discussed.

Ignatius is explicit; whatever promotes the sharing of this understanding is more important than whatever promotes the relationship. What I mean is that in the spiritual direction relationship, both director and dirigé are looking for God more than for each other. And the God for whom we search is one who communicates, inflames and disposes: God the primary director. This understanding of the relationship into which we contract enables us to accept and to work out of the 'momentary dependence' inherent in such

a relationship. The ministry of spiritual direction is not about inflating egos, nor creating long-term dependence, nor mediating a sense of the divine. No-one will be diminished where all transactions are subject to that first action which is the work of God. So Ignatius can write, 'while the one who is giving the Exercises should not seek to investigate and know the private thoughts and sins of the exercitant, nevertheless, it will be very helpful if he is kept faithfully informed about the various disturbances and thoughts caused by the actions of the different spirits' (Annotation 17). The director who 'perceives, sees and observes', like the exercitant at the contemplation on the Nativity who is to 'consider, observe and contemplate' (Exx 115), is essentially an onlooker, drawn to serve 'with all possible homage and reverence', where God is already at work.

While Ignatius's Annotations are intended for the context of a directed retreat, nevertheless they have a general application insofar as they examine the dynamic of any direction relationship. Where they posit a contractual relationship, they can help us to draw realistic boundaries. What is a direction session and what is not a direction session becomes clear. Outside the session, both of us can legitimately stop working to that contract. I am free to change the topic of conversation, to ignore certain signals if I so choose, to be anything but a balance at equilibrium where there is no contract. In effect, I am free to stop.

Anything can legitimately be used therefore, which reinforces the sense of contract, clarifies the essential understanding that the real relationship in question is the relationship between the individual and God. One suggestion is that the encounter be in a certain way ritualized. So it will take place in a definite place at a definite time. It will have a beginning, a middle and an end. To promote the shared understanding that this is the end a new date is settled, a fresh beginning anticipated. Other chance or necessary meetings will occur in the interim—especially when people live in the same house as each other—but the message is clear: such meetings are not spiritual direction sessions. Where they do occur, both director and dirigé will be working out of a different relationship: as colleagues, friends or fellow religious, for example.

Counselling, spiritual direction or spiritual conversation

Another area which demands constant clarification is our understanding of the exact nature of spiritual direction. A rider to the

question of 'When to stop?' is 'When to stop *what*?' To analyze by negatives may seem unsatisfactory, but in this instance it would seem important to look at people's perceptions and expectations and to work from these. Any other definition might seem academic.

A poster shows a child with a cut and bruised face. The slogan reads: 'Two whiskies and eight pints of beer a night aren't doing her any good'. Our instinctive reaction is to label the child's problem—a drunken father or drunken mother—and to think in terms of appropriate intervention. Various people need help: the mother or father in question and their spouse or partner, the child and her siblings. Such intervention would work at a very fundamental level in order to restore wholeness and self-respect, dignity and love. While the motive for offering such help might be christian, and the appropriate course of action be perceived by social worker and counsellor to be part of the christian ministry of healing, or an expression of apostolic love, nevertheless each of us knows that to speak of God and his love at such a moment would be insensitive. The Samaritan does not tell the man in the gutter that God loves him, he gets on and tends to his needs. He is and does God's love for the wounded man who emerges from the experience healed and possibly with a better view of Samaritans. It could be that he asks himself questions about the God of the Samaritans, about his own God even, but this would be a bonus rather than the reason why they meet.

Kenneth Leech has written 'The pastoral counsellor is likely to be concerned a good deal with the emotionally disturbed, the deeply troubled, the damaged, the broken'.[4] The inference is that counselling has to do with problem-solving. Its focus, essentially, is to work at improving self-image. If God-image is improved in the process, this is a bonus.

The focus of spiritual direction on the other hand is essentially upon God-image. Its purpose is to remove the screens I put between myself and God so that I may see him more clearly as he is, not as I imagine or fear him to be. If my self-image is healed in the process, this is a bonus. Once such a distinction has been made, spiritual direction need be less wary of appropriating the skills with which counselling operates and the insights of professional counsellors. Where the distinction is not made, spiritual directors can fail to take themselves and their ministry sufficiently seriously—and this for the very best of motives. A reluctance to stop would be a case in point. The myth of permanent availability

dies hard, because we so easily equate commitment with being on call. God alone has the harmony, energy and resource for this. And so our second misgiving, that precisely because this is God's work—God is at work in the life of this individual—I should be like an acolyte, casting pools of light, ever attentive to the service of his grace, an integral part of the liturgy by which his coming is to be recognized.

What may be learnt from the distinction between counselling and spiritual direction is the professionalism to take both ministries equally seriously and to accept that God can dispense with our services. He can use us but does not need us. We may legitimately stop.

Other insights can be gained from the essential amateurness of another ministry, that of spiritual conversation. God-talk is one area of conversation among others. It has a place in any conversation between believers, between people whose temporary or permanent relationship enables them to share their experience of the human quest for meaning. Relationship is the key word. There are times when it is appropriate to share the quest, times when it is inappropriate. To stop is as natural as to start. The demands of friendship come first and where they are honoured there is somehow less of a problem.

Above all spiritual conversation gives us a sense of proportion. The sharing of feelings legitimizes feelings, the sharing of fears legitimizes fears. We do not force our insights upon our friends, we question and develop them because real friendship—even where shared by strangers—is non-competitive. It is characterized by that leap of the heart which launches us into 'being for others'. Friendship is the context in which we learn fidelity. It keeps us in mind of that mixture of boredom, love, dislike, laziness and acceptance by which we ordinarily interrelate. Human reactions such as these are kept in perspective because we are certain of the boundaries between what is me and what is not me. We are free to improvise and experiment with styles of intervention because the relationship is not complicated by projections and transference. For this reason the freedom to stop is promoted where we have alternatives to work, friends outside the profession, a vocabulary that is more than a jargon.

From spiritual conversation we learn the primacy of people in all ministry, the give-and-take of any two-sided relationship where we meet as equals beyond any implicit dependency. God-talk has

both a time and a place, and so does other talk, so do other occupations.

The matter of direction

A further question: what are we doing when we give or receive spiritual direction? What is the purpose of the exercise? Certain answers drive something of a wedge between prayer and life, as though prayer alone were worthy of discernment. Direction sessions become a school of prayer; formal times of prayer the only place where whatever is learnt may be appropriated. If, however, the matter of direction is limited to prayer, it becomes impossible to dispense with direction because this necessarily remains a form of tuition and there is always more to be learnt. If, on the other hand, the matter of direction is the discernment of spirits, discernment of the action of God in the everyday fabric of my life, including those moments of heightened attentiveness and awareness when I wait on him in prayer, then it follows that this is a process which may be internalized. There is such a thing as auto- or self-direction after all. The Spiritual Exercises themselves work towards such an ending. Whichever mode is evisaged—a closed retreat, short retreat, retreat in everyday life—Ignatius sees their purpose as promoting movement into freedom. The individual exercitant, freed from inordinate attachments, personal sin and disorder, is led to seek and find a God in the blessings of creation and redemption, to enjoy salvation in the here and now. His 'Contemplation to attain to the love of God' becomes the great prayer of integration, the way in which post-retreat people live.

Movement into such living and praying in the everyday, constantly aware of God's gift in the gift of myself and my world, may be promoted by a model of spiritual direction which seeks to make itself redundant. Where such discernment has become the familiar way of proceeding of a given individual before God, then we may safely stop.

Supervision

Finally we might ask: Who directs the directors? In any other field of professional care or competence, supervision is understood to be an integral part of the mechanism by which one stops. Where I am supervised I am both able and obliged to be in contact with my own feelings and needs. The supervisor's task is not to monitor

progress, nor to check up on what I say that I have heard or said in given circumstances. Rather he or she is there to enable me to examine personally the dynamic of my ministry, to be in contact with its ebb and flow. Practically speaking there is a sense in which I can off-load certain burdens when I am supervised, or revitalize my sense of role. Either way I am working towards the freedom to stop, to respect my own need for space and time.

One model for such supervision is the peer self-help group. John Heron of the Human Potential Research Project at Surrey University identifies this model as one that 'develops alternatives to the existing system.'[5] For spiritual directors, co-counselling/co-supervision could go a long way towards 'fulfilling the human needs of persons serving within or served by . . . the organizations and institutions of our society'. People rather than systems will be served where we talk to each other, listen to each other and tell each other to stop.

Are you more than user-friendly?

One advantage of the new code of language thrown up by the emergence of computer technology is that it helps us to differentiate more precisely between human and machine behaviour. A computer can be user-friendly, or in down-time—in plain English, either it works or it has broken down. The inference is that it can in fact work for twenty-four hours a day. Where we choose to operate as machines, we too limit the ways in which we can be, and restrict or abuse our capacity to live both public and personal lives.

Where we ask when to stop, we are committing ourselves to human and interpersonal ways of being. Consideration of the direction relationship, of the difference between counselling, direction and spiritual conversation, of the matter of spiritual direction and of the value of supervision all clarify this understanding. We guarantee, both for ourselves and for those with whom we work, some sort of personal life. With our friends and with our God we are free to be more than user-friendly, because our public life can safely be abandoned.

The word personal is used advisedly, because personal life can nurture all our relationships. To describe a life as private is to work in terms of negatives. In general a private life is one into which we withdraw. Contemporary spirituality highlights some of the understandings behind such withdrawal: that it might be based

on a privatized spirituality where there is only one relationship, that which exists between me and my God; and only one legitimate activity, formal prayer. To be committed to personal life is to receive the gift of life in all its complexity from God's hand, to be alone and to move out towards other people with equal ease, to 'be still, and still moving.'[6]

For all who work in the caring professions, for all who mediate God's love in apostolic works, all who would seek first that Kingdom of God which is in our common midst—growing the whole time, we know not how—it becomes necessary that we stop, in order that God may teach us 'to care, and not to care. Teach us to sit still'.[7]

NOTES

[1] *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola.* Translated by Louis J. Puhl (Loyola University Press, 1951).
[2] Carroll, Lewis: *Through the looking-glass* (Collins, 1975), p 210.
[3] *Spiritual Exercises.*
[4] Leech, Kenneth: *The social God* (Sheldon Press, 1981), p 67.
[5] Heron, John: *Dimensions of facilitator style* (Human Potential Research Project, University of Surrey, August 1977), p 46.
[6] Eliot, T. S.: *Four quartets* (Faber and Faber, 1983), p 27, *East Coker* V, line 204.
[7] Eliot, T.S.: *The waste land and other poems* (Faber and Faber, 1983), p 64, Ash Wednesday VI.