

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION OF THE UNCHURCHED

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SPIRITUAL DIRECTION of the 'unchurched' is about encouraging and enabling spiritual growth. This article has evolved through my endeavouring to hear through listening to all sorts of persons. Each one is unique in his or her own way of becoming, whether churchied or unchurchied. Spiritual direction is direction offered to others churchied or unchurchied in their journeying towards a growing relationship with God and with themselves.

In this paper I am sharing with you my insights and my journeying into the way of *christian* spiritual direction. For many the word 'spiritual' presents many problems, it is a word that can suggest escapism, inactivity, irrelevance and other-worldliness; for others it can and does suggest the development of one's fullest potential in a world where it is increasingly difficult to become and remain one's real self. It is a word that covers a whole multitude of attitudes and activities, from being deeply co-creative to co-destructive. A potential we all share. It can be used to include anything we think or do, for or against oneself, others and the whole of creation. Christian spirituality is the way of being Christ-like before the challenges of everyday life from within a given historical and cultural environment of our times.

'The spiritual director', according to the *Dictionary of christian spirituality*, is:

a physician of souls, one who seeks to diagnose the condition of the soul with its graces and ills and to assist it into the way of growth. He is not primarily a judge nor at anytime a dictator. He is a spiritual father/mother concerned with the welfare of his/her children. The most positive use of spiritual direction is in two specific areas: understanding ourselves in the light of God, and growth in the life of faith and prayer.¹

The Abbé de Tourville, in his letters to a young nun, writes:

The purpose of all spiritual direction, here as elsewhere, is not to introduce you to a ready-made interior life complete in all its

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parts, but rather to direct and encourage those natural gifts and enthusiasms which it has pleased God to endow you with, and which come from him alone.²

For me, spiritual direction belongs to the ongoing process of revealing to the other person his or her spiritual dimensions. It is encouragement offered for this process to take place between one person and another. It is christian when being offered between Christians and I believe it can also be considered such even when offered between the Christian and the person seeking to flow into a Christ-like life, whether that person be obviously christian or not. It can be defined as the process which is encouraged in the context of a one-to-one relationship in which a competent guide assists another person, at his or her request, to grow into the spiritual dimensions of his or her fullest potential as a spiritual person. I liken it to rock climbing, where the more experienced rock climber acts as a guide for the less experienced rock climber, altering and slacking the ropes according to need.

Thomas Merton reminds us:

The spiritual director is concerned with the *whole person*, for the spiritual life is not just the life of the mind, or of the affections, or of the 'summit of the soul'—it is the life of the whole person . . . A spiritual director is, then, one who helps another to recognize and to follow the inspirations of grace in his life, in order to arrive at the end to which God is leading him.³

Christian spiritual direction then is an ongoing process through a mutuality of journeying in which the Christian is led and encouraged in his or her special vocation towards becoming his or her fullest potential physically, mentally, socially and spiritually to a conscious union with God, warts and all.

Increasingly, I see spiritual direction as being spiritual guidance between 'soul friends' who are in the process of becoming 'spiritual friends';⁴ men and women who are encouraged into this spiritual becoming through the basic activity of hearing through listening, an activity that is so essential for the work of discerning the way of another's pilgrimaging through life to life in this life.

Models and images abound to describe the spiritual director. Whatever the title, the image, the person is firstly called out by love and secondly by the pilgrim, seeking guidance, and as they journey together on their separate ways, they learn how to move

within the natural rhythm of each other's co-creative activity of 'soul-befriending'.

The more I attempt to understand the nature of spiritual direction as being spiritual guidance, the more I see it as being 'soul-befriending'. This is why I prefer to use the term 'spiritual guidance', suggesting a non-directive approach, as I encourage the other person to become his or her 'best self' through learning *how* to decide, sometimes *what* to decide but never *not* to decide, as he or she enters upon 'the way' of being a pilgrim in search of his/her total self as a person.

Soul-friends are what Rosemary Haughton describes as 'agents of transformation': men and women who are gifted with the ability to hear through listening, who are willing and able to assist others to discern the movements of the co-creative spirit within; in fact anyone who is gifted and trained to offer 'attentive attention'. All Christians are expected to share their compassion, their empathy, their insights and their love with all others, whether unchurched or churchd.

The spiritual guide must be prepared and prudent in the art of taking risks: prepared not always to choose the safest means, but the best and the most appropriate in the here and now of any situation; always being careful to respect the other person's uniqueness, while at the same time not strangling the other person with the cord of his/her own needs.

It is extremely important that spiritual guides be acutely sensitive to the person who has the courage of faith to reveal his or her story: a story that is not only filled with people and places but also with action, including the action of non-action. This is because people do things and have things done to them for good or ill. It is to be aware that all our activities or non-activities are related, whether recognized or not, as we pilgrimage into our respective futures, within the community of humankind and the greatest of all mysteries, labelled 'God', labelled 'love'.

It is to be remembered that each time the spiritual guide takes a person into his or her caring he/she accepts from God a spiritual responsibility which can be very costly, through physical, mental and psychic exhaustion; through the angry darkness of depression. This is why it is essential for the guide to be within the caring of his or her own spiritual guide. It also helps to keep one in tune and in touch with the experience of being a pilgrim. It is important that the spiritual guide recognize that he or she is responsible *to* and

not for the pilgrim. The quality of our integrity, when responding to the pilgrim, reveals to the pilgrim how well we are or are not listening with the whole of ourselves. Listening without hearing in depth leads to moralizing judgment, when what the pilgrim is seeking is to be heard and accepted, as he or she *now is*.

Whenever I am *being with* the other person, and hopefully the other person is also with me, I am aware that God created this person and seeded him or her with the potential for being co-creative or co-destructive. It is, I believe, our basic service, one to another, to encourage and to 'water with love' each other's co-creative potential; this demands of us a care-full watering of the seeds. Too much watering drowns, too little inhibits growth. In this activity I am reminded of St Paul's familiar words, 'I planted, Apollas watered, but God gave growth' (1 Cor 3,6). In our situation God has planted; the guide and the pilgrim are to water and be watered according to need.

Many who come into the orbit of 'Reaching Out', I assume to be unchurched unless they state otherwise. Many choose to remain so for a variety of reasons. For them, the institutionalized Church is 'not on'. Some are seeking the unchurched-Church. That is, the Church which is not institutionalized. They search for a Church which is embracing of the love ethic rather than the law ethic; a Church in its search for liturgical and pastoral relevance; a Church they can recognize as being caught up in the struggles of the wounded, the oppressed, the lost and the minority groups, as they believe Jesus to have been, a Church that is willing to encourage self-criticism in its attempts to be and to live out its vocational responsibilities towards *all* God's people. Most of the people I see do not mention religion, or the Church, though many will insist on stating 'I believe in God though'.

It is through listening with the so-called unchurched that I realize that my first responsibility is to offer an understanding of their lives, as revealed by them, recognizing the important values they attempt to live by so that together we come to a greater awareness and acceptance of their hidden potential for co-creative growth that is unlimited. Many have been baptized into the faith of Christ at birth and what is required now is an awakening of this fact and its true meaning and purpose. This will occur when the person is ready to understand and accept this meaning and its purpose, in a way that is relevant to him or her. Most of the time all I am able to suggest to the person (this in conjunction with

anything else which may be needed, physically, mentally, socially and educationally) is that he or she spend a little time each day, *simply being still*, so that the processes of self-acceptance, self-awareness, self-forgiveness and integration may take place.

I could not be in the work of 'listening' if I did not recognize that the Holy Spirit is at work in and through the many who appear to have lost their bearings in life and in 'the way, the truth and the life' into which they have been baptized. My responsibility is to be *present* to each person in such a way as to awaken this person to life, and to the reality, the spirituality that is the Church of tomorrow, the Church of the founders, hidden deep within the institutionalized Church of today. The 'Unchurch of tomorrow' is the Unchurch of the early Church, full of the spirit of love's endeavouring: a Church whose growth was not without the pain of rejection; the pain of the wounded and the oppressed down through the centuries to our times, from the cross of Jesus, that is also the cross of humankind 'groaning and travailing' towards wholeness today.

I would like to share Tom's story with you: Tom who came not for spiritual guidance as such, though I wonder if hidden deep within his soul he was not seeking a 'befriending' soul mate. He came to me as someone whom he expected to solve his problems, according to his desiring. The fact that he deliberately chose to come to a priest suggests that deep within he was beginning, however tentatively, to feel the need for guidance of a spiritual nature, even though he constantly stated 'I hate the Church, its middle-classness, its capitalism'.

Tom, a transsexual, is a person with whom I have shared many hours. He is a man who has so much pain through being unloved that he has a need to hurt back. This need appears to be rooted in his being unloved throughout his life and his inability to live the gender he feels is rightly his, that of being a woman. He will cry, if you make the mistake I did of stating, 'you appear to be very masculine'. Every visit Tom made began with fifteen to twenty minutes of very strong verbal abuse. His insecurity and his loneliness were so profound that he had to 'eat me up'. He did this by having to know all about me—and he investigated my background with the thoroughness of a private detective and then confronted me with his findings. To be alongside Tom at times was extremely difficult and frightening. This was because his anger of depression provoked my own anger. He appears to frighten love

and potential lovers away as he challenges the sincerity of the love offered. In attempting to be with him, as a person rich in his own uniqueness buried deep within his wounds, I am reminded of Dr Jack Dominian's statement: 'For everyone of us to succeed in loving, we have to suffer and die a thousand deaths'. Tom's greatest need is the need of being loved, yet his fear of this is expressed as hate for all who attempt to do so. Through the most powerful outcries of anger, he asks that the attention of love be paid to him unconditionally.

Although Tom accepts the fact that I am a priest he questions why he should be seeing me. While I am attempting to embrace Tom with the Holy Spirit of love, humanized through myself, I would not say that I was overtly in the activity of offering spiritual guidance, nor would Tom accept it as such. All I can do is offer myself to Tom as he *now is*. Perhaps my sharing with Tom is an example of what might be called spiritual guidance of a hidden nature.

Mary, unlike Tom, came into my orbit of concern as a lapsed Roman Catholic because of her fears of how she will or will not be accepted by her local roman catholic priest, due to a serious misunderstanding with her home town parish priest some years ago. Mary, a woman in her thirties, caught up in the world of addictions and now beginning to feel her way through and out of these past few years of self-destruction, is making an attempt to find 'my way back to the Church'—a statement made during her first visit with me. During her several visits Mary quietly and with hesitation revealed her life story, its pains and its joys, mostly the former. She interrupted her flow every so often to ask, 'Do you really think God loves me?' 'Why do you bother with me, you must have more important people to listen to?' After three months Mary ceased to keep her appointments and I felt I had been of no help to her. About three months later Mary just turned up and informed me that she had returned to her own Church. She remarked 'I pray for the strength not to be drawn back into the scene, I feel so different now and I want to live'. As we were both searching in the area of spirituality I came to recognize that this was a situation of spiritual guidance, being asked for, accepted and acted upon by Mary in her pilgrimage, according to *her* needs and *her* insights, as we journey together to be made whole in the co-healing power of love being offered by a care-taking God.

In my sharing with you these two differing stories I have tried

to illustrate the differences between spiritual guidance and other forms of guidance. Initially, I feel, individuals come to share and not to seek spiritual awareness or to be converted, but rather to be recognized and authenticated as persons with a future worth living, suffering and dying for; dying consciously into a new way of being fully alive to themselves, to others and to the mysteries of God. It is only through being assisted 'to hear themselves' into the uniqueness of their future potential as authenticated and authenticating persons that they will be prepared to recognize the mystery of the spiritual element in and around their lives. This will occur if the spiritual guide has a real sense of the 'spiritual' surrounding and permeating all. In this way I feel that the unchurched are surrounded by the uncharted waters of spirituality—by proxy. That is, they are caught up in the circle, the aura of the other person and are affected by this, as lovers are affected through sharing in the auras of each other's loving.

Like so many others who attempt to care I realize that spiritual guidance is both visible and invisible, always offered from within the heart of God embodied in the hearts of men and women who are able to recognize each other as brothers and sisters—men and women who are able to take each other's hands, as together they pilgrim their way through life, in the ways of loving. So they acknowledge the fact that loving is our sole reason for living and becoming our fullest potential, through the activity of love's endeavouring.

Spiritual direction of the unchurched only comes about when the person considered to be unchurched recognizes and accepts his or her innate spirituality, a spirituality that is Christ-orientated if it is to be called christian spiritual direction. This occurs through the desire to receive guidance through a mutuality of an acknowledged faith-commitment in Christ, by both parties, in an atmosphere of wonder and reverence.

I grow daily into the mystery of being a 'soul-friend' through my increasing awareness of Christ and through the 'trinity of the disciplines': the disciplines of the Church, as the non-institutionalized 'body of Christ'; a constant meditation on the book of the 'Good News'; and the offering of an open heart vulnerable to the pains of others. It is these disciplines that release my potential as a 'soul-friend' towards others so that together we might become 'soul-buddies'.

Once I am invited into the work of spiritual guideship, I am

being asked to be prepared to bear not only my own, but also the burdens of another. A mutual acceptance of this relationship involves the guide and the pilgrim in a growing relationship which is meant to be co-creative and one that is not only vertical but horizontal. It is the continuing work of the cross shared. For this work to continue it is vitally important that the spiritual guide respect and wait on God's timing for the pilgrim's growth, at times quite perceptibly, at others not so. At times it is right and necessary for the pilgrim to rest awhile: sometimes to wander down what, on the surface, appears to be a dead-end. Sometimes a person may only go so far along the spiritual path and then appear to renounce all for a number of years before resuming his or her spiritual pilgrimage. The spiritual guide should not become discouraged by these developments and neither should he or she take personal credit for the 'successes' or 'failures'.

The searching pilgrim journeys in the belief that there is for that person the 'christian way', the way which transcends and embraces all that divides and separates one from oneself, from others in Christ. All Christ-like spiritual guides are concerned, or should be, with the physical, mental, social, educational and spiritual health and sanctity not only of the person but also of the community of the unchurched as much as that of the church.

The delicate work of being a spiritual guide rests on mighty acts of faith, unlimited and fearless hope. That is, the pilgrim and the spiritual guide place all growth-enabling activities in the context of love. Spiritual direction of 'the unchurched' is all about loving the unchurched in such a way that they may come to love themselves warts and all, others warts and all, and God; as together we attempt with the strength of all our frailties to live out and be the request to 'Love one another as I have loved you' (Jn 15,12).

NOTES

¹ Wakefield, Gordon S. (ed.): *A dictionary of christian spirituality* (SCM, London, 1983), pp 114-5.

² Waterfield, Robin (ed.): *Streams of grace: a selection from the letters of Abbé de Tourville* (Fount, London, 1985), p 22.

³ Merton, Thomas: *Spiritual direction and meditation* (Anthony Clarke, 1975), pp 15 & 17, cf also, Merton, Thomas: *What is contemplation?* (Notre Dame, 1948).

⁴ Cf Leech, Kenneth: *True God* (Sheldon, London, 1985), p 344.