

# SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AS A PROCESS

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## *Introduction*

**S**PIRITUAL DIRECTION is a way in which Christians help each other on their pilgrim journey to the fulness of the Kingdom of God. It is a service which one pilgrim offers a fellow pilgrim. Both the spiritual director and the one who seeks direction (the dirigé) are journeying: both are searching for the living God.

The conversation, therefore, between the director and the dirigé is about travelling and searching: about seeking the right way, trying different approaches, retracing one's steps from dead ends and finding the right places to make inquiries: and the searching and the seeking and the inquiry are about the will of God and the dynamic of the journey is the Holy Spirit.

The relationship between director and dirigé is rooted in christian friendship. There is a deep mutuality involved in sharing a common search and in seeking to deepen each other's faith. (What they are engaged upon is a catechesis in the full sense of that word.) Nevertheless, the dirigé comes to the director, and the latter, therefore, plays the leading role in the relationship and lays down the ground plan of the relationship.

## *Process*

In this article I have a very limited objective which is to say something about how a director begins to direct and about a kind of framework in which to direct. I had been reading Thomas Groome's *Christian religious education*<sup>1</sup> when it occurred to me that the process which he was offering for the teacher of religious education was a description of what I was attempting to do in spiritual direction. I define process simply as the steps I have to take to get from A to B: a logical sequence of stages.

Groome's process applied to teaching prayer, for example, would go something like this: what is your present experience of prayer? Do you pray? How often? What does it mean to pray? In other

words, stage one is descriptive of one's present practice and experience of prayer. Stage two asks the question: was it always like this for you? What is the story of your prayer-life? Can you remember when you first began to pray? Stage two seeks for the genesis of one's present experience and attitude to prayer. Stage three is input. This could be very varied: in the case of prayer, it could well be the teacher's own experience of prayer which he/she shares or a book about prayer. The input is presented as something to be considered; to be pondered upon. This consideration forms the basis of stage four in which the subject of the process interacts with the input: the subject modifies his/her understanding of prayer in the light of the input, but also at the same time the input itself undergoes change because it is received by this particular person with this particular history, and so there emerges new insight (be it only a flicker). The fifth stage looks at how this emerging insight spills over and affects what the person intends to do about prayer in future in his/her daily life.

It is not difficult to see how this process can be adapted by a spiritual director to form a framework within which to give direction both with regard to the dirigé's life as a whole and with regard to a particular area or problem.

#### *Stage one*

(a) The dirigé comes to the director, 'I feel a need to come and talk' or 'I've got this or that problem—can I come and talk?' The interchange, the dialogue, the conversation begins. The director's function is to enable the dirigé to talk while he/she listens, not just to the words spoken, but to the whole person of the dirigé: he/she does not want to hear a cool analytical recital of a life or a problem but wants to feel his/her way into that life or problem in its full context including its intellectual, emotional, physical, social and spiritual setting. The director, nevertheless, says as little or as much as is needful for the dirigé to say what he/she wants to say. Many a promising spiritual direction relationship has foundered in its initial stages because of the over-inquisitiveness of a director. The dirigé must be allowed to reveal him/herself in his/her own way at his/her own pace. The object of this interchange is simply to help the dirigé say 'This is me!'

(b) The second element of this first stage is an integral part of helping the dirigé give an account of him/herself: it is affirmation, and this is given non-judgmentally, uncritically. The director

assures the dirigé of his/her goodness: 'It is good to be you!' This is an essential step in the ongoing movement of direction, it is only within and out of this assurance of personal goodness that a person is able to cope with limitation, failure and sin, and to assume responsibility for the story he/she is telling. Perhaps the greatest single stumbling block (I am tempted to say 'disease' because it eats away at the very fabric of the spiritual life) is a poor self-image. The dirigé is affirmed: this does not mean that the non-gospel elements in his/her life are glossed over but that they are put in context and are shown that they can become a way forward. This stage, therefore, is one of story, of affirmation and of responsibility.

### *Stage two*

As I begin to speak of stage two, I would like to emphasise that these stages do not necessarily follow one after the other in a logical sequence, rather they interpenetrate and throw light on one another, perhaps 'movements' rather than 'stages' would be a better word.

Stage two deals with the question: how did the present evolve? What is its genesis? 'How did I come to be the person I am?' The answer to this question begins: 'I remember'. The dirigé remembers, he/she puts together how the elements of his/her life or problem came together. (To remember: to assemble the members, the pieces of the pattern.) The past is opened, not to become a dead past but a living entity contributing to the present whatever that past may have been.

To digress for a moment on how past sinfulness can become a way to life: central to deepening a relationship is forgiveness (making up) after a breakdown (a row) of the relationship. The result of the altercation and forgiveness is not to put the relationship back to where it was before it all happened, but, where the 'making up' is deep and sincere, an enhanced and richer relationship results. This pattern of sin, forgiveness and new life is but a reflection of *felix culpa*, the happy fault which 'gained for us so great a Redeemer!' And so, likewise, one's past can become the source of new future.

But to return to what is involved in this stage. 'Remembering' helps the dirigé uncover the assumptions upon which his/her life is based and the ideologies which govern it. It can, at times, be painful and the dirigé will need the support of the director who

continues to affirm the person, as I noted above. In the course of this stage the dirigé's present goals will emerge, the kind of person he/she sees him/herself becoming. This will enable the dirigé to assess his/her goal and the means he/she is adopting to achieve it and then begin, on the one hand, to look at 'change', the steps he/she will need, perhaps, to take, or on the other hand, to recognize more clearly the value of the way he/she is going and deepen his/her commitment to it.

In helping the dirigé put together the evolution of the present, the director guides him/her to see how God has ever been at work in his/her life. In the thick of the complexity of the present it is frequently very difficult to be aware of God's presence and action; it is only when looking back that we can assert: 'Unless God had been there . . .' In this exercise the director is enabled to understand the 'why' of the present: how the poor self image evolved; how the disturbed image of God emerged; why he/she shies away from feelings, and out of this understanding the director is enabled to begin to put questions into the mind of the dirigé, questions, the answers to which, will help him/her on his/her journey.

I put it this way because the director has always got to remember that what he/she exercises is a facilitating rather than a directive role. (Shades of the argument about what a spiritual director should be called!) The director's function is to let the Holy Spirit communicate directly with the individual who is devoutly seeking the will of God and not to get in the way of this communication.

### *Stage three*

Having described his/her present situation and how it evolved the director's task is to journey on with his/her dirigé seeking the will of God.

The matter of spiritual direction, (that is what the director and the dirigé together reflect upon) is prayer in its widest sense, that is, everything which touches upon one's relationship to God, including relationships to other people. In the course of this exchange the director is continually rooting his/her reflections in scripture, the living challenging Word of God. The director wants the dirigé to see his/her life in the light of Christ whom he/she meets through and in the gospels. The gospels mark out the way and illuminate the goal: praying the gospels reveals the divine will for the individual.

It is in this sense that we can speak of stage three as 'input'; new material, new ideas to enable the individual to feel his/her way forward and find the will of God.

In some situations the director may well recommend a particular book; a religious may be urged to get into contact with the charisma of his/her religious congregation as expressed in its foundation documents; another person may be advised to look at a particular aspect of the teaching of the Church; or it may be that what this individual needs is an experience of working, for example, with the poor.

Whatever the input may be, the object is to help the dirigé feel his/her way forward to a new vision, even if it is only a question of seeing the old way and the old vision in a new light. The whole business of 'what I can become and what I can do with the help of God' takes us to the heart of spiritual direction as we saw in the opening paragraphs of this article; because spiritual direction is accompanying another on a journey and a journey implies a way forward, a goal, a vision to which to direct one's steps, and it is in seeking this way and looking for this goal that the dirigé finds the will of God.

#### *Stage four*

Stage three involves an emerging vision of what it means 'for me' to be christian: 'What I can be with the help of God'—the next staging post of 'my' pilgrim journey. Stage four deals with the ongoing movement of the spiritual life, and is the 'bread and butter' substance of spiritual direction. Broadly speaking it is about the continuing interaction between where the dirigé *is* on his/her journey and where he/she *can be* with the help of God: the interaction between the present and his/her christian vision. It is to be noted that while the christian ideal or vision challenges the dirigé onwards, the dirigé is continually clarifying his/her understanding of this vision while making it his/her own. This is so because though the source of 'what we shall be' is common to all journeyers, the living Word of God, each one as this unique individual makes it his/her own, and gives it his/her own personal stamp. This is the heart of the interaction on the one hand, the dirigé being drawn towards and transformed by the christian vision of what he/she can be with the help of God and, on the other hand, in the journeying making his/her own contribution to what

is the vision of being a Christian, because each one appropriates that vision under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps another way of expressing this is to consider the community dimension of the life of the pilgrim dirigé. It is God who calls and draws the dirigé: God initiates the pilgrimage as God is its goal. Those whom God calls, God graces and accompanies; but in all of this the dirigé is not a single isolated pilgrim, he/she is a member of a pilgrimage and the pilgrimage itself has an inherited vision of what it means to be a pilgrim (the community's understanding of 'Christian'). What the individual pilgrim does is to make his/her own the inherited ideal, the christian vision, and give it his/her own unique characteristics and in so doing makes his/her own contribution to the vision, thereby enriching the inherited ideal of the pilgrimage.

The backcloth to this stage, and indeed to the whole of spiritual direction, is the interplay between God and the individual human being whom God created and the glory of being human, in God's view of human-ness. The creature moved by the Holy Spirit discovers the God who loves him/her. In the discovery he/she becomes aware of the distance between him/herself and God because of sin and his/her lack of response. Conversion to Christ as his/her personal saviour enables him/her to be changed by the paradoxical values of the gospel and approach the God who calls, making the first tentative movement of integration with God and the created order. No sooner does this integration begin before he/she becomes aware again of the distancing of him/herself from the God who loves and draws him/her and the whole process begins anew at another level.

The director ministers to this process. He/she helps the dirigé keep in balance the different elements: the emerging vision of the ideal Christian and the contribution to that ideal which is characteristic of the dirigé; the drawing of God ('unless the Father draws . . .') and the response of the dirigé; the dirigé's limitations and sinfulness and the healing action of Christ, his/her personal saviour; the community and the dirigé in his/her uniqueness.

#### *Stage five*

This stage is already implicit in the previous stage: how it all works out in practice; how it translates into life-style. It answers the question: 'What do I do?' Here the director brings together the pieces: he/she clarifies the issues, points out the various options

and supports the dirigé in feeling his/her way forward. Clearly it would be possible to develop this section at great length, make a book of it (after all I've said nothing about discernment!). This I do not intend to do, but I want to make one plea and that is a plea for the 'provisional'. By that I mean a willingness to experiment, a readiness to assess and evaluate. 'Try praying for half your usual time and do some reading: we'll see how that works'. The provisional builds up an attitude in the director which is good for journeying especially when the leader of the pilgrimage is as elusive as the Holy Spirit.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Groome, Thomas H.: *Christian religious education* (Harper & Row, 1980).