

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

By ELINOR SHEA

THE CURRENT POPULARITY of doing theology through story-telling provides an exceptionally apt vehicle for presenting one concrete answer to the frequently posed questions: 'What is the connection between spiritual direction and social consciousness? Is there a connection at all, and if so, how can it be identified and developed?' This one concrete experience recounted here may encourage and assist others who are searching for answers to those questions.

The story is that of the Center for Spirituality and Justice, a centre established primarily for the training of spiritual directors.¹ The Center was founded in the Bronx, New York, in 1980 through the initiative of Sister Miriam Cleary O.S.U. an experienced spiritual director who had just returned from four years spent in the Caribbean and South America. At centres in Jamaica, Trinidad and Guyana, she and her co-workers trained laity, priests and religious to work as spiritual directors in their own countries. The horizon of the Third World and its needs was therefore a significant influence in her decision to create a training programme for directors in the United States.

From its inception and naming, the Center for Spirituality and Justice was based on a strong faith that the two foci—spirituality and justice—were essentially interconnected, and on an equally strong commitment to discovering where the essential connections lay and how to foster their dynamic interaction in the lives of the trainees and staff of the Center. The fact that each person who joined in the work as staff had some experience either in foreign or domestic missionary work ensured that the horizon of the Third World and the poor would not be lost sight of. Strong as the faith of the staff was in believing in the interconnectedness of spirituality and justice, it soon became clear to them that the task of shaping a training programme on its foundation would not be easy nor would the methodology be obvious.

The directed retreat movement and the growing phenomenon of ongoing spiritual direction, familiar as part of the current life of the Church in the United States, had early on encountered the question: how does the practice of spiritual direction and the marked increase in interest in interior prayer, prayer forms and all that was embraced by the term 'spirituality' relate to the equally strong and equally engaging world of social action? The equation was sometimes framed rather facetiously: 'Do you picket or do you pray?' but the concern was much more serious and searching.

The Synod of Bishops in 1971 had declared unequivocally that 'action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear as a constitutive dimension of preaching the gospel'. The implication of this statement of faith for christian spirituality was real and challenging, but a methodology for implementing it had yet to be created. Directors trained in the ignatian method of contemplative prayer had been taught that their role was to focus primarily, if not exclusively, on the prayer of the directee as the locus for God's action: the movements, affections, attractions, repugnances, enlightenments which were noticed by the directee upon reflection on the prayer experience. The director was to be contemplative before the person directed, and was not to function in the mode of teacher, preacher, pastoral counsellor or advocate of a particular form of christian presence or action in the world. However, after a number of years in the work of spiritual direction, directors began to ask themselves why, in the lives of so many good and praying persons whom they were directing, issues of social concern related to the crying needs of the world did not appear in any significant way except perhaps in expressions of guilt, or 'shoulds' and 'oughts'. Conversely, why, in the lives of dedicated and deeply committed social activists, did contemplative prayer and, for that matter, spiritual direction, appear to them to be somewhat irrelevant to their passionate concern for the creation of a more just society? As the staff of the Center for Spirituality and Justice began their work, they were conscious of these questions both within their own lives and in the lives of the persons who were attracted to the programme, precisely because of their own search for the vital links between justice and spirituality. The challenge to the staff was to shape a programme which would be faithful to the principles of spiritual direction as understood and experienced, and, at the same time, faithful to the belief that whatever was constitutive of the christian life would be

operative and manifest in the lives of praying Christians.

The study of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius provided the basic structure for the programme. Of themselves, however, the Exercises do not address this tension directly. Although the staff did not recognize it formally at the time, they needed to find an anthropology which would give an adequate undergirding for moving ahead in the search for the links between spiritual direction and social consciousness, and which would be in harmony with the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises.

As early as 1974, the Center for Concern in Washington, D.C., had published the work of a task force set up precisely to explore the relationship between 'social consciousness and ignatian spirituality'. The term 'social consciousness' rather than 'social action' gave a new clarity to the question, and the paper, *Soundings*,² proved and proves to be an invaluable resource for the Center staff. Particularly enlightening was an article by Peter Henriot S.J., 'The public dimension of the spiritual life: the problem of "simultaneity"'. This article, coupled with one by Thomas Clarke S.J., 'Societal grace: for a new pastoral strategy', offered the basis needed for the next steps of the process.

Henriot's thesis is that

it is only possible to speak of the reality of the human person today by taking into full account the three dimensions of human existence: the individual, the interpersonal and the public. These are not three separate and distinct dimensions so much as three moments in our perception of a single reality, or three interrelated interpenetrated aspects. Thus the identity of the human person is inadequately situated outside of a consideration of all three dimensions simultaneously.³

These three aspects of the human person are described by Clarke as 'intra-personal, inter-personal and public or societal'.⁴ Every human person experiences her/himself simultaneously in all three dimensions existentially, but the nature of human consciousness is to be attentive to only one of them at any given moment in time. Without a theoretical understanding of the triadic nature of human experience, however, it is all too likely that only one or possibly two dimensions will be noticed, reflected upon and appropriated, with the consequence that the human experience is only partially known and acted within. In working with this insight, the Center staff began to intuit that perhaps directors were suffering from

some kind of blindness or bias which inclined them to focus too narrowly on the intra-personal and inter-personal dimensions of their directees' experience and thereby to fail to notice just how God was drawing and engaging them in the societal dimension of their faith. To use another image, perhaps tri-focal lenses were needed to see all that was already there.

Using the triadic model for perceiving human experience does provide a more suitable lense for expanding the range of the director's attention to include the societal dimension. For it is not a matter then of imposing the societal dimension or of manipulating the directee's experience, and in so doing, moving out of the established contemplative stance appropriate to the director. Rather, the screen is widened and the directee is consistently perceived as a person simultaneously engaged in intense intra-personal activity and consciousness, on-going inter-personal relationships, and living out her/his life within a set of established and defining structures and institutions in the societal arena. A different and more freeing challenge was offered the director. Rather than trying to make the connections between justice and spirituality, she/he was to become alert to detect and recognize how God was initiating this activity in the lives of the believers.

As the staff worked with this model of human experience, the fruitfulness of the approach became more apparent. However, since spiritual direction is primarily concerned with the *religious* experience of the person in its totality, not only in its informal or formal prayer experiences, what was then needed was a theological vision and language which would be an adequate complement to this anthropology and would be useful in spiritual direction training and practice. Two articles of Karl Rahner's answered this need in wonderfully congruent ways.

The articles, 'The experience of God today',⁵ and 'The experience of God and the experience of self',⁶ at first glance appeared to the trainees in the Center as too dense, unnecessarily complex and not obviously useful. However, serious work with Rahner's thought paid a rich harvest. The essential fruit gathered was a working understanding of Rahner's thesis that the experience of God today is *also* an experience of simultaneity, that is to say that any experience of God is simultaneously an experience of self and an experience of the neighbour. Moreover, the experience, wherever it begins, develops and moves from a non-thematic stage to a reflective and finally an interpretive level. As the staff gradually

familiarized itself with these concepts and juxtaposed them with the insights of Henriot and Clarke, a grid began to emerge which became a frame of reference and teaching tool in the training programme. The grid began to look something like this:

The experience of the directee

	intra-personal	inter-personal	societal
non-thematic			
reflective			
interpretive			

Of what use is this grid to the spiritual director? An example may illustrate. The example is drawn from an actual session of spiritual direction in which the director's consciousness had been shaped by this grid and was the receptive screen receiving the communication from the directee. The directee recounted a series of experiences, some in the mode of almost casual conversation or information, some with more explicit religious focus, some of significance but not perceived consciously as part of the formal religious experience. The directee is a person who has consistently experienced herself as having received a strong and deep gift of faith and has experienced God's fidelity in her life. She has also been drawn to involvement in peace and justice issues in her life.

The session opened with an observation that her little nephew was feeling sad because of the birth of a new baby in the family. He had lost his place of importance and was suffering from it; this was reported with a lot of feeling and compassion. The conversation then moved to two experiences of the directee during liturgies, one in her own parish and the other in a vacation place. In each instance the setting was familiar—a church filled with Sunday worshippers—and in each instance an unfamiliar interior word sounded, expressing itself as, 'What in hell am I doing here?' and accompanied by feelings of surprise, confusion, alienation and anger. Later in the conversation, a sense of loss was expressed over the departure of an intimate friend from her community, a

loss intensified by the acknowledgment that the friend was entering into a lesbian relationship. Loss was present, as well as a desire to be faithful to the person in so far as possible. At some point there was a rather disheartened reference to the reversal of many programmes of social welfare due to the direction being taken by the Reagan administration. Finally, the directee, who was just beginning the programme at the Center for Spirituality and Justice, recounted an experience of formal prayer. The participants had been asked to spend some time in prayer and to allow their prayer to offer them an answer to the question: 'What do you desire from your participation in this programme?' The answer came to her, clearly, surprisingly, somewhat disconcertingly: 'To be faithful to God even if God is not there'.

A verbatim of the session would naturally provide a more detailed picture of the flow of the conversation and the movement. For the purposes of this article, what is more important is the fact that the director, because of being attuned to the grid described above, noticed connections related to loss, alienation, death, sadness, fear, experienced in each of the three arenas. The director noticed, too, that some of the experiences were on the non-thematic level (at the liturgies), some had moved to the reflective, (the relationship with the friend), some more interpretive (the consequences of the Reagan policies). The director could also note the underlying thread of desire: a desire to be faithful to a faithful God, to friendship, to peace and justice commitments, *no matter what*. A single focus, rather than the triadic one being proposed here, might have meant that the unity and simultaneity of this directee's experience of herself, and her neighbour (inter-personally and societally) and her God would not have been perceived and reflected on.

The actual movement in the session is more dynamic than the grid and its static, geometric shape suggests. While not every session touches upon all three areas quite so clearly as in the one described above, experience suggests that with heightened consciousness and trained attentiveness, the director will, over time, perceive this pattern of experience. In being able to reflect this perception back to the directee, the director can facilitate in a fuller way the directee's recognition of the movement of God's grace in her/his life. The meaning of the experience may not be immediately available, indeed, cannot be when the experience is at the non-thematic level. But meaning is not the initial concern.

Rather, in the session, the directee is assisted in re-experiencing the non-thematic, in describing it as best she/he can. Through the director's reflecting, questioning, noticing, the experience may begin to unfold, and be appropriated more fully by the directee. In the process the experience will eventually move from the non-thematic to the reflective and ultimately the interpretive level, the latter being the level of meaning, of theological interpretation. All the while the conversation and experience may be moving around within and among the three arenas of the experience, the intra-personal, the inter-personal and the societal.

While the director gives primary attention to the arena in which the directee initiates the interview, she/he is also listening attentively to where and how the essence of the experience may be appearing in the other two areas. Since the grace of God affects us through the principle of attraction, this grace, operative in the person, will exercise the same attraction in each of the dimensions of the person's life, although the connection may not be immediately apparent. The synchronicity of the inner and outer worlds appears again and again. The attentive director, listening and looking from the vantage point of the above grid, is in a position to be affected by the attraction operative in the directee and will be able to point out or tease out the possible connections. The grid, then, places in the director's hand a kind of Ariadne's thread, the golden thread of desire, attraction, specific and unique in each directee, and enables the director to detect and follow the movement of God's grace in the religious experience of the directee, and help the directee to respond to this movement in all its richness and mystery. 'The mystery we call God' touches, moves, attracts, challenges, and is free to capture our attention at any place, at any time, and in any way. As the programme at the Center for Spirituality and Justice developed, it became clearer and clearer to the staff that the director not only witnesses the activity of God and the faithful response of the directee, but also works in the triadic maze as a translator and de-coder, attuned to the language of 'the experience of God today', and not limited to only the traditional language which often obscures as much as it illuminates.

Having come to this point in the evolution of the Center, having their initial faith now supported and elucidated by an operative anthropology and theology—a process which took about three years of intensive study, experimentation, reflection and evaluation—the staff was nevertheless still aware that in the case presentations and

verbatimims of the trainees, even though this theoretical apparatus was in place, operationally the majority of the spiritual direction sessions under supervision remained chiefly in the intra- and inter-personal areas and rarely included in any integrated way, the area of social concern, social consciousness, the societal, the public, the structural area of the lives of the people being directed. At this point the staff sought a methodology for doing the training which would finally bridge the gap still present.

Up to this point, the format for the training was not unlike a number of other programmes. Among the resources and tools that had consistently been used were the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius, and various published materials on the dynamic of spiritual direction and on the psychological principles operative in any helping relationship. Each trainee was providing spiritual direction on a regular basis for at least two people and meeting weekly to present a verbatim to her/his supervisor. These individual sessions were complemented by case conference presentations. In looking for an additional tool which would somehow bring to light the societal dimension of experience and affect the social consciousness of the staff and trainees, two members of the staff recalled the model of the praxis cycle, developed by Peter Henriot and Joseph Holland,⁷ and used in a workshop conducted by Thomas Clarke which staff members had attended. While the praxis cycle was developed for use with groups which were trying to come to some effective social analysis and pastoral action within a commonly shared structure, it occurred to the staff members that it could be adapted for use by individuals, and that the conscious and systematic reflection on a structure in this mode could provide an avenue to a transformed consciousness in the director who would then be more able to facilitate this process in her/his directees without violating the principles of spiritual direction. The enthusiasm with which the entire staff took up the idea signalled that a new source of energy and creativity was being tapped.

The praxis cycle, which is also called the pastoral cycle, soon began to be referred to in the programme as the experience cycle which connected it more directly with the basis of all spiritual direction, the experience of the directee. Some of the staff had been shaped in their earlier days by membership in Young Christian Students, so the experience cycle was readily recognized as based on that natural impulse to 'observe, judge and act'. However, as Freire had demonstrated, particularly in *Pedagogy of the*

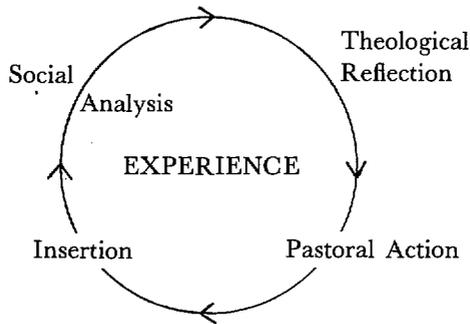
oppressed, what is *seen* and the underlying meaning of what is seen, in terms of structural analysis and naming, are quite different realities. The de-coding process which Freire developed in his literacy programme not only enabled people to read, in the traditional sense, but also to read and name their reality as subjects, and, in the process, take the first step toward transformation of their lives through transforming the structures which shaped their consciousness.

The staff decided to adapt the focus and structure of the pastoral cycle and create out of it a form for a verbatim. Whereas the traditional verbatim reported on a session between a director and directee and recorded not only the spoken dialogue between the two, but also the non-verbal, and especially the affective responses of the director, this second verbatim form would provide a format for reporting on a dialogue between the director (in this case, trainee) and a structure in her/his life which impinged on and in some instances seemed to control her/him precisely in the public, societal dimension of life. The staff experimented with the process to test its validity and try to work out any kinks. Their experience confirmed their intuition about the possibility of a break-through in finding the elusive links between spiritual direction and social consciousness.

What does the process involve? At the beginning of the year, the trainees were introduced to the four phases of the experience cycle: insertion, social analysis, theological reflection and pastoral planning. They were then instructed to dialogue with their own lives and, with the help of their supervisors, to choose a structure in their lives that they wished to investigate. The choice could be indicated either by a strong attraction or a repugnance to the structure. Initially time had to be taken to narrow down the scope so that the structure selected was as specific as possible and truly a structure as the term came to be used. A working definition of structure emerged: an independently operative set of relationships in which one is involved but which has a life of its own and would continue to operate whether one was involved in it or not. Some of the structures selected will illustrate the concept, as, for example, membership in an on-going covenant community, membership on a parish pastoral team, membership within a religious community (local, provincial, international), membership on a retreat house team, membership on a college faculty, a seminary faculty. In each instance, the person influences and is influenced by the

structure, while the structure has an independent existence.

The structure having been selected, then a series of questions was offered as a help to enter into the phases of the cycle. The most recent form these questions took, plus a diagram of the cycle follow. In each phase, the questions helped to get at the underlying reality, assumptions, inter-relationships involved in the structure in a manner not unlike the dialogue that would ordinarily be recorded in a spiritual direction session verbatim.



Insertion phase (surfacing actual experience and affective response)

What is happening to you and to others, relative to the structure? What are your feelings about your experience? How do you find yourself responding, in behaviour, in feeling, in prayer? Where and with whom do you locate yourself or identify as you consider this structure? When you consider this structure or discuss it do you find that you tend to leave out certain people or groups? Relative to the structure, who are the poor, the oppressed? What role do they play in your considerations? Pray for the light to discern the presence of the Spirit in the midst of the experience you are considering.

Social analysis phase (becoming objective; getting at the facts and interconnections)

What is the history? How did the structure come about, develop, change? What analytical tradition(s) have been operative in this history? What one(s) are you using as you analyze the structure? (For example, if the structure is economic, is the tradition socialist, capitalist; if political, is it participative, authoritative; if ecclesial, is it hierarchical, communitarian?) What are the operative assumptions flowing from the tradition(s) being used? What are the social

relationships involved? (class, race, sex, etc.) How is power being exercised? Who has it? Who makes decisions? Who benefits? Who bears the cost?

Are any trends emerging? What will happen if the situation continues as it is now? Pray to discern the 'signs of the times' and the sources of creativity and hope.

Theological reflection phase (becoming contemplative; allowing the gospel values involved to surface)

What reinforces, or undercuts gospel values, or social teachings of the Church in the situation under consideration? What theological stances are involved (e.g. God as loving or condemning; creature as good or evil; the Church as pyramid or people of God)? What scripture passages apply to the situation? What is graced, open to God? What is sinful, turning from God in the situation? Have there been any transformative aspects to the experience as you have moved through the phases so far? Any spontaneous insights, understandings? Pray to be aware of the movements of light/darkness, peace/disquiet, encouragement/dis-encouragement which have occurred.

Pastoral action phase (becoming concrete as to action to be taken)

How much freedom do you experience as you move toward this phase? What concrete responses arose in you to the movements you noticed in the theological reflection? What concrete actions are possible to bring about what you see as needed relative to the situation under consideration? Which of these do you consider most effective? Who would be involved in carrying out the action(s)? Are the poor and oppressed involved? Is service *for* or *with* others involved? What are the implications of the actions? (e.g. hostility/acceptance; enthusiasm/apathy, etc.) What means will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the actions? Pray for the strength to move into the decisions and actions which have emerged.

These questions, adapted from Henriot and Holland's original ones, have undergone several revisions in the process of working with the cycle and the revisions are themselves a fruit of applying the cycle to the structure of the training programme itself.

In the training programme which encompasses thirty weeks of the year, the verbatim on a spiritual direction session with a directee was alternated each week with a 'verbatim' on the trainee's dialogue with the selected structure. As each phase of the cycle

was completed, a completion which was noted as the outcome of an organic process, the trainee was invited to move to the next phase. An interesting dynamic appeared. In the first two phases, analytic and cognitive skills were called upon primarily. The transition into the theological phase called for a different kind of skill. Experience showed that the theological reflection phase remained at an elusive and somewhat sterile plateau until a more contemplative and receptive stance was assumed by the person using the cycle. Then the theological connection, which had the character, usually, of the non-thematic level of experience, appeared and was noticed. At times it came through the awareness of a familiar and significant scripture passage, or an image, or a word. The revision of the questions for this phase reflects this insight rather clearly.

The movement into pastoral action was strongly influenced by the quality of the theological reflection thus described. The actions which proved to be most appropriate to the process frequently were less dramatic than the term 'social action' often connotes; however, within the structures selected, they often had a free and transforming effect on the trainee and on the structure, partly because of the action and partly because of the consciousness which had emerged out of the various phases. For example, the decision-making process of a provincial Chapter was a structure selected by one person. The pastoral action taken was to suggest the experience cycle to the steering committee of the Chapter. Several months later a decision was made to structure the Chapter proceedings around the experience cycle. Boycotting the Chapter could also have been a way of registering dissatisfaction with the previous decision-making process. The suggestion of the cycle provided an alternative method which had a consciousness-raising component built right into it.

A cardinal principle of spiritual direction is that the initiative is always God's; the responsibility of the directee, and of the director, is to pay attention to where God is acting, initiating. Just as in prayer traditionally understood, so too in the realm of social consciousness, the initiative is God's. If 'action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear as a constitutive dimension of preaching the gospel' then faith informs us that God will act in harmony with that belief. The story of the Center for Spirituality and Justice offers one concrete

example of how directors were enabled to be attentive and responsive to that action.

NOTES

¹ The author is indebted to the staff and participants in the Center for Spirituality and Justice for their assistance and encouragement in writing this article, and for allowing the author to use their experience.

² *Soundings*, (Center of Concern, Washington, D.C., 1974).

³ *Ibid*, p 13.

⁴ *Ibid*, p 15.

⁵ Rahner, Karl: 'The experience of God today', *Theological Investigations*, XI, (Darton, Longman, and Todd, London, 1974), pp 149-165.

⁶ Rahner, Karl: 'The experience of God and the experience of self', *Theological Investigations*, VI, (Darton, Longman, and Todd, London, 1969), pp 231-249.

⁷ Holland, Joe and Henriot, Peter, S.J.: *Social analysis: linking faith and justice*, (Orbis Books in collaboration with the Center of Concern, New York, 1983). See Chapter 1, p 7 ff.