

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN THE SINGLE MEETING

By PETER VERITY

RETURNING FROM giving a parish mission recently, two of us were reflecting on what had taken place. Between us, in the course of the week, we had talked at some depth with about forty people, the majority of whom were wanting to grow in prayer or faith. 'I'm really beginning to realize', said my companion, 'that if people want to progress in their prayer and in their faith, they will need some regular guidance and help. Perhaps all we can give in the short time we have with them is to point towards some more regular direction'.

As I have reflected on this and similar experiences, I have gradually become aware that there is a paradox contained in the title of this article. Using the terms in the strictest sense, spiritual direction is not possible in a single meeting; at the same time, a single meeting can complement regular direction significantly and, more importantly, be the occasion for initiating a person into regular direction. It will be helpful to try to unpack something of this paradox before exploring the area of the single meeting more fully.

In recent years there has been a growing emphasis on the idea of 'journey' in a person's life. The Vatican Council's insistence on the Church as a pilgrim people,¹ and the increased use of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults,² have been two of the major contributions to this understanding. In this climate spiritual direction can be described as accompanying a person on his/her journey through life. The director is the companion, the objective observer of the developing relationship between the individual and God. He or she is there in the good times and in the times of crisis, when things are developing quickly or when nothing seems to be happening. In talking of how a community provides sponsorship for a new convert, James Fowler sums up many of the things which could be applied to the spiritual director:

The sponsor is one who walks with you; one who knows the path and can provide guidance. The sponsor is one who engenders trust and proves trustworthy in supporting you in difficult passages

or turns. The sponsor may, as needed, confront you, insisting that difficult issues be faced and that self-deceptions or sloth be avoided. The sponsor or sponsoring community should be able to provide both models and experiences in education and spiritual direction that deepen and expand one's initial commitments and provide nurture for strong and continuing growth.³

Seen like this, it is difficult to understand how spiritual direction can take place in a single meeting. There is no sense of 'accompanying' anyone, no sense of continuity, no possibility for long-term development. This is why, I believe, the first part of the paradox is true. If spiritual direction is understood in this way, it is simply not possible in a single meeting.

When does it occur?

Before examining the positive value of the single meeting for spiritual direction, it will be useful to clarify what exactly is meant by a single meeting and when it is likely to occur. As I understand it, the single meeting is an occasion when a person asks for some help or guidance and there is little likelihood of meeting that person again. This can occur literally in a single meeting or it can even be several meetings within a short space of time. For example, one person directing another in an eight-day retreat, while it is not strictly a single meeting, could hardly be said, in the context of a life-long journey, to be 'accompanying' another. The significant feature which qualifies this as a single meeting is that the guidance does not continue after the retreat.

My own experience of helping people in a single meeting has come from the last seven years when, as a member of the Catholic Missionary Society, I have given parish missions throughout England and Wales. We would visit a parish for two weeks and, among other things, we always gave people the opportunity to come to talk to us individually. At the end of the mission we moved on to another parish in a different part of the country so that there was rarely any possibility of seeing those people again. In no sense were we their spiritual directors, but I would hope that our meeting with them did make an important contribution to their life journey. Any person who gives retreats or missions will be familiar with similar situations.

As well as a retreat or mission, it is my belief that all Christians meet occasions in which they have to share something of their faith. I am thinking of the chance encounter on a train or in

talking with a stranger in other circumstances. This is rarely thought of in terms of spiritual direction but in the light of 'the single meeting which contributes towards the journey', then it can be of great significance.

Another frequent opportunity for a single meeting will be within the context of the sacrament of reconciliation. Especially since the advent of the 'open' or 'face-to-face' confession, many people are increasingly using this as an opportunity for guidance and direction. While the confessional may not be the ideal place for regular direction,⁴ for most priests this will be the most frequent occasion when they are asked to give help in a single meeting.

From all that has been said, it is clear that the opportunities for a single meeting which gives guidance and help are very frequent. Priests in their day-to-day parish life, people giving retreats, and all Christians, will be called on many times to help people along their journey. It is important therefore to discover in what ways these occasional meetings can contribute to the process of spiritual direction and to the life journey of the individual.

A model for the single meeting

The picture that keeps coming back to my mind as I think of the place of the single meeting in spiritual direction is one of days spent walking on the fells of the Lake District in England. I would usually walk with a companion who would be there throughout the journey. There would also be people whom we met on the way. Some of these would be merely casual meetings with little interest or importance—just 'passing the time of day'; but there would be other meetings which could alter the whole nature of the day's walk.

I can remember people who would stop to talk and would tell us of an interesting feature ahead, something we must be sure not to miss. Others would help to point out the right way when we had lost our bearings. Sometimes on a very hot day when we had stopped to rest, another walker would stop to rest for a while and the new voice and new face would give us the encouragement to start off again with a spring in our step.

Those casual encounters were important for our walk. It was exciting as we set out in the morning wondering what adventures lay ahead and what interesting people we would meet. And there was always a story, over a welcome glass of beer at the end of the day, of the things we had done and more especially of the people

we had met.

This picture seems to be a useful one in understanding something of the value and the limitations of the single meeting in spiritual direction. While a single meeting can never be spiritual direction in the sense of companionship on our journey, it frequently does make a vital contribution to the total journey. We must now try to explore this contribution more fully.

The value of the single meeting

From my experience of giving parish missions, there seem to be four particular types of help given in a single meeting which are of value for spiritual direction. In each case I will give an example from my own experience, relate this to an example from the gospels and finally draw out one or two more general points.

Encouragement

Some time ago a young woman came to me after a mission service. I had been talking about Christ as 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' and this had disturbed her. She was distressed because life had been treating her badly and she could see no purpose in it. She needed encouragement, affirmation, and a sense of her personal dignity and value. Within that single meeting which lasted for almost two hours she became aware that God loved her and that she had a contribution to make to the world.

The gospel story that comes to mind to illustrate this is the story of the transfiguration. This account in Luke (9,28-36) is immediately preceded by the first prophecy of the passion and the explanation of the condition of following Jesus as 'taking up your cross every day'. It is not hard to imagine that the apostles would have been in need of some sort of encouragement after that and the transfiguration experience would have given them just such encouragement.

When people come to talk to a retreat director or priest they will often have questions about their prayer, their faith or their lives in general which indicate that they are beginning to become discouraged. A word of affirmation is sometimes all that is needed to start them again on their journey. If they have no regular director, the single meeting can be vital in providing this affirmation. If they do have regular direction, the encouragement they are already receiving will be helped by a new face and a new approach.

Challenge

Somebody came to see me recently because she was feeling that her parish priest was not allowing her to use her talents as she thought they should be used. She wanted to give her life to the Church and all she was meeting was frustration and rejection. To me, as an outsider and a stranger to her, it soon became obvious that she was a very generous person but that she was suffering from a kind of 'tunnel vision' with regard to the Church. She could not see beyond the parish boundaries, and the wider issues of justice, peace, and involvement in society had escaped her. She needed to be challenged in order to develop new and wider horizons.

The story of the samaritan woman in chapter four of John's gospel is a good example of challenging a person to a broader vision. Jesus challenges the woman to go beyond the narrow confines of her society and religious traditions; water from the well leads to the discovery of 'living water'; the traditional local religious rites are broadened to 'worship in spirit and in truth'.

There are times when people come to talk when it starts to emerge that there are areas of their lives that they are ignoring or are not aware of. For instance, there may be a moral problem which they have pushed to the back of their consciousness, or it could be that their prayer is being used as an escape from life. In these and similar cases, they may find that the conversation takes an uncomfortable turn and what they had hoped would be a few words of advice starts to reveal something which at a deeper level they know they should be tackling. If they have a regular director, he/she may be working at this, although it is always possible it may have been overlooked. But if they are not receiving regular direction, the new face may be the opportunity to challenge them into a wider awareness.

Healing and liberation

A few years ago I picked up a hitch-hiker travelling north on the motorway. He told me how seven years previously both his parents had been killed in a crash on this road and since then he had been roving round Europe trying to find what he wanted to do. We talked for a long time about his experiences which became particularly vivid as we passed the spot where his parents were killed. In the course of about three hours he 're-lived' the experiences of the past seven years and in doing so helped to heal himself

of the scars of the past.

There are many gospel stories of Jesus healing the sick but the one which stands out as a good example in this case is from the ninth chapter of John's gospel, the story of the man born blind. This seems especially apt because physical blindness can often be taken as representing spiritual blindness, and indeed in the gospel story the man is also spiritually blind until Jesus frees him and heals him.

People who come for help may often be scarred by things in the past. It may be some memory, some guilt or some relationship in the past which has had an influence on their lives ever since and it may be something which they have never faced up to. In a single meeting there is the opportunity to heal these things from the past, to free people from what oppresses them and start them afresh in love of God and of others.

New direction

An elderly woman came to talk to me recently during a parish mission. She went to Mass every day, she told me, said morning and evening prayers and in general lived a very good life. But things did not seem the same as they used to in her prayer. She could not keep her mind on things and she did not get any of the feelings she used to have when she prayed. She was the sort of person who was trying to grow in her spiritual life but she needed some more regular direction if she was to progress. The single meeting I had with her was the opportunity to point her towards more regular direction and explain how it would help her in her growth in prayer.

In Luke's gospel we read the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24,13-35). We are told that Jesus 'opened their minds to understand the scriptures' and then later 'took bread, blessed it and broke it'. It is almost as though, in that single meeting, he were pointing these two disciples and all disciples of the future in a new direction which would lead them to seek him in Word and Sacrament.

Just as the person we meet on our walk on the fells may be able to point the way ahead, so a director in the single meeting may be able to point to a new way on our journey of faith. Examples of a new direction would be to introduce people to the possibility of using scripture in prayer, or to suggest that they might consider starting to receive regular direction.

In these four examples we have been considering the value of the single meeting. The advantages to be gained would be true for someone who is already receiving regular spiritual direction, in which case the encounter with a new person can give a freshness which will complement the regular direction. But the greatest benefit of the single meeting would be for those who are not used to receiving regular direction, for in these occasional meetings they may catch a glimpse of something which they find they want on a more regular basis and thus they would begin to seek a 'companion for the journey' in spiritual direction.

Dangers in the single meeting

When someone comes for guidance in a single meeting, there is a need for even greater sensitivity than in a long-term relationship since there is less time to get to know the person well. With the need for this sensitivity there are several dangers which, while they should not be exaggerated, it will be as well to mention at this stage.

Putting people into categories with regard to their prayer or their faith is one of the most obvious dangers. Almost subconsciously there is the tendency to think that the problem is a common one and that this is the way to deal with it. There is a further danger of giving the instant answer and of being oversimplistic. Sometimes the director can fall into the trap of giving the person too much direction—trying to solve all the problems in the one meeting. It is perhaps a natural reaction to feel that this person is only here once so the most must be made of it while the opportunity is there. The opposite danger to this is to give too little time, feeling that this person's difficulty is so minor compared to others that it should be rushed through so as to leave more time for the more needy cases. There is the danger of being judgemental, of comparing this person with some objective norm without entering fully into his/her particular spiritual journey. Finally there are the people who are 'shopping around' for someone who will agree with them, and the people who really should be referred to more expert help as in certain pathological cases.

The main way to cope with these dangers in the single meeting is to be aware of their existence. This person who has come for direction is in a personal and individual relationship with God. The director is privileged to get a brief insight into that relationship and to be available as an instrument for God to use in furthering

it. I believe that this sort of sensitivity is something which directors may or may not have a feel for. A willingness to love this person as an individual is essential but after that it is a matter of discretion, tact and practice.

How to approach the meeting.

We have already seen what we can hope to achieve in any spiritual direction in a single meeting. The meeting itself will tend to be more free-flowing than the meeting with a regular director and circumstances will dictate how it should be structured. Some people will talk more than others, some may need prompting, some will listen to what is being said, others will not. It would be impossible to try to give a rigid structure for such a meeting, but there are three things I have found helpful which, without in any sense making them the norm, can be useful in beginning to structure the meeting.

a) Sharing

The confidence which a person builds up with a director over many months and years is not possible in the single meeting. Confidence has to be built up quickly and sometimes this will involve the director in sharing something of his or her own story. How I coped at some stage in my life with a similar situation, or how I have met other people who have coped with that situation in their lives may be necessary to give confidence to the person looking for help.

b) Questions

More questions about a person's background will be necessary. In regular direction a picture of the life of the directee will build up over the months. When people only come for one meeting, nothing of their background is known. An invitation to tell something of their past history, or at least of anything in it that they feel is significant, is essential if a picture is to emerge which will help the director.

c) Prayer

At the end of the session it is often helpful in the single meeting to offer to pray with the person. This will have to be according to his/her capacity but it should be something which presents itself as a result of the dialogue which has taken place. More often than not, prayer and the person's own prayer will have been discussed

and this could lead naturally into a prayer before the end. Sometimes this prayer may be very simple, at other times it may be a sharing, at others again it may be scriptural. But I believe that the benefit of this prayer in the single meeting cannot be over-estimated and there are few occasions when it would not be appropriate.

Conclusion

For a person to be effective in any sort of spiritual direction, holiness of life and a willingness to realize that it is God's work that is being done are essential prerequisites. This is even more so in the circumstances of a single meeting. Because there is no possibility of planning for such a meeting, there is even more need to trust in the guidance of God and to believe that he is working through us. The only real preparation that we can ever do is to grow in our own personal relationship and trust in God. We never know who is coming through the door to see us next; we do not know what problems they are going to present or what situation they find themselves in. All we do know is that they are individuals who are loved by God and, whether they are the greatest saints or the greatest sinners, that we have been placed in a privileged position in being asked to help them.

All of us are on a journey of faith, an adventure which leads we know not where. An important part of that journey is the companions we choose to accompany us—these are the spiritual directors who will observe our relationship as we travel along. But an equally important part of the journey will be those people whom we meet along the way, the chance encounters which set us in a new direction, which challenge us, which at times encourage us to continue.

NOTES

¹ See especially the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, chapters 1 and 2.

² First published by the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship in 1972.

³ Fowler, James W.: *Stages of faith* (New York, 1981), p 287.

⁴ For a good summary of the place and the limitations of the sacrament of reconciliation in spiritual direction, cf *Soul friend* by Kenneth Leech (London, 1977), pp 195-225.