

# HOW MUCH THEOLOGY DO SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS NEED?

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THERE ARE TWO WAYS OF LOOKING at this question. The first is to look at it from the point of view of spiritual directors already well versed in theology: then it might be to say, 'Here is an alarming state of affairs, so many people setting up as spiritual directors, without a proper knowledge of theology'. The second way of looking at the question is more positive, saying for instance, 'Here are many more people becoming skilled for spiritual direction. How can one best help them to reach a sufficient knowledge and understanding of theology to give them a rounded preparation for the work?'

I naturally incline to the second way. I have been involved for some years now in the training of prayer guides, mainly for work in parish weeks of guided prayer. It was the prayer guides themselves who thereupon asked for a background course in theology, because of the questions that arose in prayer-guiding situations which they felt inadequate to deal with as things stood. From there, in our situation at Loyola Hall where I work, they go on further to a longer and more searching course in spiritual guidance if the work they have done already seems to point that way and if they so desire. Thus the basic theology course comes between the initial introduction to a simple prayer guiding and the course in spiritual guidance proper.

I think we always have to bear in mind that spiritual direction is more of an art, whereas theology is more of a science. Spiritual directors are probably born, not trained into being. The best theologian in the world might be quite uncomfortable as a spiritual director. On the other hand, someone to whom others naturally turn for spiritual guidance is obviously all the better for a sound grounding in theology. Hence, for the purposes of this article, I will presume that courses in prayer guidance or full spiritual direction (the latter explicitly involving any or all areas of life and not just prayer) have managed to sift out and train those with a natural gift for the work.

Of course the mere fact that others flock to a person does not mean necessarily that the person is in fact worth following. Even visionaries can be misled and therefore misleading. I remember reading one of the more remote messages from one of the visionaries of Fatima to the effect that Mary was holding back the arm of Jesus which was raised ready to smite the world for good and all. Theology would step in there and point out that Jesus is our redeemer, not Mary; Jesus is actually on our side, as he always was. On the other hand, without the true visionaries of history, without Abraham, Jacob, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mary, Teresa of Avila and so many others, there would be no theology worth the name.

The work of spiritual direction these days tends to be of two main sorts. There is the continual accompanying of another who comes regularly for direction, stretching perhaps over years, and there is the more intense situation where someone comes to another to make a retreat over a certain number of days. The latter form of direction is usually conducted according to a particular religious tradition, often connected with a specific religious order or religious movement. For the purposes of this article, the difference between these two forms of direction does not matter: both have the same need for a measure of theology.

The beginning of wisdom in tackling questions of theology is to know when I do not know. In other words, when confronted in a prayer-guiding or direction situation with a question of theology to which I do not know an answer, then to say so, or at least to give only a tentative answer. Both parties to such an agreement as spiritual direction involves need to go into it with a readiness to believe the other is a person of good will, and therefore to put the best possible interpretation on what is said to them by the other.<sup>1</sup> There are after all many varying ways of understanding the faith, even within orthodox Christianity.

Perhaps my best way of proceeding will be to enumerate some of the branches of theology, and to indicate how relatively important I would judge each of them to be for a spiritual director.

I imagine most courses in prayer guiding would necessarily introduce the candidates to issues in the study of *spirituality*. The course would surely include the theory and practice of discernment, and an understanding of what is meant by progress in prayer and progress in the spiritual life. There will be an introduction (for those who need it) to different forms of prayer, to the practice of the examen and so on. One of the most precious results of parish weeks of guided prayer is that they release people from straitjacket forms of vocal prayer into an

easier relationship with God. Hence the guides themselves have to be helped to be free before they start accompanying others. In the courses held in our own house we tend to use the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola very extensively: in the initial course mainly for the rules of discernment and for ways of praying, but in the fuller course to give a working knowledge of the whole text and pattern of the Exercises.

Where many of our prayer guides feel themselves to be inadequate is in *biblical* theology, and that in various ways. They look for a better understanding of the background of the various books of the Bible, many of which they have met mainly in short extracts given to them for their own prayer or as suggestions for them to offer to others. They also need some help in understanding different forms of literature in the Bible. Not many these days are instinctive fundamentalists when they come to us in the first place, but they like to be reassured about their own instincts, such as that the first twelve chapters of Genesis have a way of putting things very different from, say, the story of David in the Second Book of Samuel. Once they have found their own way around the Scriptures, they can set about forming their own concordance of their favourite passages of the various books, first for their own use in prayer, and then also to be able to share with those they guide, but from passages they themselves have chosen and loved, rather than relying on someone else's ready-made lists.

If there is time and if there is a perceived need, then there should also be an introduction to the aspect of *fundamental* theology which investigates the way the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament books came to be, their reliability as documents, the grounds they give for faith, and their way of expressing the truth, along with some understanding of the shape of the primitive Church.

In *sacramental* theology, I would say an understanding of sacraments in general is more important for a director than a detailed knowledge of the theology of the individual sacraments. Sacraments always celebrate something that is already true. I am a child of God, in Christ, chosen before the foundation of the world, as is everyone else. Christians are the ones who celebrate that fact in a ceremony of baptism, thus bringing home the truth into everyday life. The sacrament of reconciliation celebrates the fact that we are already forgiven, thus bringing forgiveness into our emotions instead of leaving it in our heads. The sacrament of marriage celebrates the everlasting love that is there within the Trinity and that is shown towards us sinners. For a person in prison a birthday uncelebrated would be a non-event, whereas the next birthday celebrated in freedom at home would feel

like a real birthday. Sacraments too are celebrations, and work like celebrations. They are not magic. They fulfil the strange but veritable truth put forward by Jesus, that when we ask for something in prayer, we should believe that we have it already, and it will be ours (Mk 11:24). The fundamental 'grace', or gift, is that of being a child of God; the sacraments in their various ways deepen or strengthen that relationship.

The needful amount of *moral* theology is also, I would hold, chiefly a matter of some fundamental principles, rather than a skill in applying them to endless particular situations. The generation that produces today's prayer guides or would-be spiritual directors is still strongly influenced by a form of moral teaching, among Roman Catholics at least, which is just about clean contrary to the gospel. I refer to the submission of conscience to authority and a neglect of the inalienable role of conscience in every moral decision. Conscience is not a worry about past actions, but a judgement by me about the action in front of me which I have not yet performed. Do I judge that proposed action to be right or wrong? Obviously it is good to study causes and effects, to listen to advice, to think and to pray – all these things – but in the end it is my conscience I must follow when the moment of decision arrives. No one else can tell me the answer to that question, not the pope, not my bishop, not the parish priest, not my parents, not the government, not my teachers, not my doctor, not my friends. Only God and I know the answer. 'You have one Father – the one in heaven' (Mt 23:9).

Yet there is a whole generation of Catholics who still picture an informed conscience as one in which another authority has informed me about the rights and wrongs of the action before me, after which I must take their word for it. Matters of sexual morality have brought this question to a head in recent decades, but the effects of not following one's own conscience can be devastating in so many areas: just imagine a Germany or Austria where millions might have been as willing as Franz Jägerstatter to object in conscience to what the Nazis were planning. How infinitely sweeter the history of this century would have been. I can remember as a child and as a teenager being taught to obey my lawful superiors in all that was not sin, but always the presumption, at least in the case of church authorities, was that it was unthinkable that they would order anything sinful. Nobody mentioned in this context that it was indeed and always a sin to go against my own conscience.

Other basic principles of moral theology need underlining as well as the priority of conscience. That authority does not define what is right

or wrong. That things are forbidden because they are wrong, not vice versa. That wrong actions are wrong, whether or not anyone has ever seen fit to forbid them. That the Christian faith is not the only source of our knowledge of what is right and what is wrong.<sup>2</sup> That there is a difference between subjective and objective morality, in that a person may honestly think an action to be for the best when in fact it will prove harmful. That it may at times only be possible to choose the lesser of two evils. That Jesus in the Gospels is speaking of conscience each time he speaks of his Father's will. Conscience is where God invites and guides each one of us personally.

The Old Testament, or the Old Covenant, clearly stated many times that God will love the people, but only if they love God first by keeping all the commandments, ordinances, decrees, statutes and so on as laid down. Jesus in the New Covenant turned the Old upside down. God loves and forgives the sinner with no strings attached, no conditions, no 'only ifs'. In return we are invited to love God as a matter of gratitude, in thanksgiving for a wondrous gift already given. Jesus' enemies thought this whole concept blasphemous, but Jesus showed that, looked at his way, the relationship with God led to greater generosity and a much nobler morality. A clear example is the case of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10). Suppose Jesus had seen the little man up the tree and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down. If you promise to keep all the commandments, ordinances, decrees, statutes and so on of God from now on, I will come and take a meal with you.' Much less did Jesus say, 'Zacchaeus, if you give half your wealth to the poor, and if you pay back fourfold to anyone you have wronged, I will come to your place for supper'. If Jesus had said either of those things, Zacchaeus would never have made him welcome. Instead, Jesus made no conditions, said no 'Follow me', simply offered forgiveness and friendship, and Zacchaeus was so overwhelmed that he voluntarily went way beyond the requirements of any law.

I myself was taught that I had to earn heaven by keeping many, many commandments on pain of eternal damnation. So also were many who now are becoming prayer guides. There are still Catholic schools which to my knowledge are teaching that we have to earn God's love before it will be given. The Pelagian heresy dies hard.

Another result of Jesus' turning the basis of morality upside down is that it makes a vital difference to our understanding of the phrase 'the people of God'. Before Jesus' time, I for one get a distinct impression that it is the people that matters, and individuals had better keep up or they will be left behind. Jesus on the other hand goes looking for the

stragglers, be they sinners or sick, and institutes a family-type gathering, in which the family is not home until every last child is safely home. Where Isaiah said on behalf of God, 'I will not forget you', or 'I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands' (Is 49:15, 16), he was speaking of Zion, of the whole people as a people, not of individual sinners within or outside of the people. Yet now, thanks to Jesus, we can apply such words to our own individual selves whether we be worthy or unworthy. In underlining such basic truths as these, we are going fairly near to the heart of *ecclesiology* and indeed a form of *liberation* theology. My own theory is that the pope, as servant of the servants, is also the least of the little ones, and stands for the one whom we cannot ignore and leave behind as being too insignificant, but who must be listened to with respect. Another link between prayer guiding and liberation theologies is that it seems to be a ground-swell movement, one in which ordinary people want to take part, not one imposed from above.

*Ecumenism* grows among prayer guides chiefly by experience. The experience of prayer is something common to all Christian denominations in that it is drawn from the same biblical sources and follows more or less the same rules of discernment; hence any parish week of prayer will usually cross the borders between local parishes of different denominations. Fairly quickly a sensitive prayer guide will learn the areas of difference in thought, because the one-to-one situation makes for confidence to state problems there and then. Anyone who, for instance, does not wish to pray to Mary or other saints will soon say so, but the exchange does not lead to a rift. There is always plenty of common ground.

*Dogmatic* theology does receive separate treatment in our short course of theology for prayer guides, though only selected areas of dogma. We do speak of the Trinity, encouraging those who have not already done so to open up their hearts to the presence of the Trinity, and not to leave it like a formal front-parlour room, hardly ever lived in. The First Person is love without ever having been first loved by another; the Second Person is love in return for love; the Third Person is the two-way relationship between them. God is love, and love means relationships. Love reaches down into our own relationships: when Jesus loves Zacchaeus without Zacchaeus' ever having loved him, and then Zacchaeus bursts into a flame of love in response, Jesus is reflecting the love that is in the Trinity, a love that is free, and that creates a free response.

We also speak of sin and redemption, the nature of sin and how the work of Jesus freed us from sin. Again there is sometimes a residue of

misunderstanding, among would-be prayer guides, about why Jesus had to die. They, like myself, were taught as children that God chose such a horrible death for Jesus as a matter of reparation and due sacrifice, which would have given us a strange picture of God if we had fully believed what we were taught. Rather it was that God asked Jesus to tell the world about God's love for sinners (not for sin), and that the world's powerful ordered him to stop or they would kill him. He did not stop; they killed him; but God raised him and thus convinced the chosen witnesses that Jesus was right all along. Hence they were authorized by God to teach as Jesus did: to forgive sinners, and to refuse forgiveness to those who refuse to forgive . . . and so on, through the teachings of Jesus. Jesus' sacrifice was that of his own life, so as not to distort God's message.

Christology then comes to the fore, asking what and who Jesus was and is. We find Jesus using our own voice to speak with, our own feet to go where he wishes, our ears to hear those he wishes to hear. This is the experience of our prayer guides, and is the best way in to understanding the sheer scope of Jesus' presence in the world, world-wide yet amazingly intimate. Then we are back in the mystery of the Trinity, one with Jesus looking and walking towards his Father, one with God seeing Christ in all we meet and deal with. The Spirit comes from God, telling me always I am God's child; the Spirit returns from me, from Christ in me, to God in grateful service.

*Pastoral* theology is taught as part of the ordinary courses for prayer guides and spiritual directors, in the sense that they are taught the art of listening, of making even the most naturally unattractive of people feel welcome, of building confidence, of never condemning the person. In the shaded area between dogmatic theology and pastoral theology, we would encourage those in training to work out in their own hearts their response to questions about petitionary prayer and about the problem of evil. We do bring up both matters in our course, but in the end each guide needs to have a line of response that is satisfying to themselves, so as not to be completely thrown by people very agitated about prayers not answered or devastated by pain or sorrow.

*Church history* we do not so far treat as a separate topic, though matters obviously arise out of the topics we do treat. This is no doubt a pity, since a knowledge of how the Church has changed over the centuries can be a great help to our not getting too flustered about change in our own time. *Patristic* theology likewise was more or less omitted, though there again many of the riches of the Fathers are fairly accessible and very rewarding. The letters of Ignatius of Antioch were

a revelation to me personally, and though much of Justin, Irenaeus and the early Christian writers makes difficult reading, yet extracts like Justin's description of the second-century Christian eucharist can be fascinating.

It must be admitted that we did not cover in our course anything of note about 'green' theology, about *feminist* theology, about *holistic* theology or about *creation* theology, or any other fairly modern viewpoints of theology like those. We would try to be aware of them, but like Gamaliel in the Acts talking about the early Christian movement, we would tend to let them root themselves first (cf Acts 5:34). To be honest, I must admit that the would-be prayer guides often knew more about the very modern movements than they did about the traditional.

How much theology, then, do spiritual directors need? Not a degree in theology, not even a diploma. I have listed a lot of areas of theology in this article, all of which would receive separate treatment in a traditional theology course, but often there are only one or two standards within the discipline which need to be grasped in order for spiritual directors to be able to operate confidently and competently. Often those who come to a course of theology these days, lay people such as Peter and John were (cf Acts 4:13), come with a sound instinct for theology, born of their praying, which helps them to learn very quickly.

The course we ran here at Loyola Hall in 1994 was based around eight evenings of two-hour sessions. The evenings each had a title: theology of prayer; sin and salvation; the Bible; Christ and the Trinity; morality; Church and sacrament (twice, one stressing Church and the other sacrament); conclusions. Using these as the main focus, we managed to bring in most of the other areas of theology I have mentioned above, at least enough to make people aware of the questions. Of course, the participants had a multitude of questions of their own as well. We tried to vary the methodology to let people feel they had given up their evenings to good purpose: not just lecturing, but visual and audiovisual aids, small groups and large group discussion, homework to prepare for the next session, a list and where possible a library of accessible books on the various topics.

A time-honoured definition of theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. An effort like ours to give an introduction to theology for prayer guides and spiritual directors does at least start in the right place. I myself would rather enter into theology with people whose faith is strong but flexible from their regular practice of prayer,



than exchange concepts with people who do not pray. Our guides have faith, and are asking for understanding, which is the right way round.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises* 22, Presupposition.

<sup>2</sup> Cf G. J. Hughes, 'A Christian basis for ethics' in *Heythrop Journal* vol XIII, no 1 (January 1972).