

# The ministry of spiritual guidance

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## *Shifting nuances of 'spiritual'*

LOOKING BACK ON MY OWN TRAIN, plane or bus experiences when I unwisely responded to my seat-mate's 'what-do-you-do' question by admitting I worked in the field of spirituality or spiritual guidance, I recall either puzzled looks or immediate smiles of recognition. Probably the puzzled looks were dismissing my field of interest as being too vague and amorphous to offer a worthy topic for conversation. The smilers unquestioningly assumed that both of us were involved in New Age type thinking of some sort that might include transcendental meditation, crystals and tarot cards, Sufi dancing or body massage.

The slippery term spirituality, in our current culture, certainly does not always include reference to a religious tradition. Even when it did, the focus seems to have been more on the interior world of feeling, self-cultivation and imagination. If guidance was sought at all it would be confined, even among Christians, to the private realm of 'Jesus and me' or focus on *my* spiritual growth and what religious or secular means exist to promote it.

Recently it seems that the women and men encountered on my travels, or at home for that matter, are more aware of being on some sort of spiritual path or journey that involves opening oneself to what is beyond the self, to an absolutely other transcendent value, to what for some is the Holy Otherness of God. For them spirituality and spiritual guidance now offer an opportunity for integrating their lives 'in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value [they] perceive'.<sup>1</sup>

Underlying this growing desire to retrieve the larger, ancient consciousness of dynamic unseen reality that pervades all of life lies an awareness not only of life's cosmic context, but also of its roots in the shared earth of this planet. With breathtaking frequency people and cultures are meeting and having an impact on one another on this 'round world' of ours. The others are not so 'other' any more. Not only do we live our everyday lives beside each other, we are beginning to learn from one another. We find ourselves immersed in a 'spirituality beyond borders'. Even great numbers of Roman Catholics, by and large traditional in their beliefs and practice, have

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consciously or unconsciously interwoven a variety of non-traditional religious and spiritual understandings into their everyday worship and world-view.

### *A heritage of guidance and counselling*

So what is the impact of all this for the art of spiritual guidance? The classic masters of the spiritual life, especially those recognized as saints, have left us a magnificent heritage in the Christian religious tradition.<sup>2</sup> To read the excellent histories of spirituality and tap into the multiplicity of forms of guidance that have emerged throughout the world since earliest Christian times is to see that throughout history there has been an astonishing transmission of spiritual wisdom not only under Christian auspices, but from all the great teachers of the world's religions. Although it is not possible to do justice to such a complex subject in this article, it is important to state that guides must first of all become familiar with this history. Sages and prophets, priests and saints, gurus and shamans have all contributed to this treasure of human spiritual wisdom. We Christians need immersion in our own biblical, theological and historical roots. We need familiarity also with our tradition's changing styles over the centuries, with what women and men over the years have learned as they lived through the vicissitudes of the human condition. How, for example, have life and death events altered the styles of their lived relationship with themselves, with others and with God?<sup>3</sup>

When Vatican II insisted that everyone is called to a life of holiness, all kinds of everyday human situations peculiar to lay people were brought forward to be illumined in light of the paschal mystery. Guidance was required not only for prayer difficulties and interior crises but also in response to a variety of turning points, like living through one's mid-life crises, penetrating more deeply into the joys and sorrows of marriage and family life, spiritual questions arising from dealing with sexuality and intimacy, with singleness, separation, divorce and remarriage, to say nothing of the extremities of terminal illness and death. Pastoral counselling alone was often not sufficient. Contemporary men and women want someone to help them make connections between an ultimate direction or 'flow of all that is' and the concrete life circumstance in which they find themselves right now.

Not only do we touch here on the question at what point does good pastoral counselling become spiritual direction, but we also

come to an awareness of how spiritual counselling, although a significant aspect of spiritual guidance, can be described as having a different context.

This distinction comes from the fact that many post-moderns exist on the margins of institutional religion. Living outside of traditional faith contexts, they are nevertheless embodied spiritual beings attempting to respond to the initiatives of mystery in their lives. In the midst of what one author describes as human 'narcissism, pragmatism, unbridled restlessness and loss of the ancient instinct for astonishment',<sup>4</sup> they struggle for meaning in their personal life field. Within their particular historical, social and cultural contexts they may not be able to accept a traditional religious context. Yet they are concerned with normal questions of spiritual growth and development that belong to the socio-historical, vital, functional and transcendent dimensions of their human life. They want to describe their own spiritual experience and check out their spiritual practice with an objective 'other'. These are specific concerns of spiritual *counselling*.

In my view, spiritual *guidance* or direction, while equally concerned with all of the above, focuses on awakening the person's heart to the larger life of participation in mystery as illumined by the specific revealed tradition within which a person is committed.

It follows that those of us who claim to be Christian guides have a responsibility to make this distinction for ourselves and to clarify what we are offering to people who come to us for guidance both within and outside our own tradition. In our time of what he calls 'broken and abandoned inheritance', one author underscores the relation he sees between the current situation of spiritual counselling and the need for those offering spiritual guidance themselves to stand firmly in one tradition.

He says,

Perhaps most of us inevitably are a little more than 'outsiders' to any exclusive tradition, given our vastly greater awareness of other possibilities than were ever known in the past, and the individualism of our time. Yet, however tenuous our ground, we can stand in but one place at a time. That is only human. Moving from particular depth to mature universality seems to be the human way. Trying to shortcut this by starting out everywhere is likely to lead to shallow watering holes that dry up or never go deep enough in sweat

and commitment to find the deep ground whose hidden depths nourish all.<sup>5</sup>

### *Present challenges*

In a large multicultural city like Toronto, or for that matter in large cities throughout the world, bookstores are well stocked with paperbacks inviting seekers to 'start out everywhere'. Scriptures from various traditions, religious poetry, Zen meditation manuals, Islamic calligraphy, esoteric literature and myths of aboriginal tribes, are shelved side by side with *The cloud of unknowing*, and works of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola and Francis de Sales. How can we guide people looking for methods of prayer, for practices of attentiveness to the presence of God in their daily lives, unless we know what is 'out there'? It is as important as it ever was that Christian guides have first-hand and profound knowledge of the Church's tradition; but these days an acquaintance with the epiphanies of God's self-revelation in what may be for us other and less familiar traditions is needed as well.

Does not the foundational assumption underlying the entire ministry of spiritual guidance rest on our belief that all of creation is involved in longing to attain its spiritual direction (Rom 8)? Only by relying on the bedrock faith that Christ's death-resurrection activity continues to transform the universe as well as each individual life, do we dare to undertake this ministry. Without the gifts of grace, without response to the initiatives of God's Spirit, there is no way that merely human guidance can bring anyone to the fullness of life promised to those who open themselves to it in honest search. One huge challenge then for this ministry, with its deep roots in the past, is simply the ever-changing present situations in which it must be practised.

We have already acknowledged the fact that on the eve of the twenty-first century we are increasingly drawn together by forces of convergence that bring about unprecedented meetings of culture and religions. For the past several years I have been conducting spiritual guidance practicums in which this emerging global community has been present in the form of participants from around the world. Not only were most of them from faith communities other than my own,<sup>6</sup> they were also citizens of Africa, the Philippines, Japan, India, Europe, North and South America, the Far East and Australia. And they worked with each other in triads of director, directee and observer!<sup>7</sup> The task of supervision was fascinating, to say the least.

Granted not every spiritual guide will face men and women from diverse nations like these, where the turning points, joys and sorrows, relation to God, life crises and questions that come up will be so cross-culturally nuanced. Nevertheless, guides in the third millennium will find themselves needing to learn much more about other cultures and religions as a global consciousness takes shape and ecumenism becomes the rule rather than the exception in communities and groups. The people who come for guidance deserve not only respect but also understanding as children of God and as bearers of their distinctive racial and ethnic heritage. Not an insignificant task for guides who are not members of those particular human groups.

Another challenge for guides can be traced to the ongoing explosion of new sciences (cosmology, quantum physics, evolutionary sciences, medical ethics, computer technologies, social and cultural anthropology, psychology and the worldwide concern for political theory and social justice) that have opened up new questions to dispute the answers of former generations. Occasionally it seems as if the more or less agreed-upon world-view among western Christians is disappearing in the face of the bewildering plurality of life directives offered by all this new thinking. Although it is impossible to master all these fields, today's spiritual guides must be aware of the effect such ideas are having on the thought patterns of many of their clients.

### ***Recent additional insights***

Spiritual guidance in the third millennium needs to be a well-grounded ministry capable of encompassing an ecumenical as well as a global approach to disparate styles of Christian spirituality and dialogue emerging in the culture today. It also needs to be concerned with the whole of life rather than with a few isolated parts of that life. A sense of 'connectedness' propels human beings into concern not only for relationship with the persons of the Trinity but also for openness to the envioning universe and to the complexity of the different social and cultural contexts that are 'givens' for each one of us.

Issues of social justice and peace can no longer exist outside the 'web' of our care. Immediate commitments embodied in family, work and personal and civic responsibility that are brought to guidance can now be examined in terms of the larger picture of compassion and attentiveness to issues in their structural and political

dimensions as well. This of course is only possible if the guide has awakened to that dimension him- or herself.

From my own experience of living and working in other faiths and societies, I would tend to agree with thinkers who claim that lived contact and dialogue with non-Christian persons and religions can be a resource for the renewal of Christian self-understanding. Recognizing as truly spiritual the body-wisdom and attention to the sacred of Hindu sisters and brothers, appreciating the strength of African self-understanding that arises from one's identity as a member of one's community, being in contact with Buddhist meditation practice and as a result realizing the more contemplative and mystical heritage of our own gospel-based tradition – these interfaith openings have been and continue to be gifts, not only to me personally but also to guides throughout the western world.

Valuing the diverse religious traditions, lives and spiritual journeys of our neighbours in faith does not necessarily depend on delving into theory and doctrine but rather on admiring their religious practice. Practical awareness of other faiths actually roots us more firmly in the tradition in which we stand. It is not without meaning that Tibetan Buddhists are said to greet each other with questions like 'What is your practice?' or 'From what great tradition do you come?'<sup>8</sup> As we grow into an appreciation of the deeper aspects of our own traditions that contextualize the ministry of spiritual guidance for us, perhaps some day we will be able with confidence to ask similar questions of one another!

Obviously Christian spiritual guides in the next century will have to deal also with the confusion that constant exposure to pluralism is sure to bring. They will not be equipped, for example, to cope with extremely diverse mixtures of self-help counsel and spiritual advice from different parts of the 'global village' simply by taking a few brief courses on these and other issues. A thorough training and coherent understanding of the specifically Christian journey will be required of them as they strive to distinguish modern forms of pseudo-spiritual gnosticism from the earthy, incarnational approach inherent in the gospel. In their search for a more authentic faith and for a deeper relationship with God, tomorrow's women and men, like today's, will continue to seek well-educated and critical, as well as experienced, guides who have themselves already lived through some significant ups and downs on their own personal journey to God. Where and how are such guides to be discovered?

*Charism and/or specialization?*

According to some authorities, the aptitude for being a spiritual guide is a *charism*, an absolutely gratuitous gift made by the Holy Spirit to chosen persons. It is not a technique to be mastered, nor can it be institutionalized in courses and examinations. In non-Christian traditions also, certain wise persons from the tribe, group or community have been chosen to be spiritual guides because of their wisdom, their sensitivity and the signs of spiritual leadership that they manifest. In our time some people still stand out in these ways and are consulted spontaneously by others. However, in addition to spiritual giftedness, the powerful psychological orientation that animates contemporary awareness calls for sensitivity to psychological issues as well.<sup>9</sup> Not only is a guide expected to distinguish clearly between psychological and spiritual realms, but he or she should be familiar with the embeddedness of the soul's journey in the human developmental process; should understand how human growth patterns and early emotional investments may block later spiritual receptivity, and be capable of comprehending how a false self gradually develops and conceals the true image of God in each person.

While maintaining a clear distinction between chronological and spiritual maturity, guides should also have grasped the crucial importance of relational and psychosexual growth in terms of their effect on spiritual life. They are more likely to view adult commitments in love for others and work for the common good, significant life transitions, especially those involving loss or detachment, and the ageing process and preparation for death not only as opportunities for spiritual growth but also as appropriate material for reflection during the guidance process itself.<sup>10</sup>

In their ministry of helping people tap into the uncreated power of Mystery pushing to be released in them, guides cannot afford to ignore what we now know about the interrelation of mind, body and spirit. There is a hermeneutic process involved in understanding and interpreting what a person's 'story' is really saying. It may or may not be expressing contemporary forms of sinful idolatry – addictions, compulsions, wounded emotions, co-dependence, the confusion and insecurity that attends shifting norms in moral guidance and family life. We have to recognize also the all too prevalent depression, fear and loneliness that accompany loss of sensitivity to God's self-communication.

In coming face to face with an analytic secular mentality, genuine Christian guides must not forget about the ordinary practice of humility, patience, obedience and love of neighbour that characterize gospel-based caring.

The basis of the Church's traditional understanding of their ministry has always been an appreciation of human freedom and of its inbuilt directedness toward the divine presence underlying all of life's events.

This more holistic approach does not come naturally to everyone. Nor does the more feminine relational image of a God who loves the world and all the marginalized, economically and politically oppressed people in it. Perhaps practitioners of this ministry will aspire to counterbalance the dominant mentality of competitive success that has prevailed in the west for so many generations. Perhaps their genuine attitude of trusting receptivity towards God and their positive faith in the universe as a 'living field brimming over with created and uncreated energy' will gradually allow a change to happen in our world and in our hearts.<sup>11</sup>

By now it must be clear that along with a natural aptitude for the ministry of spiritual guidance, both spiritual counsellors and spiritual guides are in need of an integrative theoretical framework as foundation for their somewhat specialized task. This framework would be multi-disciplinary, inclusive of the full spectrum of the dimensions of the human person and of their life field. Spiritual counsellors would have a trustworthy anthropology undergirding their work, while guides from specific religious traditions would be able to contextualize their process as they entrusted its completion to a power greater than their own. For Christian guides, this deeper pneumatic presence has always been the Holy Spirit.

### *Preparation of guides*

When I look back on my own history that preceded becoming a person sought out by others for spiritual guidance, I find that twelve years spent living in a community whose formative context was Scripture and the liturgical year,<sup>12</sup> time spent studying and teaching catechetics in an atmosphere of excitement and scholarship,<sup>13</sup> living and working with apostolically committed Christians, many of whom became role models for me,<sup>14</sup> and twenty-five years teaching and learning in the field of formative spirituality and psychology<sup>15</sup> have all had a very deep influence on the way I do spiritual direction. My own experience of personally encountering men and



women of other cultures and religious traditions has also left its mark on the way I see spirituality, on how I pray.<sup>16</sup> I am convinced that we do spiritual guidance more from who we already are than from the courses we may have taken or fields we may have studied. What I mean here is that there are always more courses to take in ascetical theology and mystical prayer and supervision techniques. My own experience of being guided by a variety of wonderfully wise others has done more to prepare me for this calling than all the learned lectures I have attended and books I have read. The weaknesses and distorted views of reality, the sinful dispositions I bring to this process are also mine, as is a lifetime of being loved into existence by God and by others. What does all this have to add to our discussion of the training of spiritual guides?

Mainly it raises questions about the educational dimensions of the guide's calling. Women and men who are sought out by others or sent by the Church as spiritual guides or companions may be specially gifted by God. But in today's world is this enough? What about the need for more formal, ongoing academic training? At this point, I am inclined to agree with those who claim that you cannot train a man or woman in the dispositions and largeness of heart expected from a spiritual guide. On the other hand, in the course of this discussion we have seen again and again the relevance not only of the quality of the guide's ongoing life but also of his or her growth in knowledge of the mysteries of God and of the human heart. Besides prayer and self-discipline, how can they grow to be both prod and source of light for those who come? Where are they finding communities of wise persons whose support encourages them not only to let go of power games and control, but also to study and read widely in the necessary areas? So questions remain regarding the training of spiritual guides who are prepared to allow the Spirit to take the lead in their own lives as well as in the lives of persons who come to them for guidance.

For years now the training and certification of spiritual guides and of those who educate them has been an issue of increasing importance. Theories about just what are the concrete skills and supporting knowledge that a competent guide should possess abound. Lists are compiled of the qualities that person should embody. Suggestions are made and books are written about how he or she can attain the art of attentive listening and inner silence. But there are still very few really competent people willing and able to co-listen reflectively with another for how God is actively transforming the intentionality

of another person's heart. For sure such faith-filled listening can be extremely useful from time to time, when, for example, a person is facing a spiritual crisis, is discerning a vocation or simply needs to experience a time of accountability and/or support.

Competent guidance becomes really necessary, though, when someone needs to be accompanied through experiences of dryness and dark nights, of aridity or being called to extraordinary acts of surrender. Unlike the inexperienced guide who, recognizing his or her limited ability in such cases, makes a wise referral,<sup>17</sup> a more experienced and educated guide will feel at home with these genuine states of prayer and be able to sustain that person, preventing him or her from becoming discouraged and giving up on being an opening for God's love to pour into the world.

### *Conclusion*

Regardless of whether we perceive it as necessary or merely useful, when it is focused on real life and motivated by real love, from its roots in the past to its complexity in the present, Christian spiritual guidance emerges for me as *both* charism *and* specialization. Demanding more than mere goodwill and desire to fill the role of 'wise guide', it presumes a certain well-defined 'call' and a degree of reliable professional training that till recently has not been available for many people in many places. Perhaps we can only say that in view of its distinguished past and burgeoning present, spiritual guidance has all the characteristics of a ministry whose time has come.

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## NOTES

1 Sandra M. Schneiders, 'Theology and spirituality: strangers, rivals, or partners' in *Horizons* 1/2 (1986), p 266.

2 See for example Kenneth Leech, *Soul friend* (London, 1977); Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold (eds), *The study of spirituality* (New York, 1986); Lavinia Byrne (ed), *Traditions of spiritual guidance* (London, 1990).

3 For an excellent example of this type of biblical spirituality, see Demetrius Dumm OSB, *Flowers in the desert* (New York, 1987).

4 Ronald Rolheiser, *The shattered lantern* (New York, 1995).

5 Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual friend* (New York, 1980), p 235, n 13.

6 Guidance Practicums at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Chicago and Ashland Theological Seminary in Ashland, Ohio, for example.

7 Guidance Practicums at the Institute of Formative Spirituality, Dupresne University, Pittsburg, PA.

8 See, for example, Beatrice Bruteau, *What we can learn from the East* (New York, 1995); Susan Rakoczy (ed), *Common journey, different paths* (New York, 1992).

9 For purposes of this article, I confine myself to only a few attributes, skills and academic qualifications of guides.

10 See Carolyn Gratton, *The art of spiritual guidance* (New York, 1992), for a fuller account from the author's graduate courses in spiritual guidance.

11 For a more complete description of this world-view held by Greek theologians in the undivided Church, see George Maloney SJ, *A theology of uncreated energies* (Milwaukee, 1978).

12 An experience of community living such as I found in Grail communities in the mid-years of this century can be one of the richest sources of formation for commitment in spirituality-related fields.

13 Courses like those at Notre Dame's Liturgy School in the sixties brought the best of European thought and inspiration to North Americans, and called, for example, to put into practice the decrees of the Sacred Constitution on the Liturgy.

14 Life in small, intergenerational groups of committed Christians continues to be a reliable way for spiritual aspirations to be not only taught, but caught.

15 A disciplined time of learning (and perhaps teaching) in fields like theology, spirituality and psychology as well as broad study in the humanities should play a part in the education of today's spiritual guides.

16 Because of international teaching assignments in Africa, China and India, I have been fortunate enough to have my thinking stimulated by fresh insights from these and other traditions.

17 As in all ministries, guides must recognize times when they are out of their depth and take care to call on physical, psychological and spiritual resources when their own limitations in these areas are exceeded.