

Exploring issues in spiritual guidance and contemporary religious life

Howard J. Gray

THE FOCUS OF THIS ESSAY IS ON the issues that have emerged within the context of spiritual guidance conducted among men and women who belong to religious communities. The word 'issues' intimates that there are some tensions in the way that spirituality is practised by women and men who identify themselves as members of religious communities. Moreover, there is an assumption that these issues and tensions have emerged within our post-Vatican II Church, and perhaps more importantly, within our cultures. Let me address these assumptions.

The contemporary setting

The Church and secular culture that provided a context for Vatican II and the Church and secular culture of today are simply not identical. That is not a particularly perceptive assertion but it is an important one to keep in mind. We live in times that have moved from optimism about a Church that found its voice in the modern world to one that has many voices within a postmodern world.¹ Plurality is a cultural and religious given; and all the exhortations to think of the Church as a communion will not change the sociological, psychological and theological realities that emphasize diversity far more than they do unity. Anyone who has engaged in religious-life formation, government, or apostolic planning recognizes the fragile character of any consensus. The centre holds today far more because of God's patience than because of our commitment to unity, much less to uniformity.²

I do not think it an evil or even a lesser good that religious life today faces an active pluralism both within its community life and within its apostolic works. I think it is the cultural reality in which God continues to work and through which God draws people. To attribute to God's patience the identity and singleness of purpose that we religious manage to uncover in our life and labour is to assert a strong optimism – even hope. For this dependency on God's

enduring care and goodness will, ultimately, evolve into a deeper union and richer harmony than our own efforts could ever have achieved.³

Spiritual guidance – the modest help one Christian extends to another – is done under the power of God, not in place of the power of God. As such it is a dramatic instance of the dependency I cited above. The contemporary search for meaning and direction embraces every person within religious life or outside religious life. It is one of the radical points of solidarity that does unify us as postmodern.⁴ The first and fundamental tension facing religious women and men, then, is to look within spiritual guidance not for escape from the plurality of our culture but rather for the compassion to live in ambiguity with the rest of the human family and through tested endurance to discover the leadership of God within that ambiguity. Practically, that means that spiritual guidance today cannot drift into a programme that divides people into ‘the enemy’ and ‘the friend’. Enmity is not the holy ground on which one can construct a temple to unity. The weakness of any fundamentalism is that it seems to exist only if it finds someone to marginalize, whereas the Christian instinct is to find ways to save, to include, to forgive. That is why there is something sacrilegious about the term ‘Christian fundamentalist’.⁵

The first issue that religious women and men face both in giving and receiving spiritual guidance is, then, whether to take the forum of such guidance out of their culture or to exercise this ministry within their culture. For spiritual guidance can become an escape from the asceticism of context. When that happens, it nurtures a geography of soul that puts people in exile from their professions and their peers. Such guidance risks representing spirituality as a preserve that finds God outside of some things, a God for special people with certitude built on self-righteousness and protected by exclusions. But should not spiritual guidance be an engagement with a God always greater than our expectations and more generous than our impulses to control and to simplify, a God we can find in all things – even in the plurality and the ambiguities of this age?

Assuming this foundation, in the succeeding sections of this essay I shall concentrate on three sets of contemporary issues: those concerned with the meaning of the term guidance, those concerned with the relationship between guide, the guided, and the wider community, and those concerned with the directions toward which spiritual guidance can move.

The term guidance

We should emphasize that the term 'guidance' covers a wide range of descriptions about a specialized pastoral service. Other terms are 'spiritual direction', 'soul friendship', 'spiritual companionship' and 'spiritual mentoring'.⁶ Carolyn Gratton, while describing the process of spiritual direction, implicitly speaks about all the other forms of spiritual guidance.

An intentional relationship of Christian spiritual direction is not so much a matter of one person having authority to direct another; rather, both parties in the relationship are expected to become attentive listeners to the Holy Spirit, who continually provides providential direction in the life of each man and woman whether they are aware of it or not. Gradually individual blocks will be uncovered and brought to consciousness. With increasing depth the desires of the true and core self are revealed when compulsive reactions of the false self give way to positive, truly free responses to divine initiatives.⁷

I want to emphasize five elements from this description and then suggest how these have become issues in the understanding of spiritual guidance within religious communities. The five elements that I want to emphasize are: attentive listening, the providential direction of the Holy Spirit, the uncovering of individual blocks, the freedom to move from desires to an appropriate response to the divine initiatives, and, most important, intentional relationship.

Attentive listening

By 'attentive listening', I understand that the encounters are primarily about the experiences of the person who seeks guidance, not the knowledge, wisdom or experiences of the director. For example, an older religious has been struggling with the role of affectivity in his/her life: the craving for love, the inappropriate ways that this craving may have been momentarily satisfied, the anguish of guilt, the desire to reorient oneself toward consecrated chastity as an expression of one's love for God. The spiritual guide is there first to listen to the experience, not to correct, exhort, instruct, or share his/her own struggles. To listen attentively to all a person wishes to reveal is demanding and humbling. Questioning should be directed towards understanding as well as one can what the person seeking guidance is saying, e.g., the context, the history, the subtle movements towards God's peace and the sometimes even more subtle

movements away from God's peace. While this listening should be compassionate and accepting, it should also be professionally and ascetically focused on bringing the religious into God's light, forgiveness and direction.

I also understand by 'attentive listening' that both the religious and the guide accept what God has revealed about the religious, about his/her choices, about his/her deeper needs and desires (not at all the same), and about the impact that he/she has had on other people in the way he/she has been living. Both the guide and guided are united in their mutual desire to find the Spirit's leadership through attentive listening. On occasion, there may be need for the guide to intervene, to offer suggestions, some clarifications, some warnings – but these should follow after the disclosure from the one seeking guidance and that disclosure simply needs time to develop. Moreover, the aim is to bring the relationship into a mutual acceptance of the Spirit's priorities. For example, using the case I outlined above, it may be that simply accepting the need for professional counselling is the immediate step that God asks, i.e., the humility on the part of both the religious who seeks help and the guide to accept the fact that this individual's sexual acting out is compulsive, enduring and destructive.

Providential direction of the Spirit

By 'the providential direction of the Spirit', I understand that God's Spirit is essentially life-giving and loving. I also understand that God moves within all the human realities that define life and love for people. How the guide sees God and understands both human reality and the dynamics of human development are terribly important. If the image of God is punitive in the spiritual and psychic life of the guide, then that guide will probably listen out of fear and emphasize performance before God rather than an encounter with God. If the guide is uncomfortable with any aspect of human reality (e.g., the affections, imagination, the body, sexuality, the drive towards autonomy), then the guide risks not really hearing the one seeking guidance because the guide has telegraphed to the religious seeking help that there are some parts of his/her life that the guide cannot hear or hears only to critique. On the other hand, if the guide listens out of a religiously unsophisticated romanticism about human reality (e.g., any experience is good as long as it originates 'from a sincere heart'), then the listening will be sentimental and dangerously indifferent to the harm that a person could cause him-

or herself or others. It seems to me that the commandment religious most consistently violate is the first, i.e., they bring strange gods before them, not the God revealed by Jesus in the Gospels. While the guide does not have to be a professional theologian, he or she must possess a sane, informed theology of God and the human person. Moreover, within the context of spiritual guidance it may well be that one of the directions of the Spirit's activity is to nudge those who seek guidance to be better informed about Scripture, the tradition of the Church, and the individual and social ethics that define the life of an adult Christian Catholic. The pursuit of Christian learning ought to be a lifetime asceticism for religious.

Uncovering of individual blocks

By 'the uncovering of individual blocks', I mean, first, that the guide has to know his/her limitations and protect the religious who comes for help from being harmed by the guide's personal biases and limitations. For example, the guide may feel that reactionary elements in the Church have a disproportionate influence on church discipline and governance. When a 'conservative' young religious comes for help or is assigned to a guide for formation, the guide could discount the earnest and genuinely acceptable conservatism of the young religious as an attack on his/her convictions or as an instance of 'creeping centralism' in the Church or within the religious community. Ideological fixation – right or left – can make it hard for an authority figure to be fair. The question is not the sincerity of the guide but the integrity of his/her self-knowledge.

Obviously, the 'block' can also be in the life of the religious who seeks guidance. For example, the conservatism of the one seeking guidance can intrude on the ability to learn from others, to accept the plurality of viewpoints that represent a legitimate catholicity within a community of religious, or even to reject the authoritative directives from a general chapter because some unofficial, but acceptably conservative, figure has convinced him or her that these directives are 'suspect'. Ultimately, the uncovering of blocks means the ability to see what gets in the way of living a life of love. Certainly, that life must be informed by truth; but the truth of the gospel is truth under the sign of the cross, a truth that seeks reconciliation not division. The ultimate cry of the crucified Christ is forgiveness of those who allowed his crucifixion to happen and surrender in trust to the Father whose will he embraced. While our 'blocks' to grace come from a variety of sources – some culpable,

some simply inherited from our culture, our family, our education – our resolution will lead similarly to reconciliation and surrender.

The freedom to move

By 'the freedom to move from desires to an appropriate response to the divine initiative', I understand that competent spiritual guidance helps to liberate our interiority (e.g. our memory, our reflective capacities, our affective drives, our imaginative creations, our ambitions and hopes for ourselves and others) so that we act in partnership with the Spirit sent by Jesus as the Lord. Further, I mean that the guide and the one seeking guidance stand in reverence and gratitude – and frequently in awe – before the realization that this journey of soul began with God's unexpected call and ends with God's pleasure in our acceptance of that call. Like Jacob we can look back on the processes of spiritual guidance and cry, 'Surely this was the place of the Lord and I did not know it!' (Gen 28:16). In his *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius Loyola talks of the process of spiritual guidance as one that helps both the one who gives the exercises as well as the one who makes them.⁸ This is a wise commentary on the action of God within any spiritual enterprise. The realization that mutual dependency on God leads to mutual consolation from God is an important confirmation that the spiritual guidance process has been truly free, faithful to God's leadership, and, ultimately, a gift for the entire community of faith.

In attempting to explain these four key elements used in Gratton's description of 'spiritual guidance', I have also indicated a number of issues that a spiritual guide might encounter. Some of these issues involve sustaining a clear focus during the exchanges of a spiritual guidance encounter. Others might involve the role of psychological therapy in helping a person come to greater freedom. Others touch on maintaining a balanced view about consecrated chastity, the dynamics involved in sound human growth, the body and authority. Others touch on the parameters of tolerance between 'liberal' and 'conservative' partners within spiritual guidance. In sum, a veritable catalogue of 'issues' can emerge within the forum of contemporary spiritual direction. However, the commanding issue emerging out of spiritual guidance done by religious men and women concerns the defining referent in the relationship. What frames the spiritual guidance conversation? What criterion guides the direction given in a session? Around what reality does a religious man or woman assess

his/her integration? In the spiritual guidance of religious this is crucial.

Intentional relationship: the core issue

The final element, intentional relationship, structures the movements within spiritual guidance and assesses their authenticity. By 'intentional relationship' I mean that both the guide and the religious who seeks help agree to situate their conversation within the religious' commitment to his/her particular religious tradition. It also means that fidelity to that commitment is the essential criterion by which one gauges the truthfulness and fruitfulness of the spiritual guidance process. Too often, I fear, other realities frame and then dominate the spiritual guidance conversation: human development, professional future or professional competence, social adjustment, feminism, church politics, mid-age crises, and on and on. I am not trivializing the important influence that these realities have on the lives of religious people. I am painfully aware that these and similar issues can become the centre of attention in spiritual guidance because they involve crucial concerns about one's future, one's happiness, one's human survival within religious life itself, and one's place within the Church. Nonetheless, the commanding reality is the identity of the religious as religious. The reason for this is twofold.

First, if the religious has committed her/himself to a way of life, this becomes the radical response to God's call to place oneself along a particular path. That pathway to God must govern all one's choices. The vows – whatever problems we have in explaining them – symbolize a totality of donation to God through a specific way of life.⁹ If there is not this kind of understanding, i.e., if the religious sees her/himself as tentative in his/her identity as religious, as merely exploring options, then there is no concrete, specific frame, no fundamental criterion for that individual as a religious.

Second, while the gospel remains the fundamental norm for all Christian discipleship, the gospel has to be appropriated within a specific set of fidelities. A vague loyalty to the gospel lacks the specificity of human choice. We follow Christ within history by making decisions based on our temperaments, our talents, our graces and the needs of our times. Finally, we settle on following Christ in a particular way of life. The kind of life we choose with God becomes our way to God with Christ and through Christ's Spirit. The way of life we have chosen becomes, as well, the criterion for our authenticity both before God and before other men and women.

The major issue within contemporary spiritual guidance among religious is the lack of clarity about norms and the vague commitment to the ultimacy of one's choice of a way of life. Saying 'forever' is hard for people today, including religious.

Living faithfully in a time of renewal

The living tradition of a particular religious community must incorporate gospel values, must bear the Church's confirmation of its purpose and way of life, must be oriented towards meeting the needs of God's people. Renewing the tradition is an ongoing task of leadership within every religious community. But men and women join that process-in-renewal not as spectators but as members. People join a particular religious community – with all its limitations, struggles and defects – because they identify this very human community as their way to God, their way of following Christ, and their way of serving other people. That personal point of identification becomes the prism for spiritual guidance. When religious lack that identification with their community, then spiritual guidance lacks a focus and avoids any ultimate practical criterion for judging the directions and the authenticity of one's life. Let me go further: for the woman or man who claims membership within a particular religious community the criterion for following Christ has become her or his institute – in all its particularities and incessant need for renewal.

The relationship of guide and the one seeking spiritual guidance

It is important that both realize that the relationship is relative not absolute. By 'relative', I mean two things. First, the relationship is oriented towards helping the religious who seeks guidance to receive 'guidance', i.e. some help in finding and embracing the directions God inspires. To achieve this goal, the religious must be assured that acceptance is extended and confidentiality is revered by his or her guide. No community superior or leader or group of leaders has the right to ask a spiritual guide to serve as an extension of government in order to direct a religious towards some goal they have determined. Nor do these superiors or community leaders have the right to ask for information about the religious from the spiritual guide. A religious has to believe in and experience a compassionate subjectivity from his or her guide: 'I am here to help you find what leads you to God and to uncover with you what might lead you away from God. I serve your interests before God.'

Second, the relationship has to be founded on those realities which constitute the life of the religious. For example, if a religious who has no capacity for languages is still eating his or her heart out to become a scripture scholar, it is a cruel kindness for a spiritual guide to telegraph support in a fruitless venture. With tact but also with loving directness the guide has to help the religious read his or her talents accurately. Support does not mean we bracket reality but rather that we try to reveal how God works within the real. One of the primary realities within the life of a religious is the acceptance of his or her institute as the pathway to God that he or she has freely chosen. Therefore, the spiritual guide should have a sensitive and informed knowledge of the communal responsibilities this religious has assumed as a member of a particular community. This knowledge does not require that a spiritual guide blindly support either the directives or the governing styles of community superiors. If there are injustices or stupidities, no one is helped by excusing these away as instances of God's will. God may 'permit' harm to happen; but that theological dodge offers scant comfort – psychological or spiritual – when people confront injustices, ignorance or imprudence from those chosen to give oversight to their communal and apostolic life. Nonetheless, the spiritual guide has to relate the religious to the life-frame that binds his or her vocation. It also can happen that a religious discovers she or he made a defective discernment about religious life or that the essential character of a particular institute has been so modified that it is radically disoriented from what the religious had thought he or she was joining. In such cases a religious has to negotiate anew her or his membership and that negotiation may lead to a departure. But this has to be done with a careful regard for the reality of the religious commitment.

Granted all the cautions and possibilities surveyed above, there is a contemporary tendency among some to isolate the spiritual guidance relationship from the communal obligations that a religious also bears. Self-fulfilment can be an important condition for self-donation, but they are not always the same. Religious life is essentially a life of donation through corporate obligations freely accepted and freely honoured. This is a sensitive issue today when so many religious structures have been modified to express consensus rather than obedience to a superior's directives. In many religious communities leaders often feel that they are expected to grant favours and to offer support but not to govern, especially if this were to include a command. And even in communities which have main-

tained a clear structure of centralized authority, consultation and the lessened ability of superiors to direct all aspects of every apostolate have modified the way in which assignments are made. Consequently, negotiations between the religious superior or leader and the individual religious are an accepted element in the lives of most religious. In such an environment it is important – I would say crucial – that spiritual guidance be seen as a way to present to legitimate religious authority the representation of what the individual religious honestly and prayerfully feels to be God's movements in his or her life, a part of the decision-making process, not its determination. Spiritual guidance should facilitate the ability of an individual religious to represent her- or himself to the community leadership; it should not undercut community leadership.

The direction of spiritual guidance

Finally, the aim of spiritual guidance for religious is not psycho-spiritual maturation, nor peace of soul, nor support during crucial therapy or needed rehabilitation, nor even more contemplative prayer, although any and all of these can be highly important elements in the life of a religious. Rather, the radical orientation of spiritual guidance is towards the mission of the religious community, the way the gospel is lived, proclaimed and implemented through the charisms of the particular religious community to which the religious belongs. Certainly, the wise spiritual guide should honour the laws of sound human growth, help a man or woman achieve true peace with God and other people, be a strong support when people struggle to put their lives together, and enable people to deepen their awareness of God both within and outside formal prayer. However, too often in contemporary spiritual guidance among religious the individual priorities of the religious blur the sense of mission that should integrate and orient the priorities and choices of a religious. If one is genuinely called to a religious community, then the vision and tradition which shapes the community will shape his or her choices. If one accepts the challenges to keep that vision alive and that tradition relevant in the midst of a pervasively secular culture, then a man or woman called to a religious community will find in spiritual guidance a consoling forum of mediation and support in making the community mission contemporary.¹⁰

Conclusion

Spiritual guidance among contemporary religious is an invaluable opportunity for establishing a conversation between the dominant culture and the gospel. Spiritual guidance is also a forum that allows religious to establish a clearer understanding about the essential core of their lives and mission. Finally, spiritual guidance can integrate religious around the call of Christ to imitate his self-donation in the service of his sisters and brothers. In an environment too frequently self-absorbed and violent, spiritual guidance can symbolize the needed Christian resolve to be counter-cultural out of love, not withdrawal. These are some of the many reasons why spiritual guidance should be undertaken only with hearts willing to grow in compassion and wisdom – whether they be the guides or the guided. For in spiritual guidance we surrender to the mastery of One who labours patiently within the reality of life to lead us into the reality of eternal communion.

Howard J. Gray is presently the Director of Boston College Center for Ignatian Spirituality. Prior to the assignment, he served in a number of leadership posts with the Jesuit community, including those of provincial superior and director of tertians for the Detroit Province of the Society of Jesus.

NOTES

1 Thomas J. Reese SJ, *Inside the Vatican, the politics and organization of the Catholic Church* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp 270–283.

2 Robert L. Wilken, *Remembering the past* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), pp 25–46; see note 1 p 26 esp.

3 Decree 4, 'Our mission and culture' from *Documents of the thirty-fourth general congregation of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), esp nos 98–102.

4 The literature on postmodernism is extensive but very helpful in sorting through the material is John McGowan's *Postmodernism and its critics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991). Critical but helpful are the essay by Gertrude Himmelfarb in *On looking into the abyss, ultimate thoughts on culture and society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), esp ch VII, 'Postmodernist history', pp 131–161; and 'Beyond method' in Alvin Kernam (ed), *What's happened to the humanities?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp 143–161.

5 Neal Oxenhandler quotes James Glass thus: 'What is remarkable about delusional knowledge is its refusal to consider any aspect of experience that might involve feelings of ambivalence. Delusion provides a certain, often unbreakable identity, and its absolute character can maneuver the self into an unyielding position. In this respect, it is the internal mirror of political authoritarianism, the tyrant inside the self. The authoritarian regime dominates through the

application of terror to the polity's political and social life; delusion terrorizes through the often horrifying scenarios [or spectacles] of an internal regime that takes place in bizarre symbolizations' in *Looking for heroes in postwar France: Albert Camus, Max Jacob, Simone Weil* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1996), p 10.

6 Available and helpful in surveying these various approaches is *Traditions of spiritual guidance*, collected and edited by Lavinia Byrne IBVM (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990).

7 Carolyn Gratton, 'Spiritual direction' in Michael Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993), p 913.

8 Exx 1 in any text of the Exercises.

9 Cf. Donald Senior CP, 'Living in the meantime: biblical foundations for religious life' in Paul J. Philibert OP (ed), *Living in the meantime: concerning the transformation of religious life* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994).

10 Extremely helpful on this point is John W. O'Malley SJ, 'Mission and the early Jesuits' in *The Way Supplement* 79 (Spring 1994), pp 3-10; cf. Also Howard Gray SJ, 'Contemporary religious leadership' in *Review for Religious* 56 (September-October 1997), pp 454-467.