Laughter in heaven

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A STOCK TECHNIQUE OF VISUAL COMEDY is the movement from short to longer focus. The camera fixes, for example, on two talking heads speaking earnestly and knowledgeably about the best ways of boiling and seasoning meat for the evening meal. It then moves heavenwards to reveal the protagonists in two cooking pots on the cannibals' fire. The change in perspective brings out the piquancy and irony of the conversation.

In heaven, where the saints can see the differences between the shorter and longer perspective, spiritual direction may arouse similar laughter. From close up they see deeply serious conversations between people and their spiritual directors about finding ways of pleasing God. They notice also the responsible and well-argued discussion between spiritual directors about the proper conduct of their enterprise.

But the longer view discloses the participants in these conversations to be seated in a boat, enclosed in an isolated patch of fog. God's sunlight warms the boat and makes the fog translucent to the heavenly viewers. The boat is drawn on a current that is only sensed from within it. It is surrounded by other boats full of strangers, whose hands need only to be grasped to draw the boat surely to its destination. To the observers the seriousness and complexity of the conversations are a cause of mirth because the reality is unseen by those in the boat and is so much more simple than they imagine.

Discussions within the boat: tensions within spiritual direction

Contemporary discussion of spiritual direction usually turns to a number of tensions, sometimes described as choices to be made. If they are sharpened as antitheses, they ask whether the source of the authority of spiritual directors lies in professional accreditation or their nomination by a community, whether their procedures are best described in psychological and therapeutic terms or in terms of spirituality and accompaniment, whether the scope of spiritual direction is the progress of the individual or the advancement of the kingdom, and whether the spirit of spiritual direction should be conceived in charismatic or in institutional terms.

The movement to professional standards within spiritual direction is part of a broader movement in pastoral care. The symbols of professionalism are those of the contemporary culture: courses of training, supervision and evaluation, accreditation and perhaps even payment for services. The insistence on preparation and public standards reflects the power for good or evil possessed by spiritual directors, and the consequent need to encourage the development of appropriate skills and to exclude unsuitable people. Those who resist the movement toward professionalism appeal to the gifts of simple people within the local communities, who would be excluded if professional training were required. The Spirit would be constrained if spiritual direction were seen as a profession.

All spiritual directors today reflect on the relationship between spiritual direction and counselling. The question with which they grapple is whether the task of spiritual directors is to help people recognize and clear away the obstacles to psychological wholeness, or whether it is to accompany them on their journey to holiness. They may ask whether indeed spirituality and psychology are simply different names for the same human reality. Those who argue that it is appropriate to see spiritual direction in psychological terms claim that grace builds on nature, and that most spiritual problems can best be understood and addressed through psychological theory and therapeutic practice. The relationship with God will flower when the person is free.

Others argue that holiness is often found in people with deep psychological wounds, and that the relationship with God should be the unambiguous focus of spiritual direction.

A grumbling tension between 'spiritual people' and 'social justice people' has occasionally made it difficult to sleep peacefully in the contemporary Church. The latter argue that the gospel has to do with the transformation of the world, and that a Christian spiritual director should be concerned with helping people to name the reality of the public world and to follow Jesus by placing themselves appropriately within it. The former emphasize the claims of slow processes of personal transformation on which alone a just society can be built. They insist that Christians must experience the healing of Jesus in order to follow Jesus.

Finally, some insist that spiritual direction be mediated through the institution while others see it as controlled directly by the choice and the needs of the individual. When the place of the institution is emphasized, it is natural to conclude, for example, that the spiritual

directors of Carmelites should be Carmelites, those of priests should be priests, and those of candidates for priestly ministry should be male. Spiritual direction is seen as an important tile in the mosaic of socialization into an institution, particularly in its members' early years. To others, these claims infringe the freedom of God's action in the human heart. This freedom must extend to the choice of spiritual director.

Except in the heat of battle, few people would espouse unreservedly in their pure form any of the opposed positions which I have sketched. They represent rather a series of claims in tension, to one of which we will lean while trying to incorporate satisfactorily the opposed claim. These are conversations in which we habitually engage when our attention moves beyond the everyday. They represent the tribute of reflectiveness which is owed to the seriousness of our enterprise.

The heavenly view: the strangeness of God and God in the stranger

From the longer view, the seriousness of these conversations provokes mirth. They evoke images of Moses taking serious counsel with Aaron and the wise men of the people about where to turn right and where to turn left through the cloud on Mount Sinai, about the correct forms of address to the One who waits, and about detailed negotiating techniques to be used in the conversation at the Summit. In reality, any meeting with God and consequent life towards God are so mysterious that attempts to regulate and define the conversations about this mystery cannot but be paradoxical and quixotic. An earnest confidence that the conversation can be got right is a sure index of having missed the mystery. The celestial observers can see that the true God is a strange God whose mystery is entered indirectly by welcoming the widow and the orphan. So when we turn to the face of the stranger, the saints sit up because the boat is likely to make some way.

Some will argue that this image of the boat does less than justice to our access to God who, the gospel assures us, is revealed fully in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. They will assert that my use of the image of Moses ascending the mountain through the cloud will be described as unduly pessimistic, owing more to the Platonist interpretation of Gregory of Nyssa and subsequent philosophical theologians than it does to the Scriptures. There, God speaks to and

is known by the people. The veil over the face of God falls away in the Christian dispensation.

This objection is correct to insist both on our assurance that we stand in God's love and on our confidence that we shall know as we are known. We know that in Christ we have been drawn into the life and purposes of God and that the Spirit is within us to encourage and guide us. But at the centre of Christ's revelation of the Father is the cross which, particularly in its sharp Marcan presentation, shows God's nature and purposes to be deeply mysterious. We discover a God who is more than we can understand, while not more than we can love, particularly when we meet that God in the face of the stranger. Christian faith therefore tells us that we are known and loved and that our life is both serious and blessed. It is impertinent to believe that we can know God from inside and that we enjoy access to a map of our own lives.

Serious accounts of God give full weight to the cloud through which we move. The centre of gravity of Karl Rahner's theology, for example, is his understanding of death as the archetypical act by which we surrender to the darkness in the hope of finding the unimaginable love of God. Rahner also identifies the love of God with love of the neighbour. This identity can be interpreted in anodyne ways, but its edge is provided by stories of the Holocaust. They have provided both compelling evidence of the darkness of human life and of heroic generosity where the cost of meeting the claim made by the face of the stranger was death. The God who is known through the stranger in these circumstances is a strange God. To speak with easy and proprietorial confidence of God and of the service which God asks of us in such a world is a sure sign of inattention or impropriety on the speaker's part.

From this perspective, spiritual direction itself is problematic and ambiguous. For at its heart is a conversation. All conversations tend to encourage familiarity with the topics raised in them. Any sense of familiarity with God or with the stranger in whom God is met, however, is at least deeply ambiguous. It can mark the domestication of God and of human loving, which are properly wild. This ambiguity, therefore, poses the radical question whether the conversations involved in spiritual direction are simply to be described as paradoxical, or whether they are necessarily unhelpful because they turn our attention away from God's world to conditions in the boat.

To this question, Christian experience suggests unequivocally and consistently that spiritual conversation is of benefit to us for our

response and address to God. But the structure which spiritual direction has had in its different forms in Christian history suggests with equal consistency that it is a quixotic venture in which directors always tend to subvert their own role. Spiritual directors are the ushers who retire before we kneel in the pews of the church. Like the butlers of Ealing comedies, their gravity is impressive and they are massively present until they reach the door behind which presides the master of the house. Then they retire, only to return with an equally massive presence to ensure that their charges return to the world of strangers outside the house. A good butler's face is not remembered, and no one, except those archetypal strangers to Ealing ways, the Antipodeans, would make them the object of their visit.

Conversation with spiritual directors, therefore, is important in keeping our face turned to the hidden face of God and to the neglected face of the stranger. Through Christian history, good spiritual direction has been so constructed that the face of the spiritual director slips out of focus.

The structure of spiritual direction: the desert and the cloister

This was evident in the desert tradition, where early spiritual directors are represented as fathers with all the considerable paternal and patriarchal weight that the title then carried. Their authority and their wisdom were extolled, and they were sought out on the basis of their experience of God and knowledge of God's ways.

The paternal role distanced the director from those with whom they spoke. They were conduits of God's word. Their advice was laconic, almost oracular, and silence was prized even more than words. They demanded heroic, at times immoral obedience from those who would follow them. One father instructed a would-be monk to throw his son into the river, and sent another monk both to test the quality of obedience and rescue the boy.

While such prophetic expectations of spiritual direction distanced the spiritual director from those who came to see him, the style of direction also distanced the face of the spiritual director from the face of God. The face of the director became problematic in many of the stories. John of Lycopolis, for example, never allowed visitors into his house, giving direction from the window. Nor did he ever allow women to see his face. When one woman pursued him for a blessing, he refused to meet her. Characteristically, he rejected the expectations which his behaviour encouraged: 'Am I a prophet or

am I to be counted among the just?' Both the miraculous context and the conversation drew attention to the face of God.

The structure of spiritual direction in the Benedictine tradition also took on a paternal shape. But it was more ordinary in style, because the abbot and his monks were related in the whole range of daily activities. The abbot was concerned to help the monk integrate the detailed path of life which he had chosen as his relationship to God. The monk's response to God was given flesh in time, place and routine.

But if the conversation was ordinary, the Benedictine Rule was careful to distance itself from the relationship with God to which it pointed. Monastic life itself was a school for beginners in the service of God and not a resting place. The abbot, too, stood under judgement; his skills did not give him a mediatorial role in the relationship with God. Finally, the Rule insisted on the importance of hospitality to the stranger whose face was the privileged place where the face of Christ could be met.

The structure of spiritual direction: the modern religious orders

Perhaps the most significant medieval development of spiritual direction was its association with confession. The structures of confession inevitably distance priest and penitent, and priest from God. This was most evident in the practice of confession in the post-Tridentine Church. The darkness and anonymity of the confessional, the emphasis on the judicial metaphor to describe the priest's role, and the moment when the penitent left the confessional to face the rows of strangers in the pews near the confessional, all served to obscure the face of the confessor. In spiritual terms, the priest celebrated both mass and penance with his back to the people.

The more formal structures of spiritual direction which were developed principally for religious, enshrined the same distance between the director and those whom he directed. On the one hand, the position of the spiritual director was exalted. He was endowed with knowledge about the spiritual life which had been codified in manuals describing the stages of progress in prayer. His relationship to those whom he directed was paternal. They were regularly described as spiritual children to whom he was the spiritual father, and the manuals of instruction insisted on the need for obedience and docility.

In theory it was almost possible to believe that the spiritual director was privy to the secrets of God and therefore entitled to total

obedience. But the practice disclosed a much more anarchic reality in which the relationship with God and the response to God were set free from regulation. Madeleine Marie d'Houet, for example, spent months litigating against a Jesuit who had assumed control of her nascent congregation, had tried to impose his designs on it, and was intent on disposing of her property according to his blueprint. But even while she pursued the court case, she consulted him faithfully as her spiritual director. The human oddity of this relationship revealed the strangeness of God and the distance between the conversation and the relationship with God which formed its subject.

In religious congregations, too, the spiritual director was integrated into the structures of formation which encompassed the whole of life. Spiritual direction was seen to form part of the process of socialization by which religious ratified their decision to join the congregation. But the better the spiritual director the more anarchic proved to be his influence. Sensitive spiritual direction worked against the forces that made for deformation in institutional life and belonged to Carnival. The best spiritual directors were often remembered equally for their wisdom and their eccentricity. One wore a paper hat to guard against germs; another distributed his obituary cards with only the date to be filled in; another was a great hater who could be relied upon to subvert all tendencies to petty tyranny. Others were renowned simply for their silence. In each case, spiritual direction subverted the tendency to confine the presence of God and God's will to the life and practices of the congregation. In the process, it also subverted its own claims to offer a privileged knowledge of God and of God's will. Where the best spiritual director is seen as a Holy Fool, high claims made for the straightforward effectiveness of conversation are not convincing.

While contemporary styles of spiritual direction correctly emphasize the claims of reason and of a shared humanity in the spiritual conversation, they also emphasize our distance from the director and the director's distance from God. The distance underlines the mystery of the relationship with God. Certainly, the conversation is to be structured in a way that allows the face of God to be revealed in the kindly face and unconditional regard of the director. But our awareness of the director's professional skills that is communicated through such symbols as payment for service and agreements about the conduct and termination of the relationship, and is inherent in an insistence on accountability and on a professional code which insists that these relationships are unequal, leads us back to the mystery at

the heart of our own lives. Spiritual direction encourages us to confront the mystery of God and steels us to meet God in the face of the stranger.

Thus, even though the patterns of spiritual direction have differed sharply over the ages, its structure has consistently revealed it to be a paradoxical enterprise. It is conversation between people who in other situations might be friends, but whose face is together turned towards the face of the stranger and to the face of God. The conversation stops at the point at which the face of God and of the stranger are seen. In cultures when it promises something more – an assured access to God's presence or to God's will – new forms of concealing the face of the director are developed to subvert these claims. In good spiritual direction oddity is never far beneath the surface.

How to live with laughter in heaven: seriously trivial pursuits

The essential oddity of spiritual direction suggests that the current questions about spiritual direction are all superficial (in the descriptive sense of the word). They have to do with the serious face of spiritual direction reflected on its serene surface. They do not reach down to the helpless laughter that bubbles up at its depths. To the extent to which they are addressed solemnly rather than with serious inattention, they may lead us to expect more from spiritual direction than it can deliver.

Because the questions with which we began are not ultimately important, the rival claims with which they deal are only relative. Categorical and one-sided answers are likely to indicate too unqualified a belief in the possibilities of spiritual direction. To insist, for example, that spiritual direction is radically different from psychological counselling may betray the belief that properly spiritual direction will lead us directly to find God and will reveal to us God's will. If the two are simply identified, the assumption is that our access to God is measured by our human wholeness. Both positions ignore the discontinuity between direction and the importance of our encounter with God in the face of the stranger. Both ultimately lead us to domesticate and not to discover the face of God.

Similarly, to be anxious to make spiritual direction serve formative goals in any more than an incidental way is to hope to domesticate the untameable. To insist that Jesuits should have only Jesuits and seminarians only priests or males as spiritual directors ignores the wildness of the God whom we seek. So does the belief that the name of our own spiritual director is written in heaven. Good spiri-

tual direction inevitably leads us beyond the predictable and the normal to meet the claim made by the face of the stranger, be that stranger male, lay, female or clerical. The advantage of a director from a familiar background is to be sought in the provisional nature of the enterprise. Because spiritual conversation is so preliminary, a shared grammar and syntax can be helpful.

The debate about the professional or communitarian character of spiritual direction is of equally relative importance. At the point to which spiritual direction leads and which alone justifies it, none of us is professional; our need for friendship and support in seeking the face of God in the stranger is a pastoral need that needs a supportive community. But if directors are to refuse to define the search for the God who searches us out from the cross as less exigent than standing wordlessly responsive before the face of the stranger, they require great wisdom and skill. We have the right to expect that the resources for such accompaniment will be found in the community; we have also good reason to suppose that some of the offers to provide it will be frivolous and will need to be tested.

The tension between spirituality and social justice is best described as being between two points in a process. If the goal of spiritual direction is to respond to God in the face of the stranger, it must eventually turn to the public mechanisms and sinful structures by which human beings are made strangers. But the path to such a response is long and hesitant, and our conversations along the way will at times properly be more introspective. So, good spiritual direction can spend time in billabongs as well as running streams, provided that it knows the difference between stagnant and flowing water.

Meanwhile, in the boat

Whatever the long view, we need to talk with those who are in the same boat as ourselves. Such conversation is important because it reminds us that we live in fog, and that merely being accustomed to it does not amount to good visibility. Conversation also steels us against the terrors that assail us when things go bump in the night, encouraging us to trust our conviction that we are borne on God's current. Moreover, when conversation turns to our destination, it enables us to recognize the intimations of God's face as we grasp the hand of the stranger. And finally, in such conversations we can tell stories of one who came through the fog to join us as a stranger and taught us to find God's friendship there.

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