Doing the truth in love

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A SYMPATHETIC BISHOP ONCE AGREED to lead a seminar on authority in the Church. To his own question: 'Who teaches the bishops?' he in due course provided his own answer: 'In the first place, their mothers'. My own brief in this symposium is to reflect on some of the questions concerning influence and authority raised by other gifts of leadership, the gifts and ministries of spiritual guidance, and in particular on their community recognition. The bishop's answer highlights for me two key themes of this article: the complex human grounding for learning and growth in the life of the spirit, and our radical receptivity of being and life. But in writing this, my role is not that of an expert in spiritual guidance. It is to offer some interpretations arising from my experience.

Readers of this volume will come to it for various reasons, but they will certainly come with their own context and presuppositions, however inchoate, which will condition their answers to such questions and by implication their views about spiritual guidance. First of all, I want to sketch out a way of handling the ecclesial context within which people may seek to understand and exercise spiritual guidance, basically in terms of 'stories we live by'. Then I will continue with a narrative of what I take spiritual guidance to be, following the main lines of the second 'story' I will have outlined as context and influential frame. In doing this I will disclose some of my own presuppositions. In a third narrative, I want to offer some thoughts, arising from the first two, on issues such as the kind of authority this ministry claims and the relation between what often appears as the authority of individual experience over against that of socially exercised power.

Stories we live by

In any discussion much depends on our being aware of the context of the matter in hand and of the perspective we and others have on it. This is particularly true of matters like spiritual guidance, which have the Church as their context. Here it might seem that, at least since Vatican Two, more incarnational, sacramental perspectives offer hopes of a unified approach. Everyone can assent to a

language of 'church as a communion'. But the interests and perspectives of those with official responsibilities, particularly those at the centre, are always liable to give a considerably different reading of 'communion' (more centralized and homogeneous) from that of those seeking to build community on the periphery (in more of a local and diverse embodiment of church). And these diverse readings radically affect the interpretation of the nature and functioning of all aspects of authority, including authority in spiritual guidance.

The concept of different 'models' has long been invoked to express these differences, but this rather technical metaphor from a scientific source has its limitations. It fails to speak of the passion and conviction generated by the diversity of perspectives which depend on diversity of commitment and sometimes barely analogous values arising from particular lived experience. That is why I would like to spend a few moments with the notion of 'stories we live by', where a 'story' is an imaginative interpretation of aspects of experience of the way things are, engaging subjective and objective dimensions of reality in one concrete whole.

Why stories? In the first place, narratives have a better chance of resonating with dimensions of experience other than the conceptual. This is important in areas touching on giftedness or charism and the authority gifts carry. While analysis and doctrine are further and necessary aspects of communication, especially where the stories' own ambiguities are disclosed by divergent interpretation, narratives are more fundamental. Thirdly, stories are the best means we have for redescribing the landscape of reality, and for moving within ever expanding and hitherto unimagined horizons. Extended metaphor is its medium of expression, for it enables creativity in landscaping as well as faithfulness to the main, long settled contours. Finally, to compose and listen to stories enables one to enter into the heart of a point of view, initially at least without judgement or criticism, much less condemnation.

Two stories

Two different readings or stories, chosen among many, of the communion already referred to share many landmarks, but the descriptive accounts which enshrine dedication and commitment to different perspectives highlight significantly different features. Both are stories of gift and guidance – journey stories both. They share one goal: at-one-ment. The first may be called a 'divine–human story' or a redemption story (of at-one-ment of God with human beings and

hence of human beings with each other); the second a 'human–divine story' or a creation story (of at-one-ment of the whole of creation in and with God). They are well known, like all good stories; I highlight only the relevant features, pausing to remark that the first story links more with the first of the two perspectives on communion already mentioned, the second with the second.

The first story sees itself explicitly to be sheer gift of divine disclosure, a revelation of God's Word. The Father is protagonist, who in love for a world enmeshed in sin sent his Son to redeem humanity by giving his life in a restorative sacrifice. To perpetuate and to realize afresh in each generation that changed state of affairs, the Father through his enfleshed Son in the Holy Spirit's power calls certain people from restored humanity to form a new people who would visibly realize redemption. In this story within this people from the start Jesus called certain men to represent the people before God. They are from and for the people, but set apart. The people sustain them, but are in essentials receivers through them of the gifts of divine grace, above all of the fruits of the one redeeming sacrifice spread far and wide by the sevenfold sacramental grace. Further generations of such priestly leaders come from the people who support their call, but they are recognized as called by God, tested and empowered in ordination by those already chosen. Their human gifts are of secondary importance. Empowerment with sacred gifts gives them authority over the people in things that pertain to God. They discern other spiritual gifts, and (while not conferring them, for they flow from baptism), they give them practical reality by empowering the gifted to act.

The second story consciously regards the world as its territory, but as a landscape with hidden divine depths. It begins with the world of shared human endeavour and, while telling of human beings seeking to penetrate its human mysteries and share its riches, it is also troubled by the enormity of human evil. In various ways people seek to establish justice, but conflict resolution ultimately lies in ever deeper recognition of the dignity of persons degraded by oppression and obscured by evil but expressed in the restlessness of the human heart for God, our utter dependence. This search itself reveals the world as gift of a creator who gives to creatures her very self in personal communion. That loving self-gift, always more powerful than evil, is incarnated, made visible and effective in Jesus who draws disciples who focus the grace and giftedness of the world in enduring community. As the focus of communion in visible

form, all in the community share grace and gifts: all have a role. Facilitating a harmony in the exercise of all the gifts is the task of leadership from within the community, itself a gift which many exercise at different times. The whole community as local embodiment of church recognizes created and graced gifts. And guides are themselves guided in the give and take of mature relationships.

About these stories a number of observations are relevant. There are limitless variants in the stories narrated. Elements of different stories may be 'borrowed' by different narrators, even though these borrowings take on the overall perspective of the particular story being told. This serves only to underline that all stories, and indeed all discourse, is open-textured, for however coherent systematic thinking aims to be, all patterning of experience is partial and incomplete and foundational stories are particularly malleable. This should mean that stories properly understood do not threaten but invite enjoyment (of your story as well as my own) and encourage shared exploration of their basic contours and practical implementation. But another factor tends in an opposite direction: if narrators (and modern narrators are specially at risk) forget that they are dealing with a committed interpretation, an evaluated fact, which has truth but is not exhaustively true, a story once firmly adopted tends to block sympathy and understanding for other stories. Conflict then arises and becomes confrontation when story is taken as sheer fact, and the power, the authority, of the story becomes the authority claimed for fact. This kills the story: it becomes 'mere story' and obedience to rule and law is substituted for an imaginative, creative engagement of the whole person with other persons. This poses a very real danger to the integrity of the spiritual search and to the meaning of guidance within it. One further observation: both are ideal stories about communion. Neither, as told, speaks of failure. Tensions actually come from factors the stories are not initially equipped to cope with. But then, no story is complete: it invites expansion. Creative imagination is mandatory, and this particularly in all matters of the spirit.

Spiritual guidance described

Having offered two contrasting context-stories, I go on to offer another narrative, interpreting spiritual guidance within the second story which is the one which for the most part engages my commitment. I interpret it as *a conversation which focuses on the dimension*

of spirit in human life, initiated by a person seeking advice from another who is recognized as having experience in that dimension.

As a *conversation* I envisage it as mainly one-to-one, though it may include parabolic actions as well as words, particularly in non-western settings, and alternatively may rely for much of its course on interaction with texts, with books. But live discourse is usually regarded as crucial, particularly in the early stages. The dialogue as I see it (indeed all dialogue in my view) is fundamentally between equals, because between persons. It takes place in the deepest dimension of our existence, which is the dimension of *who* we are as uniquely *named* in God's love (cf Isai 43:1), and mediately in others' love. This transcends, though it is always embodied in, our human natural being, that is to say the natural defining characteristics (the *what* we are) of our individual selves and our social existence. But the unique personal centre of our being, though never isolated, since it is constituted in its core by relationship, is very hard fully to identify, and identify with, because of our learned tendency to identify with our 'shallower' dimension, our active, natural selves, which unreflectively and often very unhappily clash and clang about in conflict with other selves. This is the basic reason why we need guidance: progress in the grasp of reality, in becoming more real, involves a process of clarification, of re-education through ever deeper personal growth-in-awareness discovered in prayer and fostered by enlightened guidance. Hence the element of conversation.

To return to the theme of equality: there may be – in most cases it is presupposed – an inequality of individual experience, but the personal equality giving rise to acceptance, respect and openness is basic. The process seems to me to be a shared search. The more familiar activity of teaching offers analogies: there may be an element of instruction of one by another but it would be a mistake to think of teaching as the transfer of knowledge possessed by one to another more ignorant than oneself; it is, rather, a matter of the facilitating of learning. Here horizons are being pushed back for both participants, and familiar patterns of understanding revised. As a prayer found in Bede Jarrett's papers has it: 'Lift us up, strong Son of God, that we may see further'. All this applies to our metaphor of a conversation. But it is not an easy option. Recognition of another, and still more of the Other, of God, is liberating but challenging with its elements of objectivity and critique of self. Conversation is subversive of its participants' assumed certainties.

Its success is only possible in a perspective paraphrased from Bernard Lonergan speaking precisely of interpersonal relationships: 'It is not a matter of what I think or want, nor of what you think or want, but of what truth and love demand'.

Holistic thinking

Next comes the notion of *focusing*. This attends to the matter of *how* we reflect on spiritual guidance, rather than saying more about what it is. I employ the metaphor of *focusing* here to express a process of concentration without exclusion, just as a burning glass brings to a point, without masking or eliminating, the whole spread of the sun's rays. As an activity, spiritual guidance can be met with in all historical ages, all societies and all walks of life. This grounding in the human is what makes it possible to concentrate on more specific characteristics of place, of time, of purpose, of historical tradition. These emerge by ever more closely focused description without losing the general human ground. For what produces clarity of understanding in this context is not a 'clear and distinct idea' but a feel for being in the right place. It follows that, as to its subject matter, ordinary life should not be excluded from the conversation. Indeed it cannot be, since it is the whole of human life in various complex ways which is the embodiment of what calls for attention – the life of the spirit.

First, however, it may be helpful to attend for a moment to the language of *dimension*, which complements that of 'focus'. We so readily tend, especially in western society, to compartmentalize our accounts of experience in binary terms of 'is' and 'is not' which are taken to exclude each other, that we overlook other possibilities of patterning that experience. But if one thinks in terms of two or more dimensions, our human existence can be described, for example, as wholly physical, or wholly mental; as wholly natural, or wholly graced, but in each case not exhaustively so. The other dimensions share the same 'space' (another metaphor), just as the dimension of depth can be located at every point of a cubic space without 'depth' exhausting the possible accounts which lie in 'length' and 'breadth'. In suggesting this with regard to human relations, I am doing only what is analogously done, as far as I understand it, in cosmological physics by adopting systematically a language of 'force' and 'energy' and 'waves' rather than one that imagines unobserved entities like 'nuclei' and 'electrons'. It is this possibility of seeing much of our language as referring to dimensions of experience before, or

rather than, making reference to concretely imagined objects or mutually exclusive characteristics, which enables us confidently to handle notions like personal presence and mutuality – notions which are central to all discussion of interpersonal relations and hence of the issues of this Supplement, especially those concerning individual and community responsibilities. But it has immediate and profound influence on that next notion I need to examine, that of 'spirit'.

The language of spirit

Paul is one author in a long line of those who use a language of spirit to explore in a highly nuanced way the relations between the dimensions of our human being itself ('body and soul') and between human beings and divine being. To speak of human spirit is to speak obliquely or correlatively of divine Spirit, just as to speak of 'finite beings' is to speak obliquely of 'Infinite Being'. One way of looking at these relations tells a story of the lives of human beings in their struggles for fairness and justice, for dignity and for reconciliation as so many inextinguishable sparks of human spirit destined, 'like sparks running through the stubble', to ignite the world of which the creative source is the fire of the Spirit. Another story tells of origins, in the creating Spirit of God constituting human beings as created spirits in their very essence. In both perspectives God appears as the ground of all finite beings. But more than this: God's constituting us creatively is, at one and the same time, God's threefold personal presence addressing us in infinite love. That is why we can say we live in a world of 'nature-that-is-graced' or 'graced-nature'. And this, not in two stages or two compartments of our being, but as two permanent dimensions of existence which can wax and wane but never be abolished.

So to use the language of 'spirit' is to enter a discourse which discloses ever deeper dimensions, moving from speech about God's free initiative in creating us (the world and our natural, given, selves) to speech about grace as God's loving personal presence. This sort of perspective encourages a quite simple threefold account of the human being in terms of bodily, psychic and spiritual or personal dimensions, rather than the more familiar dual partitioning into body and soul, which finds it difficult to come to grips with issues concerning the personal subject and grace. And it also encourages a language of receptivity, of gift given in the Spirit yet grounded in our humanness to build up the whole community in truth – in short, of *charism.*

With its focus on 'spirit/Spirit' in its varied dimensions, spiritual guidance is thus a conversation which gives people the freedom to roam over the whole landscape of human existence from a deeply theological perspective. Taken like this, it is much more like an exciting journey of discovery of dimensions of experience hitherto overlooked or only half guessed at, than an encouragement to make ever renewed moral efforts. This is an approach much closer to the '(meta-)physical' spirit of the Eastern Fathers, an exploration of reality as a whole. Hence the complex metaphor of the search for an experienced guide through what can be quite unfamiliar territory which was used earlier in a context of re-education. Guides, then, must be experienced and their experience recognized in the community. But how are we to interpret this in our context?

Authority in spiritual guidance

Further narratives focus more specifically on interpreting the empowerment or authority of gifts given and received. From my chosen perspective it seems important to me to look at three features of the landscape we are visiting: the authority of personal spiritual experience; the authority of a spiritual guide; and the authority, through its representatives or representative structures, of the wider community (in reality a network of communities with ever wider remit) in which the first two operate. In the first place it seems important to look briefly at the nature and roots of authority.

A 'story line' about authority might begin with a definition of authority like this: *a social, moral and personal power to claim assent to and observance of what is stated or claimed or sometimes ordered as being a true good for human beings.* The three aspects of power mentioned here function, as I see it, as dimensions of the whole field of human experience, each with its appropriate discourse, each occupying the whole landscape of our living but not exhausting its possibilities. Hence neither 'or' nor 'and' adequately joins the three aspects mentioned. Moral authority is a dimension not exhausted by the social, and personal authority, not by each separately nor by both together, even while they interpenetrate. Social authority, for example, includes all types of legal authority and thereby embraces moral and physical (extrinsic and coercive) power. On the other hand, moral authority is not necessarily to be equated with an interpretation according to a law model of rights and duties. It may instead approximate in the way it is understood to the free (because loving) mutual coinherence of persons which offers an ulti-

mate authority, a transcending perspective which transforms all the features of experience. This perspective of the personal functions within the deepest dimension of all – the theological – grounded as it is in the infinite threefold personhood of God, and issuing, in the ultimate analysis, in the freedom to 'love and do what you will'. But since our lives are still a journey (already well begun) into these ultimate depths, it is important to recognize that the path we follow is marked by various stages towards fulfilment, including that from an external authority, with freedom barely if at all engaged, to an internalized and freely committed autonomous authority, and onward further to the authority of being a person constituted by the creating love of God. Spiritual guidance calls on all three aspects of authority in so far as we all exist in all three.

The landscape of authority

'Power' itself seems to be a foundational notion, which only synonyms, and acting out, elucidate. But one immediate observation is important: power itself is positive; empowerment is a gift; it is the abuse of power which damages human beings. And this abuse lies in ignoring the limits of power which other moral (just) and personal (loving) claims require. In the end this abuse comes down to a repudiation of createdness, of our being radically gift and not our own possession. It comes down to an attempt to be 'as God', to control the world and persons and repudiate God as though God were a threat to our freedom instead of constituting our being, our freedom, our heart's desire, 'closer to me than I am to myself'. On the other hand, an authoritative claim which is authentic exercises positively the power of what is (pro)claimed, through its access to what is true and good for human beings. That is to say, it operates in the spheres of what is, and what has value: the two basic, inseparable, dimensions of reality. In such a perspective, to say: 'Do this (or 'Believe this') because I/we say so', can only be, at best, a short cut for effective action. The 'true goodness' of the claim must always be testable: it must *work* for human beings on a fully developed appreciation of what is for them truly good. To recall the theological dimension of these reflections: the 'fully developed appreciation' spoken of is based on the perspective, mentioned earlier in speaking of the 'spiritual', of what we are calling 'graced-nature', where all is received because we are receptivity personified.

In a nutshell, truly authoritative utterance embodies (rather than simply points the way to) authentic *praxis* – that is to say, a way of

'doing the truth in love' which gives rise to and is deepened by reflective understanding. And each of the aspects of spiritual guidance provides an instance of how authority is actually embodied. In the life of the one seeking guidance there lives the power of her or his own irreducible experience: *'What I do is me: for that I came'*. In the spiritual guide lives the power of one who has mapped out many paths on the long journey of experience: *'Those who teach wisdom shall be like the sun at midday'*. And in the lives of a community lives the power of its members who can compare and contrast the 'dangerous memories' of many histories mediated in texts as well as in multiple experiences: 'Not the intense moment/ Isolated, with no before and after,/ But a lifetime burning in every moment'. All have their authority grounded on an insight into reality – *their* complex reality, but a reality which is intrinsically relational. Each finds his or her own identity in relation to others: our individual experience is grasped and handed on in inherited and learned patterns which do not, however, constrain but liberate us to be more fully ourselves; and the community, the living form of the past, only continues its existence by virtue of its present members on whom it depends to discover its future.

Final questions

What light can we find from gathering our narratives together? If we go back to our two context-stories we can see that both of them have a belief in human gifts and the gift of being human. With that, however, the first has a structured flow to communicate empowerment (centred on ordination), which makes it difficult in practice to accept the equality and giftedness of all which it fundamentally professes. This is especially true in emergent gifts such as spiritual guidance.

Those who live by the second story have problems with effective harmony within diversity of gifts, as Paul found at Corinth (1 Cor 12—14). 'My *gift*' can become '*my* gift' and issue in various forms of self-aggrandizement. We can all assent to Lonergan's dictum; it is living it out which is the problem. This requires not primarily a moral effort, but the realization of a new way of seeing reality as intrinsically relational, like that haltingly presented in this article. There are, however, many prior steps of a social, political and moral nature which need to be taken on the way. Important among these are effective critique, supported by structures for redress, of abuses of power, in the Church as elsewhere; and proper organization to

encourage and develop the gifts of the many who remain unacknowledged. Above all is needed encouragement. A central gospel saying bids us lose life to find it; but the prerequisite for this challenge is first to have found the life one is to lose, and many lack that vital precondition of self worth.

All in all, the charism of giving guidance in the life of the spirit will flourish best, it seems to me, within a 'creation story' which sees the charism of each as a dimension of human gifts which manifests the personal presence of the Spirit. Each has the authority of those gifts and, more radically, of their personal being; some have the further authority of experience, and this is not in reality isolated or antagonistic to the authority of others (individuals or communities) – 'there is no competition'– but is reciprocally nurtured and developed by mutual respect and letting be, so that it comes to its full actuality in recognition and endorsement. Sadly, we 'can stand so little reality'. But that is not the last word.

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