

COUNSELING AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Everyone is familiar with the little cards, so popular today, which have amusing sayings printed on them. I received one recently which has caused me to think a great deal. In fact, I intend to keep it on my desk. It reads simply "If you have always done it that way, it is probably wrong." While this has not changed my life, it made me re-think my approach to the subject of "Spiritual Direction and Counseling." It caused me to ask myself if the way I usually distinguished these two subjects was as correct as I had presumed.

It is easy, and to an extent quite appropriate, to distinguish between spiritual direction and counseling. Among other writers, Byrne¹ has shown that direction treats spiritual problems and aims at supernatural integration while counseling treats emotional problems and aims at natural integration. These are accurate and useful statements and they remind the spiritual director and the counselor not to intrude in each other's domain.

But the more I thought, whether inspired by my placard or not, the more I questioned my facile use of such distinctions. I began to wonder about what makes any helping relationship effective, whether it is the relationship in marriage, spiritual direction, friendship or counseling. I began to wonder too whether the cautions and distinctions about spiritual direction and counseling did not reflect a Kantian viewpoint toward human persons. This desire to categorize may just have blurred something much more fundamental and much more profound that is shared by both spiritual direction and counseling.

Recent psychological research has indicated that there are basic similarities in all good human relationships. That is to say, there is something that all good human relationships have in common. There is some quality that they must have if the relationships are to work

¹ J. T. Byrne, "Counseling and Spiritual Direction," *The Homiletic And Pastoral Review*, LIX, 6 (March, 1959), 537.

at all. This shared characteristic may be far more important than the ways in which, on possibly accidental bases, we distinguish various kinds of human relationships. It is in this territory, in the realm of what happens between people in their most significant encounters with each other, that we need to grasp the root dynamics of interpersonal growth. I am saying, then, that what makes spiritual direction effective, when it is, is basically what makes good counseling effective. Spiritual direction works when there is a genuine interpersonal relationship between the people involved. There must be some real contact on a genuinely human level. This relationship implies real understanding and interest, and this arises when two people are related in the profound way that is possible only between human persons. This is far more important than techniques. In short, the conditions of healthy interpersonal exchange must be present or spiritual direction is a lifeless kind of enterprise.

It would seem that many persons view spiritual direction as a listless and not very profitable experience.² This is bound to occur if the relationship is mechanical, impersonal, or ambiguous. In re-reading the masters of the spiritual life, one is constantly struck by their keen sensitivity to the same truths. The writers, for example, reiterate the fact that the relationship is not one of obedience as between a subject and a superior. As Le Clerq says:

Certain spiritual authors have tended to identify as much as possible the spiritual director as a true superior and to attribute to him an authority properly so called in virtue of which he decides even the minute details of a choice of a state in life: the submission to a director becomes then an obligation of obedience strictly speaking. Pere de Guibert has justly remarked that this conception has no foundation in tradition and ecclesiastical teaching. That, differing from superiors properly speaking, the director is not appointed by God but chosen freely by each so that a person does not practice towards a director the same obedience that one would to a true superior.³

² So one writer observes that "The problem today is that many adults cannot find a priest capable of helping them attain spiritual adulthood." Lucien-Marie de St. Joseph, O.C.D., "Spiritual Direction—Its Nature And Dimensions," *Theology Digest* VI, 1, Winter 1958, p. 39.

³ Le Clerq, *La Conscience du Chretien*: Aubier, Editions Montaigne, Paris, 1946, pp. 248-249.

The spiritual director's task is far more that of the prudent guide who helps the individual develop himself in truly responsible fashion. Or as de Guibert has put it: "An excess in passivity would prevent the soul from reaching maturity in the spiritual life and would not result in true 'spiritual childhood.' Rather the aim of the director should be to make the soul self-reliant, at least in ordinary spiritual matters."⁴ The freedom the subject enjoys has been protected zealously by the Church. These notions give added reason for seeing the similarities between spiritual direction and counseling, likenesses they share with all wholesome human encounters. It may, after all, be a naive and unchristian approach to speak of separate treatments for the soul and the emotions. What is dealt with is a living, breathing human person who lives in a world of nature and grace and works toward the fulfillment of his supernatural destiny. The whole man is treated or the man is not treated at all. The spiritual director must deal precisely with persons, not just with intellects; he must be deeply attuned to the whole complex psychosomatic unity we meet in individual men. ". . . all spiritual fathers," Lucien-Marie de St. Joseph writes, "can approach each of their sons as individuals. Each individual is different by reason of his character and his own personal history. Man in the abstract does not exist."⁵

Counselors have increasingly emphasized the quality of the human relationship as of far greater importance than any possible "techniques" or "tricks." What they have come to see with ever greater clarity is that the person seeking help will improve or grow only if the relationship with the counselor is deeply real. If the persons involved do not genuinely encounter one another, then failure ensues. Counseling works, to borrow a well-known phrase, *ex opere operantis*. As a psychologist, discussing what makes counseling successful or not, writes:

In the first place, I hypothesize that personal growth is facilitated when the counselor is what he is, when in the relationship with his client he is genuine and without "front" or

⁴ J. de Guibert, S.J., "Theology of The Spiritual Life," New York, Sheed & Ward, 1953, pp. 173, 174.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 42.

facade, openly being the feelings and attitudes which at that moment are flowing in him. We have used the term "congruence" to try to describe this condition. By this we mean that the feelings the counselor is experiencing are available to him, available to his awareness, that he is able to live these feelings, be them in the relationship, and able to communicate them if appropriate. It means that he comes into a direct personal encounter with his client, meeting him on a person-to-person basis. It means that he is being himself, not denying himself. No one fully achieves this condition, yet the more the therapist is able to listen acceptantly to what is going on within himself, and the more he is able to be the complexity of his feelings without fear, the higher the degree of his congruence.

I think that we readily sense this quality in our everyday life. We could each of us name persons whom we know who always seem to be operating from behind a front, who are playing a role, who tend to say things they do not feel. They are exhibiting incongruence. We do not reveal ourselves too deeply to such people. On the other hand each of us knows individuals whom we somehow trust, because we sense that they are being what they are, that we are dealing with the person himself, and not with a polite or professional facade. This is the quality of which we are speaking, and it is hypothesized that the more genuine and congruent the therapist in the relationship, the more probability there is that change in personality in the client will occur. . . .

I hope it is clear that I am talking about a realness in the counselor which is deep and true, not superficial. I have sometimes thought that the word transparency helps to describe this element of personal congruence. If everything going on in me which is relevant to the relationship can be seen by my client, if he can see "clear through me," and if I am willing for this realness to show through in the relationship, then I can be almost certain that this will be a meaningful encounter in which we both learn and develop.⁶

The counselor must have certain skills and certain qualifications but, in great measure, his effectiveness will depend on what he is like as a person. As Father Charles Curran has written:

⁶ C. Rogers, "The Interpersonal Relationship: The Core of Guidance," *The Harvard Educational Review*, 32, 4, Fall 1962, pp. 417-419.

No one can catch in simple description the most subtle and complex relationship that must exist between counselor and client, between therapist and patient. Here the necessity of mutual involvement in the human condition is most strikingly demonstrated. The therapist or counselor cannot stand apart in an objective, unfeeling, Cartesian way. He must be a complete person, psychosomatically committed to a deep, sensitive, and intense personal communion, a true giving of self. The counselor is first to give himself. Then, more slowly but just as surely, the person coming for help gains the confidence to make a genuine commitment of himself. Such a relationship seems to approximate what the ancients called *amor benevolentiae*—a relationship in which one gives of himself entirely and seeks no return from the other except the other's best fulfillment of himself.⁷

It should hardly surprise us to find that this is so. After all, the purpose of spiritual direction must surely be growth in charity. Could it ever be imagined that this could be accomplished in one-sided fashion? The spiritual director must grow along with those with whom he works. Counseling research bids priests to examine the quality of the human relationship in spiritual direction.

Spiritual direction may be conceived by some as merely instructing the newcomer in the principles of prayer and the spiritual life. Others may see it as largely encouraging others with something akin to pep talks. Others, in fact, see the director as assuming a great deal of responsibility for the development of the directee. It is probably healthy to re-examine some of these attitudes in the light of what we are learning about real human relationships. The director, however, is not dealing just with a mind that seeks information. Neither is his encounter merely with emotions that need arousing. Nor is his the sole responsibility for the other's actions. It is an existential encounter between two persons and the outcome depends on how truly this encounter takes place. The spiritual director's main resource is not his academic degree, the title on his office door, or any other claim to wisdom; it is what he is and who he is in his work with others.

⁷ C. A. Curran, "Counseling, Psychotherapy, and The Unified Person," *Journal of Religion and Health*, 2, 2, Jan. 1963, p. 109.

Spiritual directors, like counselors, are capable of working with people in order to receive the rewards of gratitude, or to build their own image of themselves as wise men. They may find that they often concentrate, not on the person whom they hold theoretically to be sacred, but on the problem and, as a result, they resort to various artificial approaches and techniques. They find even that the problem they are solving in counseling is not that of the person but is of another order altogether. They solve, especially if they are given too much direct advice, the problem they are experiencing because someone has come to them for help. They tend to "handle" cases because, on some level of awareness, they feel they have to do something to this individual and send him on his way. They find that they are often very subtly trying to re-make others in their own image and likeness, rather than giving persons the freedom really to be themselves. They remind one of the remark of Monsignor Ronald Knox about the possible motivations of a seminary professor: "Rows and rows of divines turning out just like me. . . . What could be more suitable for the Church?"⁸

The focus comes back to the person of the director or the counselor and it is my conviction that what they must share in common is far more important than the distinctions that can be made about their work. A further sharing is in their ability to understand another and to communicate this understanding back to the troubled person. As Father Curran says:

To understand another at the deepest level of his feelings and reactions is an immeasurably more profound, complex, and delicate kind of understanding than simply to know the meaning of the words he uses. Yet this is what the other really means when he says of the counselor after an interview, "You know, he really understood me."⁹

Reality of self and depth of understanding: these, then, are the absolute requirements for a good counselor. His counseling is sterile without them. It is perhaps because these factors have been somewhat blurred in our vision of the nature of spiritual direction, that

⁸ R. Knox, *The Priestly Life*, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1958, p. 154.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, 110.

it has been a disappointing and ineffective experience for many people. This is not to say that the knowledge of the spiritual director is of no account. Neither is it to say that instruction in the principles of the spiritual life is unimportant. To emphasize the personal factors of the relationship is in no sense to downgrade these aspects of spiritual direction. It is translating his wisdom into human terms, it is in making it possible for the other to experience charity and understanding through him, that the spiritual director can learn from the counselor. Why, St. Thomas asks, can St. Paul say that a man could know all things and without charity it would profit him nothing? And he answers that nobody could learn anything from him. Nobody can learn in an atmosphere that is cold and remote. Nobody can breathe in such high, thin air. What spiritual direction and counseling share arises from the wonder of the fully human person. "The glory of God," St. Irenaeus tells us, "is in a man fully alive." The glory of God is in the counselor or the director who is fully alive as well.

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