

## SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND NON-DIRECTIVE COUNSELING

The first of many intriguing and knotty questions we will all undoubtedly want to touch upon is this: What do we mean by spiritual direction, and what percentage of the faithful are to be considered as its appropriate beneficiaries? A total answer can come only from the collaborative opinions of Church historians, theologians, spiritual writers, and counselors. Formal spiritual direction as set out by the manuals came quite late in Christian history, and seems by and large to have been available only to special or privileged souls. This leads to an interesting speculation—is such direction really essential for the masses?

It seems probable that the well-motivated and normally adjusted Christian can do quite nicely without extended private direction, especially if his spiritual advancement is illumined by a living catechesis, active liturgical participation, and a meaningful reception of the sacraments—all supported by the redemptive and loving Christian community of which he is a part. Attempts on the part of clergy or superiors to impose spiritual direction upon many of these souls might not only be gilding the lily, but could even produce an overlay of false spirituality in cases where the director acts out of preconceived notions or needs of his own as to how and when spiritual direction should be conducted.

The plain fact is that most priests have not received rewarding spiritual direction themselves, and many consequently feel unsure in giving direction to others. Seminarians and nuns, for whom direction is expected and often prescribed, express widespread dissatisfaction with current practices. They admit to thinking up problems where they have none, lest the time allotted be filled with awkward silence or idle chit-chat. In instances where a real need for help exists, the individual is all too often given far too little time. Some speak of the director as "remote, cold, austere," and visits are described as fearful experiences. All too often the director seems

to take the dominant role—probing, diagnosing, prescribing for the penitent who has hardly any active role in the relationship. Other directors are checkers. They tick off success in meditation, number of spiritual books read, particular faults resisted, and so on. In many instances a personal relationship is missing, and the counselee, instead of anticipating his sessions with pleasure, views them with uneasiness and foreboding.

Would-be directors have too often fallen into one of two categories. They are psychologically expert but theologically fuzzy, or they are well-trained theologians who have little or no insight into the theories and techniques of psychological counseling. Of the two the latter category is by far the more common, and the least effective. All too often theologians who have been exposed to philosophical psychology feel they are equipped to do counseling. The rational psychology of St. Thomas is not only among the more elusive and tentative of his speculations, but does almost nothing to elucidate the theories and principles of dynamic psychology, the basis for good counseling as it is practised today.

Spiritual direction, like other forms of counseling, can involve either of two fundamental and somewhat contradictory approaches. The "actionist" director sees himself as essentially superior in knowledge, prudence, and insight. He diagnoses, judges and prescribes. The "insight" approach on the other hand, is client (or penitent) centered. The "insight" school sees the spiritual director more as a colleague in the quest of perfection. His ability to listen, accept, and encourage enables his penitent to gain deeper knowledge of his own state in life, and evaluate his own emotional shortcomings and strong points. With newly acquired insight, the penitent *himself*, under the benign influence of the director, chooses the directions towards which he will go, the remedies he will try, the challenges he will assume.

There is no question whatever—and I want to stress this point—that all the great traditional schools of spirituality emphasized self-insight and self-determination as necessary corollaries of good spiritual direction. St. Paul speaks of the spiritual guide becoming "all things to all men" that Christ might be activated in all. The

monastic tradition developed an outstanding variety of *individual* religious temperaments, many of whom were permitted to flourish in solitude. St. Ignatius clearly prescribed, in his celebrated *Exercises*, that spiritual development was a highly personal affair. His mapped outline of this progress was designedly sketchy, since each man was to follow his own religious inclination and seek his own unique spiritual goals.

It has happened, however, that over the centuries each ascetical school has also been open to distortion by well-meaning but unperceptive disciples. All too often unique characteristics of each great tradition have been mis-read, twisted, or over-emphasized to the exclusion of other balancing factors. In each case, faulty application of basically sound theories have created problems which have forced spiritual guides into the role of actionists—of direction from without, and away from insight or growth from within.

At the risk of overstating this point, I would like to refer briefly to characteristics of some traditional schools of asceticism which are always in danger of becoming weaknesses in inept hands.

The monastic tradition, represented in particular by the Rule of St. Benedict, is founded on a firm yet loving relationship between a father and his sons. The subject is urged to "freely accept and faithfully fulfill instructions of the loving father" who makes allowances for the individual differences of his dependents. In the wrong hands, however, this approach can degenerate into a *false paternalism*. An artificial and inhibiting parent-child relationship is perpetuated, involving an *over*-dependent and blind response in the area of personal spirituality which is too often confused with the religious obedience which a subject owes his religious superior. There is a basic psychological principle which holds that when an adult is treated as a child he will act as a child. Such becomes the case when certain spiritual pilgrims are motivated only by the authoritative admonitions of one who advises and exhorts, but rarely listens for the emotional clues which describe each man's uniqueness.

The great psychological insights of St. Ignatius, as evidenced in the *Exercises*, are also prone to misinterpretation. All too often

directors have overlooked the fundamental conviction of the Jesuit founder that the spiritual life is to be pursued on an individual basis, with careful regard to individual differences of temperament and talents. The spirit of the *Exercises* is often falsely interpreted as a kind of rigid straightjacket of detailed formularies whereby the interior dispositions and prayer life of those seeking perfection are subjected to an intricate barrage of colloquies, preludes, points, contemplations, preambles, rules and notes. Voluntarism is the danger here. The role of the will can be over-stressed or isolated if the will is seen as a sort of muscle which needs only to be exercised in repetitive acts under the direction of one concerned more with obedience than with inner assent or appropriate motivation, especially on the emotional level.

Inherent in later schools of asceticism is the pitfall of Cartesian dualism implied in some of the false interpretations of works such as the *Soul of the Apostolate* or *The Imitation of Christ*. The writers of both these works proclaim the indisputable unity of inner contemplation and the active apostolate. Yet certain unfortunate picking and choosing of isolated passages have created the dangerous illusion that they are separate. A readiness to minimize and even belittle the substrate of nature upon which super-nature builds adds to the confusion and is one of the chief obstacles to the "client-centered" approach to spiritual direction.

A disdain for human feeling and individual emotional differences in particular, can create real problems. The following quotations, if properly understood, are quite valid. But years of unbalance and over-emphasis have also opened them to grave distortions.

"Good works," says Dom Chautard, "should be nothing but an overflow from the inner life. The worker for God, carried away by the pleasure of giving free reign to his natural energy, lets the Divine light fade out and thus loses the supernatural heat which has been stored up in him to make this apostolate effective and which would have helped his soul to resist the encroachments of the numbing vice of natural motives."

A needless and deadly separation of inner super-nature from the naturally human life can also be wrongly inferred from any number

of texts from the *Imitation*. For example: "This is the highest and most profitable lesson; truly to know and despise ourselves. When a man has perfect compunction then the whole world is to him burdensome and distasteful. It is truly a misery to live upon earth. Think on thy sins with great compunction and sorrow and never esteem thyself to be anything for thy good works. Conceive an indignation against thyself; suffer not the swelling of pride to live in thee, but make thyself so submissive and little that all may trample on thee and tread thee under foot as the dirt of the street."

Too often, then, the guidance of the individual soul is seen in terms of the negation of the emotional life of man, coupled with the imposition of admonitions that have more meaning for the director than they do for the penitent. Spiritual direction seems so often tragically bereft of that indispensable ingredient of counseling—a deep love of the individual as he is *here and now*. Thus the Venerable Libermann summed up the essence of good spiritual guidance when he wrote: "The spiritual director having once ascertained God's action in a soul, has nothing else to do but to guide it, that it may obey the promptings of grace. He must never attempt to inspire a soul with his personal tastes and individual attractions, nor lead it after his own way of acting or his own peculiar point of view. A director that would act thus would often turn souls from God's own guidance and oppose the action of Divine grace in them."

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