The contemplative model of spiritual direction

A bibliographic review

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Today’s increasing interest in spiritual direction has resulted in a vast abundance of books and articles with a variety of emphases and sensitivities, depending on the perspective the authors place it within.

Along with the classical perspective, today it seems to us that two significant approaches to the question of spiritual direction are emerging. The first privileges attention to history, while the other is directed to reflecting on life as it is lived now, a view that is helpful to those who feel called to this ministry. Here we would like to explore the contemplative dimension of the ministry of accompaniment, taking both of these approaches into account.

We are interested in this aspect as a paradigm, due to the ever more pressing insistence with which the literature today, especially in English, looks at it. This interest is also due to the risk (recurring in the past in settings more sensitive to pragmatism)  of placing the emphasis on methodological and technical aspects, to the detriment of what should be the essential dimension of the experience of faith.

## 1. How does one recognise a spiritual director?

In his book *Spiritual Director, Spiritual Companion: Guide to Tending the Soul,* Tilden Edwards tries to answer the question ‘How does one recognise a spiritual guide?’ Spiritual direction, he replies, does not primarily consist of using particular acquired techniques, but of a specific type of experience in which the director allows himself to be led by that God in whose presence he places himself for the good of the person who asks to be accompanied. The director must only express himself in a climate of prayer, immersed in an atmosphere of depth within his own experience. He moves at that level where he encounters the Spirit (T. Edwards, 2001, pp. 96-97).

In the broadest sense, it is the experience that springs from a relationship with the Mystery, a relationship that is direct, immediate and intentional. It consists of placing oneself before God in a contemplative attitude. It is letting oneself be inspired by this source of love which, in turn, is capable of pervading all of reality.

In this context, the love of God and for God becomes the soul of spiritual direction. Two fundamentally important attitudes derive from this. Firstly, the director must be personally present to this Mystery in the context of the direction, precisely because this is a privileged circumstance of God’s presence; secondly, he must be able to grasp God’s initiative in this sacred moment (T. Edwards, 2001, pp. 4-5).

Edwards’ reflections seem simple, almost obvious. However, his insistent emphasis should be seen in a context where, before any form of spiritual direction, it is assumed that the director has an authentic relationship with God.

Similarly, an author of the same name, Denis Edwards, in a book about the human experience of God, (*Human Experience of God*) focuses on the mysterious dimension of life. In spiritual direction, he writes, as a human experience of God, the transcendent aspect must not be relegated to a secondary level: ‘we can confirm that our knowledge of ourselves depends on our experience of the infinite mystery, which has left its mark on our life’ (D. Edwards, 1983, p. 25).

This is not a pietistic reflection. On the contrary, this experience is essentially rooted and marked by daily life: the unity between the human and the divine is nothing more than the reflection of those other unities, with oneself and with others, that one tries to put into practice in the spiritual direction.

At this point we ask ourselves a historical question: if current literature arrives at such a focus, what kind of tradition preceded us? In other words, do we find living points of reference in the tradition of the Church or not?

## 2. The Desert Fathers

The English edition of the work by the Jesuit Irénée Hausherr on *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, contains an essay in which Bishop Kallistos Ware (I. Hausherr, 1990, vii - xxxiii) traces the figure of the spiritual director in John Climacus and Symeon the New Theologian. He does this to highlight the founding elements that constitute the essence of spiritual paternity. Without going into the details of the reflection, which worthily introduces Hausherr’s fundamental work, I would like to propose a paragraph taken from a sermon by Climacus quoted by Ware. The quotation summarises the author’s thoughts on spiritual paternity, but it also reflects the beliefs of the entire period on spiritual direction.

Giovanni Climaco ends *The Ladder of Heaven* with a Sermon to the Shepherd. After explaining that the shepherd must be a shepherd, a steersman (guide) a doctor and a teacher, he continues: ‘For the superior, to pray to God that his disciple receive a gift that he does not yet have would be a real shame. The saints must behave like those who presented themselves to the king if they became his friend and for this reason they in turn can introduce others, unknown to him or even his enemies if they want, to enjoy his glory. Similarly, God’s friends respect his most intimate devotees, obeying them and yielding gently. It is a good thing to have friends, and spiritual friends who can help us more than others in the conquest of virtue’ (John Climacus, 1996, p. 351).

The same question of the indispensable intimacy with God is found in a letter of Symeon the New Theologian on confession (*Symeon the New Theologian*, 1997, pp. 185-203). Without stopping to analyse the letter in detail, what interests us about these two masters is not so much the masterly way in which they explain the role of the spiritual director, but rather how for both of them, paternity must essentially be rooted in the spiritual director’s experience of God (*Symeon the New Theologian,* 1997, pp. 193,195,201). The truth that a blind person cannot lead another blind person except to ruin is their basic conviction.

## 3. The mystics

Alongside the contribution of the Desert Fathers, we have that of the mystics. A work that clearly presents the mystics’ thoughts on spiritual direction is *Generated by the Spirit* by Trappist André Louf. Following in the footsteps of the Desert Fathers, he shows two fundamental aspects that are connected. The first is the centrality of the experience of God in spiritual direction. The second is the attention to interiority that serves as the necessary background for the centrality of the experience of God. These two aspects almost converge. We can consider the first as the context in which spiritual direction takes place, and the second as the core that animates those called to provide spiritual direction.

Louf quotes John of the Cross to show how, for mystics, the centrality of the experience of God is the whole of spiritual direction: ‘What can be of some help to a guide is not what they believe they know because they have learnt it from books. In fact, God's intervention is never planned in advance, and the guide must be able to feel God at work, even when he seems to go off the beaten track and ask for unexpected things.

John of the Cross is even harsh towards those guides who have no other means at their disposal other than a few easy recipes that have worked well in other circumstances, or certain general principles of spiritual theology, or even simple common sense. All this is not enough. The great misfortune for contemplatives – he writes in his commentary on the third verse of the *Fiamma viva d'amore* – is to let themselves be guided by another blind person’ (A. Louf, 1994, p. 33).

John of the Cross confirms that in the search for God one arrives at the point where the rational human dimension of the person must recognise the superiority of the spiritual dimension. It is in following the impulse of the latter, according to Luof, that the true progress of direction is achieved: ‘Here, John of the Cross reveals himself to be perfectly aware of the distance that exists between what he calls the “natural inactivity” of the soul, for which advice dictated by common sense may suffice, and the inner drive of the Holy Spirit which, at a given moment of inner experience, replaces it’ (ibid.)

This is why the task of directing others, at a certain point, necessarily requires opening the doors to an experience marked by the divine, which touches both those who experience it (the person being directed) and those who favour it (the director). Grasping this fundamental truth, Louf himself moves on to the second aspect, that of the interiority that characterises the experience of spiritual direction. ‘But let’s try to take a further step in understanding this life force that is at work in each of us, situating it in the deepest, most intimate part of ourselves, at the source of our being, where it merges with what recent literature calls “interiority”. What is it about? It could be defined as follows: the interiority of man is that metaphysical place inside him where, at every moment, God touches him with his creative hand. In that place God never ceases to create man and to keep him in existence. This activity of God at the source of his being “is” the source of his being! - it is intense and continuous. And indeed eternal, in a certain sense, since it is assured of eternity... Byzantine authors called this place “the place of God” in man (*ho topos tou Theou*). It is like a secret, “metaphysical” sanctuary, that is, beyond any physical or biological dominant, and at the same time “metapsychic”, beyond any psychological dominant, in which man experiences the touch of God at every moment, although this totally escapes his consciousness and his superficial sensitivity, at least in normal times’ (A. Louf, 1994, p. 46).

In a certain sense, Louf’s reflection manages to express the two previous positions, that of the Desert Fathers and that of the mystics, in a synthesis that uses the language of modern reflections.

## 4. Today’s situation

In his book on contemplative prayer (*Open Mind Open Heart. The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel)*, the Cistercian Thomas Keating formulates a series of reflections that can be linked to the field of spiritual direction.

‘In popular thinking there is too much misinformation about contemplation. Emphasising what contemplation is not can help towards a better understanding of what it is. First of all, contemplation is not a relaxation exercise... It is primarily a relationship, therefore it includes intentionality. It is not a technique, it is prayer…

Secondly, contemplative prayer is not a charismatic gift, but a prayer that depends on the level of maturity of faith, hope and love of God and has to do with the purification, healing and sanctification of the soul and its faculties…

Thirdly, contemplative prayer is not a collection of parapsychological phenomena such as precognition, knowledge of events at a distance or other phenomena.

Finally, contemplation does not consist of mystical phenomena such as ecstasy, or external and internal visions’ (T. Keating, 1994, pp. 5-11).

Contemplation as a model of prayer, but also as an attitude of the spiritual director, is emphasised by Kenneth Leech in his book on spiritual friendship (*Soul Friend)*. According to him, in prayer there is a ‘process of transformation whereby the light of God can shine in the void. This means that the purpose of the different ways of praying is to favour the emergence of a state of the soul on which the light can shine with clarity and without interruption. In this way the soul is led to a clear vision of God’ (K. Leech, 2001, p. 179).

If you are looking for God in the lives of others, you must first and foremost experience this search for yourself. The link between spiritual direction and contemplation, then, is not simply coincidental. Rather, the contemplative attitude becomes a necessary condition for discovering the power of love, which has God himself as its source.

For Janet K. Ruffing (*Spiritual Direction. Beyond the Beginnings*) direction is marked by great challenges, fundamentally rooted in the sphere of mystical experience. Listing them, she points out that the lack of a deep relationship with God constitutes one of the most serious impediments to the growth of life in the Spirit. ‘Directors may not be able to offer supportive development to those they direct and may not be able to empathise with the mystical experiences of those they direct because they have not sufficiently experienced the mystical dimension themselves’ (J.K. Ruffing, 2000, p. 99).

Alongside these reflections, we find another that uses the paradigm of listening to present the theme of contemplation. Kay Lindhal, in an original collection of considerations (*The Sacred Art of Listening*), writes that when the director listens to God he is prepared to listen to himself and to others: ‘contemplation begins when our whole being is open to a Presence that goes beyond words, thoughts and emotions. For many of us, prayer is associated with talking to God – we talk and God listens. Mother Teresa had a different approach. She said, “We have to find God, but He cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence”’ (K. Lindhal, 2002, p. 80).

Lindhal states that through contemplative practice we learn to discern what matters and let go of what doesn't; we learn not to judge others; we accept the goodness that fundamentally characterises us; we cultivate an open mind; we transform our motivations and purify our intentions; we acquire an inner freedom to truly serve the world (K. Lindhal, 2002, p. 82).

## 5. Conclusion

In the book The Practice of Spiritual Direction, W.A. Barry and W.J. Connolly explicitly deal with the theme of contemplation as a necessary attitude that manages to connect both the life of prayer and the search for God itself. It seems useful to take into account the contribution of these two authors who have influenced the recovery of spiritual direction as a path of faith in various parts of the world. They remind us that the essential contemplative aspect of prayer and of all Christian life lies in the conscious relationship with God. The task of the spiritual director is therefore to help the person under his guidance to pay attention to God who reveals himself on his own initiative and to become aware of his own reactions in order to formulate a suitable response (W.A. Barry -W.J. Connolly, 1990, p. 68).

# For personal or shared reflection

1. A spiritual guide, before being a technical expert or a therapist, must above all be a person completely open to God, who lives in a climate of prayer and relationship with him. How can we reconcile the need to make use of the human sciences with this contemplative attitude?

2. Which attitude prevails in our way of proceeding: the concern to acquire methodological competence or that of growing in the contemplative effort, in the conscious exercise of the presence of God and of spiritual discernment?

3. The spiritual director must help the person who entrusts himself to his ministry to pay attention to God and to become aware of his own reactions, in order to respond in an appropriate way. What difficulties and obstacles do we encounter in this central aspect of accompaniment?

## Reading and sources

The following books are cited, in order : T. Edwards, *Spiritual Director, Spiritual Companion. Guide to Tending the Soul*, Paulist Press, New York 2001; D. Edwards, *Human Experience of God*, Paulist Press, New York 1983; Ware K., *The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climacus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian,* in I. Hausherr , *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*. Cistercian Studies Series, 116. Cistercians Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan 1990, vii - xxxiii; *Giovanni Climaco, Sermone al pastore*, in C. Riggi (Ed.) *La scala del paradiso*. Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1996; *Symeon the New Theologian, On Mystical Life. The Ethical Discourses*. Vol. 3: Life, Times and Theology. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY 1997; L ouf A., Generati dallo Spirito. Edizioni Qiqajon, Magnano (Biella) 1994; T. Keating, *Open Mind Open Heart. The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel*. Continuum , New York 1992; K. Leech , *Soul Friend.* Morehouse Publishing, Harrisnurgh PA 2001; J.K. Ruffing, *Spiritual Direction. Beyond the Beginnings*. St. P aul's Publishing, London 2000; K. Lindhal, *The Sacred Art of Listenin*g. Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock Vermont 2002; W.A. Barry - W.J. Connolly, *Pratica della direzione spirituale*. Edizioni O. R., Milano 1990.