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## What is Spiritual Direction?

**In this article Elizabeth Culling gives a comprehensive introduction to the subject of Spiritual Direction. She outlines the purpose, processes and content of Spiritual Direction, exploring various models for understanding the practice of one person meeting with another for guidance and companionship. While acknowledging that many evangelicals might be anxious about the benefits of such relationships, she encourages readers to consider Jesus as the model for Spiritual Direction, and the Bible as an essential aid for those encouraging others in their relationships with God.**

When Cranmer enjoined on those desiring communion but whose consciences were troubling them ‘...the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice...’<sup>1</sup>, was he advocating spiritual direction or did ‘ghostly counsel’ mean something else? There was a time not so long ago when spiritual direction was deemed to be something a few high church people indulged in and involved being told what to do by a male priest who sat behind his desk in a black cassock. Looking at the history of spiritual direction renders it even more remote for it has traditionally been associated with the religious life, something given by those in religious orders to other in religious orders. And yet there is an ever growing interest in, and a seeking after, spiritual direction in the Church today, not only in the more catholic traditions and certainly not only amongst the religious orders. There are people giving and receiving spiritual direction in all parts of the Church. Why? Is it safe? Is it necessary? Is it beneficial?

### Defining spiritual direction

Spiritual direction contains two very emotive and frankly unhelpful words which require some thought and definition. Spirituality can mean anything we like and has become a word used as often in women’s magazines as in Christian circles. Even within the Church there is a dualistic tendency to refer to things spiritual as opposed to things material or physical but spiritual direction does not only look at the person’s spiritual life. The Cistercian monk Thomas Merton told a story about a Russian Staretz who was criticized for spending too much time advising an old woman about the care of her turkeys. ‘But her whole life is in those turkeys’ was his response.<sup>2</sup> Spiritual direction is about the whole of life lived under God. The focus for direction is the person’s prayer life, but no one prays in a vacuum. The stuff of life is the stuff of prayer and so the whole of life legitimately comes into focus in spiritual direction.

1 Exhortation to communion, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662.

2 Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, Anthony Clarke Books, 1975, p 16.

The word 'direction' also raises questions because it can sound like one person interfering in another's life. There are certainly directors who are too directive. The director is not there to give advice, instructions or even to point the correct way ahead. Spiritual direction is a cross between guidance and companionship. Two people walking the Christian way together.

### Is it elitist?

Thinking about spiritual direction in these terms immediately takes it out of the realms of elitist mystique and places it firmly in the mainstream of the Christian Church. There is nothing elitist about wanting to grow in the Christian life, nothing unbiblical about seeing the Christian life as a journey, a pilgrim's progress if you like, and nothing strange about sharing the ups and downs of the journey with a companion in Christ. The church I grew up in trained older Christians to accompany others new to faith. They took seriously the responsibility of keeping in touch, of praying for the new Christian who was under their wing and usually met regularly with that person to study the Bible together and talk about issues thrown up in daily life. It was a church where preaching was held in high regard, but it was recognized that however good the preaching might be, it could not compensate for personal friendship and conversation about everyday concerns with someone who had been there already. Learning to think Christianly about life is like all learning, best reinforced through personal teaching and example. The model for all this of course was the apostle Paul and his disciple Timothy. Discipling in this manner is fairly common in evangelical circles and always has been. The eighteenth century evangelical preacher Charles Simeon stands out in this respect with his ministry among undergraduates at Cambridge. Simeon and his like notwithstanding, some evangelical eyebrows will still be raised if a person announces they have a spiritual director or are going on retreat. The two phenomena go hand in hand. Often someone who has been on retreat, especially an individually guided one, subsequently seeks ongoing direction because they have found it helpful to talk to someone about what happened in prayer.

The whole purpose of spiritual direction is to enable a person to get in touch with God at work within. Nevertheless, many people would not acknowledge the value of spiritual direction while others would modestly and mistakenly think that they are not worthy of being listened to in this way assuming that spiritual direction is for spiritual giants. Similarly many who have the potential to be directors are not encouraged and may themselves feel too diffident about trying. Unfortunately this attitude is reinforced by respected writers on prayer. St John of the Cross pronounced that 'Not one in a thousand' were capable of giving it, while St Francis de Sales put it at 'Not one in ten thousand.'

Such attitudes persisted into the twentieth century and so Martin Thornton, the respected Anglican reinforced the elitist view in his writing.<sup>3</sup> This kind of elitism, however, seems remote from the Gospel picture of God choosing the least and using the most unlikely in his kingdom and also far from the way Jesus called and

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3 Martin Thornton, *Spiritual Direction*, SPCK, London 1984.

dealt with people. It would also seem that if the upsurge in desire to receive spiritual guidance is from God (and of course this may not be the case), then surely God would supply the means to meet the need. The question of from whence the interest in spirituality is another subject, but the conviction behind this article is that any searching for spiritual meaning has the potential to lead to encountering God in Christ, and therefore the giving and receiving of spiritual direction has a place in the movement of the Holy Spirit today. One of the notable features of the current interest in spiritual direction is that many of those seeking it are on the edge of the Church. They may have given up attending or not yet be involved but trying to sort out what they believe and are seeking spiritual guidance. There is a need for suitable guides.

### **A ministry for all?**

Some would argue that every minister/church leader is a spiritual director. After all the minister is still someone to turn to for spiritual advice and often finds him or herself speaking with others about prayer and faith whether off the cuff or in an ongoing relationship. Like the instance of chat over coffee between two friends this comes under the wider definition of spiritual direction but by itself it is not adequate to describe the ongoing sharing of the Christian journey of faith.

There are some Christians who find that people naturally turn to them to talk and share spiritual things and for them this may be the beginning of a ministry of spiritual direction. It was in recognition of this and out of a desire to encourage and equip such people that the Southwark 'Spirdir' courses were begun in the 1980s by Gordon Jeff. Over two years people committed themselves to a day a month to gather together to pray, listen to a variety of speakers and engage in practical exercises designed to train them in listening and understanding the way God works in people's lives. Topics explored covered a wide area: dreams, the use of scripture, spiritual traditions such as the Benedictines and Franciscans, prayer and personality, prayer and politics, healing, to name a few examples. The input and practical participation also help participants understand their own spirituality better and as a result be more sensitive to the experiences of others, and more confident in walking alongside them. Course members share resources and introduce one another to different ways of praying and over time trust grows and so the level of sharing together deepens. Each person has their own spiritual director for part of the ministry of spiritual direction is learning one's own need for support and direction while seeking to guide others. Some who have been on the Southwark course then go on to lead courses themselves and so the ministry itself widens and reaches more people. Arising out of the Spirdir courses Jeff wrote a handbook of spiritual direction which echoes the current climate of broadening interest in direction.<sup>4</sup> In it Jeff argues that there are men and women in every congregation who have a latent gift for this ministry and with encouragement and training they could be enabled to exercise it. While I would agree with Jeff on this, reflection on the variety of definitions as outlined above leads me to want to make a distinction between those who share

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon Jeff, *Spiritual Direction for Every Christian*, SPCK, London 1987.

with a 'soul friend', (cf below), and those who make a point of carving out time to go to see a spiritual director who may or may not also be a friend. Probably if the relationship is going to work as spiritual direction a certain distance is helpful.

## Spiritual experience

For centuries people's experience of God was secondary. Doctrine was the primary concern. In evangelical circles, Christians are warned of the fickleness of feelings because they come and go. We may feel God's presence intensely one day and feel nothing another and there may or may not be good reasons for doing so. I remember a diagram describing Christian experience in the shape of a train. The engine pulling the train was Christian truth while right at the back came an insignificant truck labelled feelings. It is true that Jesus is risen today whether we feel in an Easter mood or not, but without disputing the centrality of objective Christian truth, there is surely a place for experience. In the last fifty years or so experience has come to be valued and this is one reason for the general upsurge in spiritual direction. The world at large is interested in human experience and in the West it has become primary. If it feels true for me and not for you, that's OK, but reacting to this situation by dismissing experience as irrelevant is not an adequate response. The charismatic movement within the mainstream Church has demonstrated that people's experience of God is a vital and legitimate aspect of our relationship with God. In this respect it is interesting that Kenneth Leech observed in 1977 in his book *Soul Friend*<sup>5</sup> that it would be of the greatest importance for the future progress of the charismatic movement that it took seriously informed and careful spiritual direction. The emphasis on peak experience within the movement often left people vulnerable when times of darkness hit them and so Leech suggested a network of spiritual guides should be established to help people at such times.

## Spiritual direction by another name?

Spiritual directors come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, which is not surprising given the widening of definitions. The difficulties over the title have led to efforts to find other ways of describing spiritual direction, none of which are ideal. Spiritual mentoring is one, but it still suggests giving out advice. Some prefer spiritual friendship or spiritual companionship which suggests a more informal arrangement and implies that the relationship may evolve naturally. In the twelfth century, St Ailred of Rievaulx wrote at length about spiritual friendship which he regarded as vital to one's spiritual wellbeing:

'...a man is to be compared to a beast if he has no one to rejoice with him in adversity, no one to unburden his mind... he is entirely alone who is without a friend. But what happiness, what security, what joy to have someone to whom you dare speak on terms of equality as to another self; one to whom you can unblushingly make known what progress you have made in the spiritual life; one to whom you can entrust all the secrets of your heart and before whom you can place all your plans.'<sup>6</sup>

5 Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend*, Sheldon Press, London 1977, pp 31f.

6 Ailred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, Mowbray, London 1982, pp 71f.

Soul-friend is a similar nomenclature though may suggest more of the idea of soul-mate than someone to whom we make ourselves accountable. There is great value, nevertheless, in the friend who sits down with another over a cup of coffee and 'chats' about God. This kind of ministry is more often a one-off kind of encounter, though for some it will become a regular fixture of life to meet with the same friend expressly to talk about spiritual matters. Spiritual direction on the hoof is another aspect of this kind of encounter and may take place along the supermarket shelves or at the bus-stop. Some would wish to exclude such encounters from the umbrella of spiritual direction, but there are people who find that these kind of meetings seem to happen to them often and a ministry grows up which can legitimately be called spiritual direction. The task of a soul-friend is to walk beside another soul in her journey of faith. The help and support given is to enable that person to pay attention to what God is saying and to respond. For the early Celtic Christians the *anam-chara* or soul-friend was an important figure, someone with whom one could share one's innermost self: mind and heart together. It was a spiritual friendship based on an act of recognition and belonging, but directed towards God. What is often neglected in discussing the *anam chara* is the fact that its origins lay in the development of the Irish Penitentials.<sup>7</sup>

A final term which has much to commend it is that of 'prayer guide' for prayer is at the heart of what both the content and process of spiritual direction consists. Together director and directee are listening prayerfully for the voice of the Spirit who is the true director. The director is to allow: 'the Creator to deal directly with the creature and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord.'<sup>8</sup>

## Being accountable

Accountability is an important aspect of direction. Some of us find that knowing we will be talking to a director at a later date means we are more likely to be disciplined in exploring prayer than otherwise. It is all too easy to get into a rut with patterns of prayer simply because we grow lazy and settle for ways of praying that are comfortable and familiar. The formal director still exists and will suit some people who prefer a distant arrangement. There is a danger that some people will become so beholden to their spiritual director that they are unable to function without first checking out with him a particular course of action. 'My director says' prefaces every statement and is evidence that an unhealthy dependency has grown up and needs to be broken. In more catholic traditions people often combine the role of spiritual director with that of confessor and there is good reason to deal with one person for both purposes since issues dealt with in confession may have other repercussions which affect prayer and relationships. For those who would never dream of seeking out another person to whom to confess their sins, there will be issues surrounding guilt and sin which have cause blockages in prayer and need to be dealt with during a meeting with their director, though formal 'confession' may be done later alone.

7 Cf. the discussion of the Penitentials in Thomas O'Loughlin, *Celtic Theology*, Continuum, New York 2000, ch 3.

8 Joseph Munitiz and Philip Endean eds., *St Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1996, p 286.

As for the accountability of the director, a useful lesson from psychotherapy is that anyone giving direction should be in receipt of it themselves. Indeed the world of counselling has provided a number of useful lessons especially in the realm of how to set up meetings, knowing when to pass a person on to someone else with more specialized skills, understanding human development and so on. Under accountability would come the matter of confidentiality which should have the same value as the seal of the confessional. In her book *Holy Listening* Margaret Guenther writes of how she learned to 'practise forgetting'.<sup>9</sup>

## Models for spiritual direction

Along with the alternative names for spiritual direction there are numerous models for conducting the director/directee relationship. Gordon Jeff describes four such models, each exaggerated, but in some cases only slightly. While each model suggests legitimate functions too much emphasis in one direction leads to a distorted relationship and is unhelpful in the long run.<sup>10</sup>

The first model is that of guru. It emphasizes the parenting function of the director, especially important in the early formative days of faith. It has an educative aspect which is important. The pitfall is that the directee can be kept in a dependent role, and may end up modelling themselves on the director instead of becoming the people God wants them to be.

The second model is the confessor. Positively this can be a challenging way to direct for it makes the directee look hard at herself, but it can also be too directive and focus on very limited boundaries surrounding sin and guilt.

The third model, that of counsellor is a common one especially when spiritual direction is assumed to be problem centered. Much has been gained from the world of counselling and therapy in terms of process and in the way director and directee relate to each other, but spiritual direction is about the ongoing journey of faith and is not entered into because there is a problem. There may be difficulties along the way, but too much stress on the counsellor model makes the director look for problems. Focus on a problem may also mean that God is left out of the picture. The director as counsellor leaves little room for friendship and a sense of companionship as a counsellor's task is to remain detached from the situation.

This leaves the fourth model that of friend. This one has the advantage of warmth and involves the sharing of the whole person, but it can lead to a muddling of roles. As we have seen too much emphasis on friendship might prevent the director issuing any challenges and turn meetings into cosy chats.

In *Holy Listening* Margaret Guenther examines the role of the spiritual director as midwife and as teacher and spiritual direction as hospitality. The model of midwife is based on the parallels between giving birth physically and spiritual birth and rebirth.<sup>11</sup> She points out that the midwife does things *with* the mother-to-be rather than *to* her. She works from the start to establish a relationship of trust, one where no question is out of order or considered stupid. She assists at what is a

9 Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening*, DLT, London 1992, p 10.

10 From a talk given by Gordon Jeff in February 2002.

11 Guenther, *Holy Listening*, ch 1.

natural event and relies on skills which do not suggest that her charge is a patient, but someone who is involved in a natural process. So it is with the spiritual director, who should not be confused with a counsellor or therapist, but someone working alongside another in the spiritual realm.

Her second model is that of hospitality and she begins her reflections with the story from Genesis 18:2ff where Abraham welcomed three strangers to his tent.<sup>12</sup> The three travellers were in need of rest and refreshment. Abraham's tent was on their route and he had what they required. There were no holiday inns and like all travellers, they could not simply keep on going without ever stopping. Today's seekers after spiritual refreshment like all travellers, have far more choices, but they will certainly have needs. They may have only travelled a short car journey to see their director, but inwardly they may well have come a great distance and still have far to go before they reach home.

As for the model of teacher, there are over forty references to Jesus as teacher in the Gospels and of course he 'taught with authority.' The teacher model may be one to recover in our own time when so few have any Christian foundations on which to build. The letter of James, however, warns that the office of teacher is a dangerous one, for 'we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.' (James 3:1) Among the qualities of good teachers are that of understanding their pupils' limits, encouraging them to ask their own questions, wanting them to grow into maturity and able to evaluate progress. Good teachers never stop learning and all the great spiritual teachers are very clear that all the knowledge in the world is useless if a director has no personal experience of God and his ways.

From these definitions it is clear what spiritual direction is not. It is not one Christian telling another Christian what to do and it is not an attempt to clone Christians in our own image. It is very important that a spiritual director does not try to make others fit either their own experience or their expectations. The director has a crucial role as facilitator, guide and companion, but the integrity of the other person remains paramount.

## **Jesus as the model for spiritual direction**

While the above models of direction offer rich resources, our chief example of someone who both listened to God and understood people is Jesus himself. The Gospels provide insight into Jesus' tactics as a spiritual director. In Mark ch 6, for example, The disciples come to Jesus to tell him about their doings, and he invites them to take time out with him in a lonely place. The purpose is to find rest and suggests a brief retreat, just the setting for God to get a word in edgeways. No wonder they are irritated when the crowds get in the way and invade their precious time with Jesus. The other people were a distraction and threatened their communion with the Lord. But Jesus does not ignore the distraction; rather he turns it into the stuff of direction and issues a challenge to the disciples' spirituality. 'Give them something to eat.' The disciples are to learn from this 'distraction.' They learn by doing. Then Jesus left them altogether and went to attend to his own prayers

12 Guenther, *Holy Listening*, ch 2.

before rejoining the disciples. He was not a director who was at the beck and call of others, but made sure that he was in touch with his Father in heaven as the absolute priority. Thus when he did go back to his disciples he got into their boat, calmed the raging storm and urged them not to be afraid. He was not a non-directive type of director, ready to say nothing more than 'I hear what you are saying' and nod benignly. The disciples had not understood the loaves and the fishes, Mark tells us, but Jesus does not show up their ignorance by drawing attention to it, nor does he hector or reproach them. Directive though he is, his words to them are gentle and comforting. 'Do not be afraid.' He is prepared to go at their pace, waiting to lead them further on when they are ready. Throughout Mark we find Jesus prepared to comfort *and* confront, always knowing what approach to take with different individuals and treating them as such, not as clones who must be made to jump certain predetermined hoops. He stayed with their experiences, encouraging them to reflect on them and refusing to allow them to deflect the conversation onto what other people were doing or saying. And of course he had a working knowledge of spiritual traditions: he was steeped in the scriptures, and could apply them at all times in the most refreshing and directly relevant way. But how does a would-be director follow that?

### **Born or made?**

It is often said that spiritual directors are born not made. Certainly anyone attending a course and subsequently putting a plaque on their door saying 'Spiritual director' would be a director to avoid. At the other end of the spectrum there is the natural reticence of many people to set themselves up in any way as spiritual directors because it sounds far too holy and even elitist. The only qualification necessary is that a spiritual director is someone who prays and is open to exploring prayer in all its different facets. The gifts of spiritual wisdom and discernment come from God and those involved in this kind of ministry sense a call to it from God. Skills which are there in embryo, however, can be honed and there is a valid place for training as long as people realize that courses do not make directors. Listening skills are an obvious example of the way a person gifted in something can be helped to refine it and use it more effectively. Listening is at the heart of an encounter between director and directee as together they listen to the guiding of the Holy Spirit. Thus there are three people involved in spiritual direction: the director, the directee and the Holy Spirit. The most important thing for the director to do is to listen.

Another useful tool is knowledge of Christian spiritual tradition. For a spiritual director to be effective widely and in the long term, he or she will need some knowledge of different traditions of prayer and be able to understand different practices in prayer and communicate them to some one else. It is unlikely that a person who is exploring prayer for themselves will not become more aware of the ways in which other Christians have prayed and want to discover what the great teachers have said and written about it in the history of the Church. One of the great benefits of receiving spiritual direction is the way it opens up the spirituality of other parts of the Christian Church both historical and contemporary. There is a rich treasure house of teaching on prayer waiting to be drawn upon and a vast



range of ways in which different people have experienced God. Often people find the sense of their own tradition strengthened while at the same time they are enriched by others.

### The Bible and spiritual direction

While it is possible read many books about prayer and never get down to praying it is important that the spiritual director is familiar with the main sources of teaching about prayer from the Christian tradition. This first to inform their own experience, but also to be able to point others to authors who might illuminate their prayer life at different times. Examples include spiritual classics such as *The Confessions* of St Augustine, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross and so on as well as modern writers mentioned here.<sup>13</sup> There are plenty of evangelical writers to be explored though it has to be said they are often neglected because of the narrow way in which spiritual direction has been traditionally understood.

Whatever tradition a director hails from, he or she cannot ignore the Bible, though of course it will be used in very different ways. If we are talking about Christian spiritual direction, then the aim is to help people become who they are meant to be in Christ and the scriptures will play a central part in the process of discernment. First, the director's own relationship with God is very important and she needs to nourish her own relationship with God. Part of the spiritual director's personal journey will be to meditate on the scriptures in order to seek God in her own life, to get to know them and to practise different ways of feeding on them so she can help others.

One of fundamental ways that God has made himself known to people is through the word, both written and spoken. It is through his word that we come to know something about God, his character, and the way he deals with people. We have already seen that Jesus himself is our best guide to spiritual direction, but the Bible is full of models of how to exercise spiritual guidance and how not to. Most thinking about spiritual direction has been based directly or indirectly on biblical reflection about prayer and human relationships with God. Margaret Guenther's three models, for example, are all grounded in scripture. Reflecting on hospitality, she writes: 'Like all of us, the person seeking spiritual direction is on a journey. Since the expulsion from Eden we have been a people on the move, despite attempts at self-delusion that we have somehow arrived. We follow in the footsteps of our peripatetic Lord, always on the way, our faces turned resolutely or reluctantly towards Jerusalem.'<sup>14</sup> Such a passage is full of biblical allusion, the fruit of reflection and experience.

The third way in which the Bible is fundamental to spiritual direction is in setting the bounds of orthodoxy. There are certain boundaries of orthodoxy for the Christian and the director needs some criteria with which to assess what a person claims is going on in prayer. When someone claims to have had a vision from God and is convinced they are being sent down a particular road of action how should

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13 See also Lavina Byrne, *Traditions of spiritual guidance*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1990; William Barry and William Connelly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, Harper Collins.

14 Guenther, *Holy Listening*, p 7.

a spiritual director evaluate such a claim? This is especially important since the recovery of the charismatic side of Christian experience. Visions and direct encounters with God are normal to some Christians. Do we simply accept them all gladly or should we dismiss them all as fantasy? The dual emphasis in the charismatic movement on scripture and personal experience are not always in harmony. Kenneth Leech stated that one of the greatest needs of today's Church was to integrate the charismatic wing of the Church into the mainstream and he prophesied that spiritual direction would be one of the essential needs of this section of the Christian Church.<sup>15</sup> The Bible is essential here. Added to this is the search for spiritual roots among a generation not brought up in the mainstream churches and the need for biblical knowledge and understanding becomes very clear.

A final point under this third heading is that using scripture reminds both director and directee that being a Christian is a communal not a solitary activity. The Bible has sustained and nourished Christian tradition and Christian community. Indeed the critical test of the truth of the scriptures lies in its communal and practical aspects. In other words where spirituality is concerned the test is the fruits that reading scripture bears in the life and worship of the Christian community.

Fourthly, all the great spiritual teachers have been steeped in the scriptures.

Thomas Merton traces the beginnings of spiritual direction to the great exodus into the desert of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Separated from the Christian community and living in dangerous spiritual circumstances they needed direction. The *Apothegmata* or Sayings of the Desert Fathers demonstrate the depth and simplicity of the spiritual guidance given. People travelled for miles just to hear a brief word of advice, or a 'word of salvation' as it was known. This word summed up the judgment and the will of God for them in their situation. The lives of the Desert Fathers involved continual meditation on the scriptures. They sought to quiet the inner self so that they could hear the Word of God. The Word given may or may not have referred directly to something from scripture but it would be informed by scripture.

## St Ignatius of Loyola

St Ignatius of Loyola is a key figure in the history of spiritual direction and must be considered because today Ignatian spirituality is especially dominant in the world of spiritual direction and some directors only operate as Ignatian directors. Ignatius wanted to gain knowledge of God in order to help others. The knowledge he looked for was the kind that gave rise to love and to a closer discipleship of Jesus. He included some of his own experiences of God in the *Spiritual Exercises* based on images taken from scripture, but also from other books, people he had met and the world in which he lived. He was far more at home with images, stories and pictures than with abstract theology. Ignatius was converted, not through reading the Bible, but Ludolph of Saxony's *Life of Christ*. Ever after the person of Christ was central to his way of deepening the spiritual experience of others. He carried

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15 Leech, *Soul Friend*, pp 31ff.

with him a notebook in which he had copied out passages from the Gospels with the words of Jesus in red ink. He wanted to go to Jerusalem so that he could see and touch the places Jesus had been. The humanity of Jesus and his divinity were both powerful influence on the way his concept of discipleship developed. He selected passages from the Gospels for his Exercises according to the impact Jesus had made on his own life. He emphasized for example the kingship of Jesus, taken as he was with the image of being a soldier in the service of Christ. Javier Melloni's study of his Exercises shows how Ignatius built on what had gone before.<sup>16</sup> Melloni traces the influences on St Ignatius and provides a genealogical tree which includes the Benedictines, Carthusians, Franciscans, the *Devotio Moderna* and Church Fathers among others. The Bible is not mentioned, but of course it has informed all these traditions, while they have each developed with their own distinctive features. Ignatius was developing a form of *Lectio divina*: the classic reading – meditation – prayer- contemplation. Reading is the careful study of the scriptures thus providing the food for the rest of the exercise.

Ignatius lived and developed his *Exercises* at the time of the Counter-Reformation when restrictions were placed on direct contact with scripture. Reading therefore came via the director's presentation of the Bible passages. The reading has therefore already been interpreted and directed towards the specific fruit anticipated in that particular spiritual exercise.

## Head and heart

We have seen how experience has come to be valued as valid aspect of faith. Reacting to the Biblical text is not only an intellectual exercise. Indeed in spiritual direction the reaction of the heart and the feelings to the Bible are essential. The Bible is not there just to know about in a factual kind of way, but to have its own impact on a person's life as an encounter takes place between reader and text. Much bible study involves head knowledge and as a result many feel that the Bible is a closed book. This isn't to deny that who wrote the Bible, and when and why are important questions, but they are not likely to feature much in spiritual direction.

There are many ways of reading the Bible and one of the tasks of the spiritual director is to introduce the directee to these. Practices such as *Lectio divina*, Ignatian contemplation, the use of silence and interceding for the kingdom can be shared.

## Director and directee

Spiritual direction involves conversation. Many of us will be able to look back at a life-changing conversation. In the course of talking with another person we may have felt a shift in our stance taking place deep within and known that things will never be the same again. But there are more mundane occurrences which happen in the course of conversation. 'How can I know what I think till I hear what I say' is not everyone's mode of operation, but for some it is vitally important to be able to think aloud. Hearing ourselves express beliefs, opinions, doubts, and so on, helps us to discover more about faith and Christian living. Spirituality covers so many

16 Javier Melloni, *The Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola in the Western Tradition*, Gracewing, Leominster 2000.

things we had not thought of including until we began its exploration in conversation.

What are the things to talk about with a spiritual director? What sort of questions to ask? Recalling Thomas Merton's story of the Russian Staretz and the turkeys is an apt reminder that nothing is outside the scope of prayer because the whole of life is of concern to God. Whatever is going on now in my life is the stuff of prayer, just as it is the stuff of life. It is the same mistake to think that only certain 'spiritual' things should be brought into the sphere of spiritual direction, as it is to imagine that direction is only for a spiritual elite or for people caught up in the latest fad of our times. 'Where is God in my life?' is the best question to bring to spiritual direction for spirituality is about the relationship between God and my experience of him. 'Where has God been at work in the last twenty four hours / week?' That is a question which is relevant for everybody seeking to bring the whole of life under the lordship of Christ. Richard Foster has written about praying in the ordinary and although people may want to talk about visions and supernatural experiences, most will bring the ordinary stuff of daily life to their director.<sup>17</sup> How can I pray in the midst of the mess or the stress of work or the emotional strain of difficult relationships? Where is God in my everyday?

The spiritual director must be learning and teaching discernment. Discernment means seeing where God is at work in this person's life, what He is doing, where are the blockages, and so on. Asking the right questions is important, but this is as important for the directee to learn as it is for the director.

## Conclusion

Spiritual direction is a ministry of walking beside another on their journey of faith. It is a ministry of listening, of prayer and of conversation. It is a privileged ministry, not to be taken lightly. Guenther sums it up as 'a kind of living out of intercessory prayer, as the holy listener waits and watches – sometimes in the warmth of the stable, sometimes in the pure white light on the high mountain apart, sometimes in the desolation at the foot of the cross, and sometimes with fear and great joy in the encounter with the risen Christ.'<sup>18</sup>

Is it a passing fad, yet another symptom of our introspective individualistic age? It may not be such a coincidence that it is on the increase just now, but spiritual direction has nothing to do with cultivation of the individual and everything to do with building the kingdom of God. If we truly listen to the Spirit we hear God's agenda, and help in learning to hear more clearly is surely a valuable tool.

**The Revd Dr Elizabeth Culling** is based in the Diocese of York, and is currently researching in the area of Spiritual Direction.

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17 Richard Foster, *Prayer*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1992, pp 179ff.

18 Guenther, *Holy Listening*, p 150.