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Spiritual Direction: An Instance of Christian Friendship or a Therapeutic Relationship?

Janet Ruffing, S.M.

Introduction

THE EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE OF spiritual direction in the Christian tradition is currently enjoying a renaissance. As increasing numbers of people are introduced to this quite specific relationship in which one person places him or herself at the service of another's spiritual growth, the search for an appropriate model to aid our understanding of this relationship and its process remains problematic.

Historically, several models of this relationship have waxed and waned in the tradition. In the desert of the fourth century, the relationship of an abba/amma to a neophyte was characterized both by its charismatic quality and the authority invested in the guide by virtue of his or her experience. Monasticism institutionalized the qualities of spiritual guidance in the functions of novice director, the head of the monastery, and in some of the elders. Within the Cistercian tradition as monasteries became quite large, the importance of spiritual friendship both as an aid to growth in the Christian life and as a means to meet the need for human companionship emerged. In the late medieval period, women and men, remarkable for their holiness, guided the people who came to them for spiritual advice in the context of a loosely structured friendship circle. Members of the group were guided both individually and in group conferences by the leader.

Catherine of Siena is a notable example of this pattern. In the Tridentine era, spiritual direction became almost restricted to the confessor-penitent relationship.

The contemporary resurgence of spiritual direction incorporates features from previous models while at the same time rejecting other features. For instance, the authoritarianism and clericalism often exhibited in the Tridentine model is explicitly rejected by most and particularly repugnant to Protestant groups. And, of course, our cultural context differs from several of the earlier models which often presumed some form of celibate religious life-style as the context for spiritual direction. Once spiritual direction became distanced from the confessor-penitent relationship and from the formal structures of religious life, the search for another model for this relationship became critical. Who may be a spiritual director for whom? Can friends "direct" one another? How is friendship different from spiritual direction? How is spiritual direction different from counselling?

During the last fifteen years, it appears that the prevailing operative model of the spiritual direction relationship increasingly resembles a clinical model of therapy with many of the conventions and contracts which govern this relationship—fifty minute hours, restriction of the relationship to the clinical setting, including time, place, and frequency of meetings, one-sided self-disclosure by the directee of intimate details of his or her life to a director who maintains clinical distance, sometimes a stipend or fee, and a professional structure of supervision for the director. Despite the growth in skill current directors may experience from this professionalization of spiritual direction, we might well raise the question whether or not other features of this complex relationship are being compromised or neglected by this growing dominance of the therapeutic relationship as the model for all relationships in our culture.¹

In the context of this issue of *Studia Mystica*, I would like to propose that we might better understand the spiritual direction relationship within a model of Christian friendship?² Secondly, as these relationships unfold, some develop into fully mutual spiritual friendships. By shifting to a model of Christian friendship, we can hope to make visible some features of the spiritual direction relationship which are part of our experience of these relationships but which become difficult to describe when the clinical model dominates our reflection on this experience.

Christian Friendship

Locating the spiritual direction relationship within the context of Christian friendship requires a description of the relational bonds which form between directors and directees which may well be integral to the process of spiritual direction itself. And I would further suggest that justification of this relationship as a particular kind of friendship has theological roots as well as interpersonal ones.

Obviously, friendship implies mutuality and genuine equality. One entrusts oneself to one's friend in a way one does not and cannot to a mere acquaintance or an authority figure. One can argue that the most fundamental relationship we have to one another in Christian community is that of a community of equals rooted in our common discipleship. Theologically, we are all graced by God and drawn into a filial relationship with God through Jesus and consequently into a community of friends. Jesus clearly signals this shift when he says in John's Gospel:

"There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer speak of you as slaves, for a slave does not know what his master is about. Instead, I call you friends, since I have made known to you all that I heard from my Father." (Jn. 15. 13-15)

This relationship within Christian community which replaces kinship bonds with those of divine filiation suggests that all ministries within the community need to be exercised from this common ground of mutuality of service and equality of situation in the order of grace.

Despite this fundamental equality, existential inequalities also exist. Growth is a maturation process. And human maturity is not necessarily identical with spiritual maturity. People enter into a direction relationship at all stages of their human and spiritual development. When guides are more mature and experienced than the directee, a situation of temporary inequality obtains. The less experienced is not capable of true mutuality at this stage. However, if the relationship continues long enough and the directee matures humanly and spiritually, this situation of inequality may be overcome to allow for greater mutuality as peers in this relationship. Within the

context of spiritual direction, mutuality does not necessarily mean explicit self-disclosure by both persons. Rather, it is a mutuality of attitude in which the other is accepted as a peer. This attitude has the effect of diminishing distance and imbalances of authority. For this type of shift to occur, both persons involved need to be open to this possibility in the way in which the relationship functions from the beginning. If the more mature befriends the other without expecting any return of that care, yet considers the other to be a potential Christian friend, an openness for development exists that does not occur if the director's stance is one of holding the other at clinical distance.

What are the conditions necessary for this development to occur? First of all, it is a very gradual process of mutual influence in which the context is always the reality of faith and the implications of living out that grace. Because the central content of spiritual direction is the unfolding of the directee's life in God, the bonds which develop between directee and director emerge around and in a core of shared faith.³ The attraction to one another is rooted in the goodness experienced in the other—the directee's graced existence and response to God's action and the director's encouragement, discernment, and assistance in realizing these desires and goals. Participating in the directee's life in this way, in turn, affects the director's graced life who is encouraged in his or her own faith journey. A mutuality occurs in the nourishing of faith quite apart from explicit self-disclosure on the part of the director.

One difficulty we have inhabiting a friendship model rather than a clinical one in the spiritual direction relationship is rooted in the fact that our cultural notion of friendship has become so impoverished that it does not adequately embrace some of the qualities essential in spiritual direction. According to Lillian Rubin, among the functions expected of friends are the following: friends support or allow us to develop new aspects of ourselves, help us through various transitions, may be out-grown or discarded, may be restricted to a single shared activity, may provide a network of support when we are separated from kin, accept us as we are without confronting us, and may not put up with behaviors which families endure in us.⁴ While the spiritual direction relationship does help us develop a specific aspect of ourselves, namely, the spiritual one, it is not restricted by some of the other expectations. Other authors insist friendship entails a positive valuing of one's friend which places one on the side of his or her best interests. In this context, confrontation is expected and necessary but is friendly,

proceeding from love and acceptance of the other rather than condemnation.⁵

What kind of love is offered by the director in the service of another's growth in God, and how does the directee experience that love and reciprocate it? Answering these questions may help us see the particular form of friendship involved.

The director is called to love the directee unselfishly, purely for the other's good. She or he wants nothing from the directee other than that she or he realize the potential for growth into God. The director offers this benevolent love from the common ground of being engaged in a similar quest. In order to accompany the directee on this journey, the director literally "be-friends" the spiritual core of the other through the friendly hospitality of the relationship which is a necessary condition for a sacred form of self-disclosure to occur. This accompaniment includes the following for the director: a) to receive the other's experience in the form of stories of mystery and grace, sin and conversion, b) to participate in the other's life by encouraging in the other attitudes and actions that foster response to this grace, c) to comfort, agonize with, and suffer with the other in pain and struggle, d) to celebrate the in-break of God in the directee's life, e) to contribute by patience, presence, and loving regard to soul-making—to increasing soul, one's relationship to the Holy One, by giving these subtle interactions more reality by virtue of hearing these stories into speech.⁶

In the process of these encounters, both director and directee are often blessed by fresh revelations of God in and through the relationship. As such, these are occasions of grace for both.

On the directee's part, there is an experience of a loving acceptance from the director which contributes to the directee's self-acceptance and appreciation of his or herself more deeply. An interaction occurs at the non-verbal level best described as a quality of presence to one another. This non-verbal meeting is often revelatory of the spiritual quality and presence of the director through behavior and attitudes. When insight and enhanced self-understanding occur for the directee through the director, freedom, selfhood, and capacity for action become more available to the directee. The directee's trust in the director's care for him or her enables deeper self-discovery through the directee's self-revelation. As the relationship grows and deepens, the directee usually feels gratitude to the director and love for him or her based on the directee's experience of growth in the spiritual life, a

deepening of self-knowledge both positive and negative, and a deepening of the God-experience.

Ministerial and Spiritual Friendship

As equality gradually develops in the direction relationship or is present from the beginning in the case of two genuine peers engaged in spiritual direction, it is not uncommon for the shared spiritual dynamic to lead them into various forms of shared ministry—ways they are led to extend the kingdom of God. This apostolic dynamic tends to extend the relationship beyond the more private encouragement and facilitation of another's growth to working together for some common goal. The history of such spiritual friendships in the tradition as well as contemporary experience supports this thesis. Teresa of Avila worked with both John of the Cross and Gracian for the sake of the larger Carmelite Reform. Both men originally served as her confessor, but in the work of the reform she was clearly also a leader and inspiration in her own right. Catherine of Siena continually advised and encouraged Raymond of Capua in his diplomatic missions and as Prior General of the Dominicans. And Jane Frances de Chantal and Francois de Sales founded the Order of the Visitation together as a collaborative project.

Contemporary experiences suggest similar developments though perhaps in less dramatic ways. I personally have co-led retreats and worked on other ministry teams with men and women who have directed retreats for me or been my on-going spiritual director. And I have similarly worked with some of my directees on common ministry projects as well. Laywomen, who are frequently based in a parish community or in a particular network for lay ministry such as *Cursillo*, even more frequently confront an overlap between spiritual direction relationships and local social and parochial relationships, as well as instances of shared ministry. Frequently, relationships between director and directee are not restricted to the single function of spiritual direction. A more complex relationship does present challenges which require careful discernment to both people in the context of spiritual direction as well as in other situations. However, this mutual participation in a larger Christian community may provide a more appropriate context for spiritual direction than a restricted or compartmentalized relationship. In such instances, the spiritual direction function or moment becomes contextualized within a more encompassing relationship for one or both people involved.

Although I am focusing on the positive values of direction relationships that either begin in mutuality or evolve into a broader relationship, real disasters have occurred from confusion of roles, incompetence in a director, the vulnerability of directees, and actual betrayals of the spiritual direction situation. Insecure directors sometimes prematurely foster a "spiritual friendship" because they are unsure of the process of direction. Romantic attractions can become confused with spiritual attractions; and the focus of direction can be lost for the directee. Some directees may enter a direction relationship with a desire for some contact with a person of the opposite sex or because they wish to be part of some "in circle" around a well known spiritual guide. And finally either the director or directee may have unmet relational needs which create pressures in the relationship.

Despite these realistic possibilities, I continue to assert that authentic spiritual direction relationships can be less restricted than clinical therapeutic relationships and that that can be appropriate because of the context of shared faith and ministry for the sake of the kingdom which grounds spiritual direction in the first place. However, several conditions need to be present for this development to occur in a positive way.

The primary condition which safeguards a more flexible pattern of relationship is the dominating common commitment of both director and directee to the spiritual quest. This entails a quality of integrity of response in both persons to this primary dynamic and a willingness to support it in one another at the expense of other interests. One's vocational commitments and relationship with God is the network of relationship and responsibility which grounds this one. A second condition is sufficient spiritual maturity which gifts both with the capacity for self-denial and the ability to respect the other's God experience and ministry which can limit time and availability to one another. A third condition is a commitment to the process of spiritual direction for the one(s) seeking direction in the relationship. This is experienced as a single-minded discipline that prevents the direction function from becoming eclipsed by other aspects of the relationship. The above conditions can only be met by true peers who have both achieved sufficient spiritual and emotional maturity.

One of our difficulties in imagining such relationships is the fact that we tend to expect relationships to be instantly available and neglect the classical stages Aelred of Rievaulx describes so well that pro-

vide safeguards against casualties in friendship. Aelred names four stages Selection, Probation, Admission, and Perfect Harmony.⁷ The first three stages are a slow and gradual process. Aelred describes them as taking place over considerable spans of time which allow a person to mature to the point of readiness for the relationship and which safeguard against premature and impulsive levels of intimacy. Aelred's discussion rules out, by definition, people who conduct a relationship on the grounds of utility or flattery or insincerity as not being friendships at all. In our desires for instant intimacy, our contemporary situation may tempt us to neglect the process of discernment involved in the unfolding of a relationship and its trustworthiness before we recklessly entrust ourselves to one another without sufficient warrant.

Personal Experiences

As a directee, none of my primary long-term spiritual direction relationships remained restricted to the direction conversation alone although all maintained the focus and intentions of spiritual direction for me. The first significant relationship evolved out of the confessor-penitent situation with a Jesuit, some twelve years older than I, who regularly came to my convent to celebrate reconciliation and to offer spiritual direction. At the time, I was in my twenties, just perpetually professed and struggling with a number of issues personally and communally. Initially I was not mature enough either spiritually or psychologically for this relationship to extend beyond direction at all. The depth of the process of discernment and the unfolding and unblocking of my God-life and personal giftedness compelled me to cling to this graced relationship for several years just as it was. Within five years, although direction continued, we were both functioning within the same academic community and had another set of overlapping roles in relationship to one another. Within another five years, much greater mutuality became characteristic of the relationship. A gentle, pervasive, and faithful care for me within this relationship over the years was a primary cause of much of the growth that occurred for me.

A second important direction relationship occurred as a result of a Jesuit assigned as a retreat director. This man was within three years of my age at the time and was extremely accurate and challenging to me in the retreat situation. Initially, we did not continue in the direction relationship. I took several courses from him in graduate school, and he became a friend and mentor. We did a second retreat together,

participated in a theological reflection group, and worked on several ministry projects together. When my former director was transferred out of the area, it seemed natural to begin spiritual direction with this other man. The direction relationship felt richer for the reality of the other context we shared.

A third direction relationship also emerged out of a shared ministerial context. When this second director left the area, I was, by this time, a spiritual director and working with others training directors. One of my teammates, this time a woman several years my senior, and I formed a strong relationship with one another in the process of working together. Although I did not serve as her director, she assisted me in that way, but in the context of a mutual spiritual friendship that encompassed far more than the spiritual direction moment.

What I am convinced about from experience is that high quality spiritual direction regularly occurred in all three relationships. The increased levels of mutuality and the development of friendships involved a gradual process based on the capacity for true peer relationships. The development of mutual respect and affection was rooted in the shared God-mystery we characteristically touch in one another. In none of these instances was a one-sided desire for intimacy or friendship dominant as motive. They were instances in which all of us were eventually experienced both as directees and directors and could, in fact, enjoy wider contexts of relationship and ministry without compromising the direction relationship. I do believe this development is possible, perhaps probable for mature, experienced people. Although it is not necessarily a norm in the spiritual direction relationship for such mutuality to be achieved, it may be more common in the contemporary situation than has yet reached public reflection.

Although all direction relationships will not necessarily become as mutual as the ones described, nonetheless, they remain a form of Christian loving. As such they are one way Christians befriend one another in Christian community and express real care in the context of faith. By allowing the model of Christian friendship to inform the practice of spiritual direction, we may gain an adequate language for articulating the particular experience of love and care that characterizes spiritual direction as well as be less surprised when deep spiritual friendships sometimes emerge in the process. ❧

NOTES

1. Robert Bellah, *et al.* in *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley, 1985) explicitly argues that the therapeutic relationship has become the model for all relationships in our culture, including friendship and managerial ones. Janice G. Raymond in *A Passion for Friends: A Philosophy of Female Affection* (Boston, 1986), criticizes therapism as an obstacle to female friendship: “. . . therapy becomes a way of life that affects the way we speak, the way we think, and the way we relate to other people” (p. 157).
2. Several early treatments of spiritual direction written by Protestants explicitly claimed this model, notably Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend* (New York, 1977); Alan Jones, *Exploring Spiritual Direction: An Essay on Christian Friendship* (New York, 1982); and Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Friend: Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction* (New York, 1980).
3. Henry Nouwen in the Introduction to *Soul Friend* describes this particular form of intimacy: “‘Soul Friend’ suggests a real intimacy between the spiritual director and the Christian. This intimacy is not a mutual attachment to each other, however, but a shared attachment to God through Jesus Christ” (p. ix).
4. Lillian Rubin, *Just Friends* (New York, 1985).
5. See Leonard Schwartzbard, “The Risky Confrontation of Friends,” *Human Development* 9 (Summer 1988), 27-30; and James B. Nelson, *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* (Philadelphia, 1988), pp. 65 ff.
6. Both John MacMurray and Hans-Georg Gadamer reflect philosophically on the interpersonal nature of knowledge of the other and of this condition of “friendliness toward the other” as an absolute necessity for understanding another. MacMurray states, “. . . knowledge of another person as we can achieve depends on our emotional disposition towards him” (*Persons in Relation* [London, 1961], p. 180). Gadamer places his remarks in the context of a condition of presumed friendship in the case of seeking advice from someone: “Once again we discover that the person with understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected; but rather, as one united by a specific bond with the other, he thinks with the other and undergoes the situation with him” (*Truth and Method* [New York, 1975], p. 288).
7. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Mary Eugenia Laker, Cistercian Fathers Series, No. 5 (Kalamazoo, 1977), Book 3, pp. 6-10 ff.