

Perspectives on the Ministry of Spiritual Direction

One Person's View

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This article discusses the development of the ministry of spiritual direction since Vatican II. The author, who has many years of experience teaching in the field, explores the literature and suggests new ways in which the ministry will mature. She stresses, in particular, a renewed attentiveness to the body and the created universe as home to the body; connectedness between spirituality and daily life; and sensibility to place, culture, and context.

Trends emerge with long and wide exposure. Perspectives, however, are more situated. What I offer here are reflections from a certain place and perspective. Let me begin, therefore, with a brief history of how we, and I, got to this particular place in the development of the ministry of spiritual direction. These autobiographical-historical comments are followed by a summary of the literature, including comments on where I hope the literature will move in the near future; my read of important issues at the edge of the discipline; and, finally, my comments on some of the issues facing the development of the ministry as such.

Where We Have Been: The Recent Past

I am a Roman Catholic religious sister who began her journey in religious life just prior to the heady breath of Vatican II-generated fresh air that rattled the convent walls. Spiritual direction, required of everyone in formation, adhered

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very much to an institutional model. We were required to speak about our lives monthly with the superior of our particular stage of formation. I found these sessions torturous: if I said the wrong thing, or appeared to have too many doubts and struggles, I was sure I would be asked to leave. Not an auspicious foundation for experiencing the liberty of a daughter of God! As I was getting my feet wet in teaching, an innovation appeared on the horizon: the directed retreat. Along with the directed retreat came new ways of praying, new in that they began to flow from one's own personal predilections in prayer, at least under the encouragement of a good director. These first directed retreats were a reclamation of Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, and very shortly became a seedbed for training a whole cadre of spiritual directors who burst the boundaries of the ministry.

By the late 1970s, the full force of the reexamination of religious life had made itself felt in the dismantling of the structures that had neatly contained apostolic religious life in monastic categories. No one any longer told religious exactly what to do and when to do it. The Rules for Discernment of Spirits from Ignatius came off the pages of the *Spiritual Exercises*. It became clear that they still "worked" four hundred years later and in different theological, psychological, and cultural worlds. They could be demythologized, even psychologized if one wanted, but there was still an anchoring wisdom in them. These were also the high-spirited days of the Charismatic renewal, a time when Jonathan Edwards's reliable and unreliable signs of a distinguishing work of God would have been marvelously helpful. But most spiritual directors were Roman Catholic, and their theological horizons seldom contained Edwards's *Religious Affections*. Yet Ignatius's Rules for Discernment of Spirits proved to be remarkably useful in this and a variety of settings.

In 1979, as spiritual direction was beginning to be taught in a few programs, I was off to graduate school to ground my future teaching of pastoral theology. As circumstances would have it, my graduate school was in the south, in an area of few Catholics and even fewer spiritual directors. From the local perspective, I was a Roman Catholic, and Catholics knew about spiritual direction, so, completely unsolicited, referrals

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came to me for spiritual direction. Of necessity, I took my spiritual direction sessions to the pastoral counseling supervision seminar with colleagues and supervisors who had never heard of spiritual direction. I had to define, describe, and defend the practice of spiritual direction in a setting in which the assumptions, theology, and criteria were ignorant of the tradition of spiritual direction. This nontraditional route opened the need to think ecumenically about spiritual direction and to make it possible for persons of various traditions to find the equivalents from within their own traditions.

Meanwhile, in 1978, Shalem Institute came into existence in Bethesda, Maryland, and began educating a wide swath of Protestants to join the otherwise predominately Catholic cadre of spiritual directors. Other early programs included

the Institute of Spiritual Leadership, the Center for Religious Development, and the Fordham, Duquesne, and Washington Theological Union programs. An early wave of books began to appear about this time, helping to articulate a more coherent perspective on spiritual direction in this new context, locate it theologically, and distinguish it from therapy and its close cousin, pastoral counseling (Leech 1977; Edwards 1980; Dyckman and Carroll 1981; May 1982; Barry and Connolly 1982; Kelsey 1983).

In 1983 I began teaching in a Roman Catholic seminary. Here the institutional model of spiritual direction still reigned, with all seminarians required to receive spiritual direction from someone on the seminary-approved list of priest directors. Yet there were significant signs that the old order was passing. There were important provisions for spiritual freedom: spiritual directors sat in on candidate evaluation sessions but did not speak; spiritual direction was considered a confidential matter of conscience, and, as such, privileged. Dual roles were suspect: the same person could not serve both as spiritual director

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During the 1990s, Spiritual Director's International (SDI) entered the scene. While the National Federation of Spiritual Directors and the Western Associa-

tion of Spiritual Directors had supported the collegueship and professional development of spiritual directors in Roman Catholic seminaries, by 1990 spiritual direction had clearly burst the bounds of this institutional context. SDI was founded as a deliberately international and ecumenical organization for the purpose of facilitating professional conversation among spiritual directors and those who form them. In the first decade of its existence, SDI has spearheaded continuing education of spiritual directors through its annual conferences, enhanced formation opportunities through its symposia for trainers, and offered a springboard for communication through its regional gatherings and its journal *Presence*. A frontier for SDI, as well as for the entire ministry of spiritual direction, continues to be its lack of racial-ethnic diversity both in the membership and in the leadership (Ludwig 2002).

In 1987 my own journey led me to begin teaching in a Presbyterian seminary set within a consortium of Protestant and Roman Catholic seminaries. Here spiritual direction, while not unknown, was less well understood and not frequently sought out. Yet, my nontraditional route had made this teaching position not only seem possible but, indeed, a call to a venue where much learning across traditions could take place. In the course of the next years, once we could marshal sufficient well-trained spiritual directors to serve as supervisors, thanks to the pioneering work on supervision at Mercy Center, Burlingame, California, we began our own spiritual direction training program, designed to reflect specifically the largely Reformed Protestant context of its constituency. I continue to teach in and to help develop this program today.

It is in relationship to this recent history of development of the ministry of spiritual direction, and from my somewhat idiosyncratic context as a Roman Catholic who teaches spirituality and spiritual direction in a Reformed context, that I speak about the future trends in this ministry. What appears on the horizon for this broadly ecumenical and rapidly developing ministry today?

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Recent Literature Points Beyond Itself

A survey of the literature that has appeared in the past ten years suggests the next literature still to be written. The flood of introductory books is now being overtaken by the next generation of questions. We are moving “Beyond the

Beginnings,” as the subtitle of a recent book by Janet Ruffing would have it (Ruffing 2000; Vest 2000). The approximately one thousand persons completing their preparation at literally hundreds of training sites annually (Mostyn, quoted in Ludwig 2002, 13) need continuing education in order for the ministry as a whole to continue to deepen beyond the beginnings of its modern rebirth in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Ruffing’s chapters point out the direction in which some of the necessary development will lie. We need, in my opinion, full-length interdisciplinary studies on religious experience, desire, resistance, interpersonal dynamics in spiritual direction, and theological foundations. In addition we need more work on group spiritual direction, supervision, and ethical considerations to augment the works by Rosemary Dougherty (1995), Maureen Conroy (1995), and Lebacqz and Driskill (2000). Finally, we need full-fledged treatments of the theology of spiritual direction from various theological perspectives. William Barry took the first steps down this path (1992).

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The spate of introductory books now includes a fresh crop on spiritual direction in Protestant contexts (Stairs 2000; Bakke 2000), two from the Orthodox perspective (Allen 1994; Chryssavagis 2000), and one from the Jewish perspective (Ochs and Olitzky 1997). The Anglican tradition has long been thoughtful about spiritual direction (Ball 1998 is only the most recent), but we need in-depth treatments of spiritual direction in the

Wesleyan, Reformed, Lutheran, and Baptist traditions at minimum. Such works would assist beginning directors to locate themselves firmly within their traditions as they consider the history, theory, and practice of spiritual direction. History, theology, and polity do make a difference in assumptions, language, forms of prayer, images of God, models of holiness, and styles of worship.

Spiritual direction with specific populations will continue to mature. James Empeur has given us a treatment of spiritual direction with gay persons (1998) and another integrating spiritual direction and the Enneagram (1997; see also Zuercher 2000). Two studies on spiritual direction with women (Fischer 1988; Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert 2001) leave much room for further gender related studies, especially for women living outside the dominant culture. These women may be economically disenfranchised, institutionalized in prisons, mental hospitals, or nursing homes, recently immigrated and suffering culture shock, or facing various developmental milestones. Although much work remains, we do have some substantial treatments of spiritual direction with women, but parallel literature for spiritual direction with children is virtually nonexistent. What might the theory and practice of spiritual direction with children look like? How

would a spiritual direction perspective intersect with a Christian education perspective? Could each learn from the other? Since this interdisciplinary collaboration is starting to appear in Christian education literature, such a volume would be welcome to both fields.

Spiritual direction from the perspective of specific spiritual traditions continues to appear in literature (Houdek [1996] for Jesuit; Ashley [1995] for Dominican). Patricia Ranft's *A Woman's Way: The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors* (2000), fills a real need but points out what still needs to be done, namely full-length studies of the spiritual direction of various women directors such as Hildegard and Hadewijch, Clare of Assisi, Catherine of Sienna, the women of Helfta, as well as a full-length scholarly treatment of the history of spiritual direction in the West. The collection edited by Lavinia Byrne, *Traditions of Spiritual Guidance* (1990) gets us started but does not pretend to present an integrated historical study.

This survey of the literature shows much creative energy, a plethora of studies of many kinds. We are poised, I believe, to begin writing mature works that harvest the wisdom gleaned from the past thirty years of experience.

Conversations at the Creative Edge of the Ministry

Where is the creative energy in the ministry of spiritual direction? The important new developments? Here, I single out three areas for brief comment: renewing our commitment to the body, revising our understanding of vocation and work, and attending to culture as a defining (both limiting and freeing) context of holiness. Each of these loci entails other interesting questions to which I will briefly point.

Once again Christian spirituality is remembering that we are bodied. As we return to our bodies, the Cartesian split between body and mind is beginning to be healed; a new sense of the whole person is growing in our theological and spiritual awareness. We recognize anew that we are created, redeemed, and sanctified *as bodied*. The Word of God took flesh and dwelt among us as a particular bodied human being. By doing so, God dignified all material creation, and within creation, human bodies. Unless we ignore the Incarnation, we cannot ignore our bodies. Our path to holiness is walked by and in a body. The bodily resurrection of Jesus promises that our bodies, too, will also be raised on the last day.

For spiritual direction, that growing theological consensus means that part of our task of spiritual guidance is also to help our directees to “return” to their bodies, to see them as more than slaves to get them where they want to go, or shells that house souls where God is assumed to *really* work, or something that must be disciplined into submission. These negative attitudes appear in the spiritual direction conversation in a multitude of guises, subtly masking the historic split so long internalized in both spirituality and culture. In reality, our directees

are invited to experience their bodies as integral to their very selves. This growing theological consensus means inviting prayer that begins with and responds to bodies. It means seeing bodies as a locus of revelation. It means recognizing that any touch of God must register in the body and that all is recorded and “remembered” in our bodies if we can but unlock and interpret this record. It means, therefore, that spiritual directors must learn to notice and interpret these “sighs too deep for words” through a body-sensitive discernment. It means recognizing and celebrating sexuality as integral to our holiness and lived in particular ways in different vocations. It means taking gender seriously as one of the ways of being embodied in particular bodies.

As we come home to our bodies, I believe that the next invitation will be to come home to the body of the created universe.

Our embodied selves share the status of creature with all that exists in our universe. We are not distant from the rest of creation, though we often tend to live as if we are, nor are we masters of it, nor are we insignificant to the point of vanishing within creation. Thus, body offers us one avenue for opening spiritual direction out to the entire cosmos, to understanding our environment also as a locus of revelation. As spiritual directors, do we regularly look for the reverberations of environment in our directees’ lives? Do we begin to develop nature-sensitive suggestions for prayer and for discernment? Are our directees challenged to live differently in a world that is limited in resources and overstressed by human choices and lifestyles?

Another fertile area for the development of spiritual direction concerns renewed understandings of the notions of vocation and of work. Again, the wider field of spirituality in its nexus of theology, philosophy, and culture is responding

to a need to transcend dualisms, this time between what could be stated as “spirituality” and “real life,” prayer and work, or contemplation and action. Spiritual direction is not simply concerned with one’s prayer and other spiritual disciplines, unless these spiritual disciplines are specifically seen to include daily practices lived “in the world.” How is one’s vocation determined, solidified, and actualized day to day, over time and in various circumstances, institutions, and relationships? This agenda is lively among spiritual directors and directees, and the conversation is producing new reflections on the wider theological, pastoral, and spiritual issues.

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A related sub-agenda that is gaining focused attention centers on spirituality and spiritual direction that attends specifically to the corporation and those involved in its leadership. What does spiritual direction and discernment look like with CEOs in top management of major corporations? What language and what metaphors capture this experience? What issues appear in this venue that may not in other settings? How do vocation and work in this situation and with this population set an agenda for spiritual direction? More basically, how do we attend to the voice of God as it comes to us precisely in the structures and institutions in which many of us spend the majority of our time and energy?

A third rich development grows out of the postmodern sensibility about concrete location and context. Here, among many possibilities, I want to underscore the notion of culture as both limiting and opening possibilities for spiritual direction. The spiritual direction tradition reclaimed in the past thirty years rests on the longer tradition of Western Christian spirituality and cultural consciousness. Thus, the reclamation both responded and reacted to this long European-oriented spiritual tradition but was itself situated within contemporary Euro-American contexts. Appropriating the tradition of spiritual direction within other Christian cultural contexts, especially when this requires translation into another language system, is exceedingly difficult. The process calls into question the narrowness of the spiritual heritage, the cultural embeddedness of the theological categories used to ground spiritual direction, as well as the categories of power, authority, holiness, and approaches to Bible, worship, and prayer. Disentangling these realities from the reverberations of colonialism complicates the matter.

At this stage in our program's development, for example, we are barely beyond listening to the attempts by our first Korean participants to talk about their traditions, about what of our model does translate, and how that translation occurs, and what simply makes no sense within their culture. What kind of authority does the pastor or spiritual mentor have in their tradition? What is the basis of the authority? Who may exercise that role? To whom does the spiritual guide have access? Under what conditions? What role for sacred text? In addition to the Bible, what other texts would readily fall into the category of spiritual

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classics in this tradition? These questions are only the tip of the iceberg. Supervisors are constantly faced with discerning between cultural artifacts and the particular strengths and limitations of the individual spiritual director in training. Nothing can be taken for granted. While this state of affairs can be extremely frustrating for all parties, it is also the seedbed for creative moves in developing intercultural theories and practices of spiritual direction.

Issues Facing the Ministry of Spiritual Direction

Finally, what issues currently facing the ministry require continual reflection and consensus building? Here I comment very briefly on four: (1) interpersonal boundary issues and ethics, (2) the struggle between charism and profession, (3) interfaith issues, and (4) the nature of the ministry itself.

The painful sexual abuse scandal among clergy that has unfolded recently in both the secular and religious press underlines anew the necessity for clear interpersonal boundaries in spiritual direction. Fortunately, the ministry of spiritual direction has not yet been faced with the scandal that attends to broken professional boundaries, but the climate is such that there is no reason to feel sanguine that this situation will continue indefinitely. It is no longer optional for all training programs to have ethical guidelines for the practice of spiritual direction; the boundary and ethical issues entailed in the practice of this ministry in its various contexts must be explicitly stated. Issues and degrees of confidentiality must be clearly articulated and practiced at all levels of training. Supervision must be in place and used with transparency and integrity—Ignatius of Loyola's caution about the temptation to secrecy surely applies here (SE #326). Appropriate journals should solicit updated commentary on legal issues, as difficult as it can be to treat such topics because of the lack of uniform legal standard and the changing nature of the legal situation in the wave of recent revelations. Here the Internet may give the spiritual direction community the best way forward as materials can be constantly updated as the laws and case law change in light of our increasing understanding of the ethical complexities. Finally, each faith community must find ways to ensure accountability; the issue of how appropriate accountability is established and maintained is, I believe, the single most vulnerable place for the spiritual direction community.

This latter issue points to another, namely the dialectic between the professional and charismatic views of the ministry of spiritual direction. Historically, the ministry of spiritual direction has been understood as more basically charismatic than institutional. Its practitioners frequently did not hold any particular office, nor was it necessarily assumed that those of any office automatically manifest the charism of spiritual direction. Indeed, the reverse was frequently true: office holders such as abbots have been selected because they had the char-

ism of spiritual direction and not the other way around. Training, such as might have occurred, was in the form of mentoring. It was largely oral, as the apprentice learned from his or her own case and in conversation with a wise spiritual director. The institutional model did indeed gain a firm foothold between the Councils of Trent and Vatican II, appearing in seminary and novitiate formation programs such as I experienced early in my religious life, but also under the guise of the pastoral and spiritual care provided by the clergy. But the twentieth-century context raises important issues, not least of which is the necessity for thorough, standardized training and oversight of the ministry involving an increasing number of laity in a context characterized by individualization, personal authority, loose accountability, fee for services, and liability insurance, but also a generally high professional expectation for all helping relationships. How can the charismatic nature of the ministry be preserved while still attending carefully to the issues of preparation, authorization, and accountability demanded by this new situation? This question bears serious theological and practical consideration.

A third issue currently facing the ministry of spiritual direction is its interface with interfaith concerns and practices. Spiritual direction in the Christian context has a specific identity that distinguishes it from spiritual mentoring as practiced in other faith communities. Do any commonalities between mentoring in various faith traditions enlighten how we understand Christian spiritual direction? What gift does Christian spiritual direction have to offer spiritual mentoring in other faith traditions? Can, or how can, spiritual direction be carried on across interfaith lines? The theological reflection around interreligious dialogue will help move these questions, but spiritual directors and their counterparts in other faith traditions also have something to contribute to the larger interfaith dialogue. Much remains to be done on this front.

Finally, the nature of the ministry itself raises questions of interpretation and theory in a postmodern context. For example, what disciplines can contribute to a re-imagining of the theory and practice of spiritual direction? What is the role of religious sociology, of art, literature, and music, of aesthetics, and of the natural sciences? How can we carry on genuinely interdisciplinary conversations with these areas of inquiry?

This semester, several colleagues and I have engaged in a survey of the contemporary dialogue between theology and natural sciences. We have now drawn

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tentative conclusions about the nature and action of God, the nature and responsibility of the human person, and the role of nature understood as the nonhuman creation, that arise when the findings of contemporary natural sciences are taken seriously. We are now asking what discernment looks like in light of this conversation. We wonder what touchstones will suggest that one is, in fact, responding to the Holy Spirit in this larger venue of discernment. Ultimately, we are searching for the contours of a discernment process that is set within and takes seriously the creation of which we are an interdependent part, while still remaining in continuity with the long and rich tradition of discernment that we have inherited. An immense and exciting search indeed.

The distance that the ministry of spiritual direction has come in the past thirty years is enormous. The questions before us at this juncture are both serious and exciting. We must consolidate and push forward simultaneously. We must take our context seriously yet make room for radically new, or newly perceived, contexts to influence the development of the ministry of spiritual direction. We must struggle with questions raised at the dawn of the twenty-first century, many of which are continuous with our long history but some of which are radically new. In this era, our task remains as it has historically been: to attend to the spiritual movements of individuals and communities, but we must now do so in an environment in which the spiritual and the religious have been decoupled. We do not have the cultural and institutional supports, expectations, and lines of accountability that both supported and restricted the ministry of spiritual direction in the years before Vatican II. How we respond to the challenges of this time will affect the future of the religious community in more ways than we can imagine.

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