

*Peter C. Phan*

## **Spiritual Direction in a Multicultural Church Helping Others Encounter God in Their Own Cultures**

In recent years a significant demographic shift has been predicted for the North American Catholic Church, especially in the United States of America. Jesuit Hispanic theologian Alan Figueroa Deck refers to it as the “Second Wave,” that is, the emergence, within the first decades of the next century, of minority groups, in particular African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian, not only in the American population at large, but also within the Roman Catholic Church, among the laity as well as among candidates to the priesthood and religious life (Deck, 1989).

### **DEMOGRAPHIC REVOLUTION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

According to *Newsweek* (July 12, 1999), the percentage of U.S. total population in 2005 will be: 71 percent White, 13 percent Hispanic, 12 percent African-American, and 4 percent Asian. In 2050 it is projected to be: 53 percent White, 25 percent Hispanic, 14 percent African-American, and 8 percent Asian. Among the ethnic groups, by 2005 Hispanics will be the largest. Again, according to *Newsweek*, the Latino population has grown 38 percent since 1990—to 31 million—while the overall population has grown just 9 percent. This dramatic demographic shift will of course have enormous repercussions on American political and economic life in which these so-called minority groups constitute a potent force as voters and consumers. Its effects on the American Catholic Church will be no less far-reaching since the overwhelming majority of the Hispanic and Asian population will be Catholic.

Signs of this demographic revolution occurred in 1992 when salsa outsold ketchup, but they are also plainly visible in any large metropolis such as Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Miami where all kinds of foreign languages are spoken, ethnic eateries abound, shops with non-English signs proliferate, clubs play unfamiliar music and dance, and people of color raise questions about race, ethnic identity, and culture. The Church, too, experiences this ethnic and cultural diversity in its midst and attempts to meet its challenges. An increasing number of

parishes are making efforts to respond to the needs of their members of diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, seminaries such as St. John's in Camarillo, California and Notre Dame in New Orleans; religious societies such as the Society of the Divine Word and Maryknoll; and theological schools such as Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, all have benefited from a noticeable upsurge in minority seminarians and students.

Needless to say, this demographic change presents serious challenges to American society and the American Catholic Church. There is the question of whether the United States, which as a country constantly redefines itself, will remain truly one nation with English as its "official" language and the Euro-American culture as normative for all its citizens. For the Catholic Church, the issue is whether its catholicity will be capacious enough to incorporate into its life the manifold and bewildering faith expressions of the new ethnic groups.

As for the newly-arrived Catholics themselves, the challenges confronting them are in part not different from those confronting the Catholic immigrants of the "First Wave" such as the Irish, Italians, Germans, and Eastern Europeans. Like them, the immigrants of the "Second Wave" have to cross the socio-economic and political divide separating them from the mainstream of the United States. On the other hand, unlike them, these recent, at times undocumented, immigrants, who are mostly poor and ecclesiastically powerless, have to overcome the gap within the Church itself which marginalizes them from the power centers now occupied predominantly by "First Wave" Catholics.

But this demographic shift presents the Church not only with challenges but with opportunities as well. The newcomers—Cubans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Nicaraguans, and other Central and South Americans, Haitians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Thai, Hmong, Filipinos, and others—bring with them rich cultural as well as religious traditions and increase substantially the number of church members (and not least, ministerial vocations) with which the American Catholic Church can be renewed and strengthened.

#### CHALLENGES FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Spiritual directors, whether in official or private capacity, are of course not immune from these challenges and opportunities. Mostly Caucasian and trained in western methods of counseling and spiritual direction, they (still predominantly male) may at times feel confused and even overwhelmed by the cultural and religious diversities of their minority directees. These may be foreigners who came to the United States as refugees or students, most often with a limited knowledge of

English (hence, unable to express their ideas and feelings adequately) and unfamiliar with American ways of life. Or they may be natives such as African Americans and Mexican Americans but have grown up in cultures and religious traditions different from those of the directors.

Not infrequently these differences have caused mutual misunderstanding and hampered effective communication between directors and directees. Examples abound: For many North American spiritual directors, Asians seem to be unduly reticent in discussing sexual matters where frankness and openness are expected. They also tend to be excessively obsequious to authority figures, including spiritual directors. They would acquiesce to commands and requests, even when these exceed their capabilities, for fear of offending or disappointing their superiors. Moreover, their saying yes to questions does not always indicate agreement or acceptance, and their smiles are at times quite enigmatic. In moral matters, they tend to be more concerned with issues of individual ethics than with those of social ethics.

On the other hand, African Americans tend to privilege community ethics over individual ethics. Furthermore, they generally avoid discussing family matters with outsiders. In their mode of knowing they tend to be gestalt learners, deriving conclusions from relationships and emotional involvement rather than from logical analysis of abstract thought. Often they also subject their white spiritual directors to a series of tests to ascertain whether they are racially prejudiced. Hispanics tend to favor what has been called *religiosidad* or *catolicismo popular*, especially devotion to our Lady, over liturgical worship and biblical reading. They also tend to have an inordinately flexible concept of time that can be infuriating to those accustomed to strict punctuality and deadline.

These observations culled from conversations with spiritual directors (and many others could be added) are of course little more than stereotypical generalizations. Unfortunately, to the extent that they are true, they can impair or even block a fruitful relationship between the spiritual director and his or her directee.

In general, then, the new multicultural situation of the Church poses fresh challenges to spiritual direction. For spiritual directors in seminaries in particular, their tasks seem to be made more complex by the fact that they have to deal not only with the specific issues of spiritual direction in a cross-cultural context (which can be formidable in themselves) but also with the more complex problem of inculturation of minority seminarians. Indeed, for most of these (especially those coming directly from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa) entrance into the seminary is often their first significant encounter with a foreign culture. They have to adjust to a new language, food, climate, academic standards, seminary regulations, modes of thinking and feeling, ways of relating to others, and even religious practices.

Often immigrant seminarians do not know the local presbyterate from whom they would receive psychological and moral support, and they tend to be lumped with the priests and parishes of their own ethnic background and thus may be marginalized from the mainstream of the diocese. Difficulties in adjusting to any of these aspects of life are bound to affect the seminarian's spirituality, and of course spiritual directors cannot afford ignoring them.

#### THE TWOFOLD TASK OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

The task of spiritual direction, as I understand it, is essentially twofold: First, spiritual directors seek to promote the directee's *experience of God* by helping him or her (1) discover and attend to God's self-communication not only in official and public channels (e.g., the Word of God or liturgical and sacramental celebrations) but also in myriad unexpected and less obvious ways (especially private prayers and personal circumstances of life); (2) respond in faith, hope and love to this personal and intimate self-disclosure of God; and (3) live out the ethical and spiritual implications of this relationship with God in daily life. Of course, the God under consideration is not a God of deism or even theism but the divine Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit. With each of these divine persons the directee enters into a specifically different relationship, that is, as son or daughter of the Father, in brotherhood or sisterhood with the Son, and by the personal power and grace of the Spirit (Barry and Connolly, 1982; Barry, 1992).

The second task of spiritual direction is to assist the directee to *discern* within his or her experiences, extraordinary as well as ordinary, what is of God and what is not of God. In other words, there is a need of testing the God experiences (discernment of spirits). With reference to their own cultures which serve as the necessary contexts of their experiences of God, directees should be urged to examine which aspects of their cultures promote and which aspects hinder a genuine relationship with God.

In what follows I will offer some general reflections on how these two tasks of spiritual direction, with particular reference to seminarians, can be carried out in the new situation of multiculturalism.

#### EXPERIENCES OF GOD IN DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONTEXTS

##### *Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Conversion Experiences*

Since many seminarians trace their vocations to a religious or "conversion" experience, spiritual directors would do well to help them understand not only the psychological and spiritual dimensions but also the cultural conditioning of this life-transforming event. As is well known, central to this experience are the person's images and concepts of God which are sensitive indicators of his or her psychological devel-

opment, personal maturity, and psychosocial well-being. These images and concepts are often very complex, combining features of a “benevolent deity” (e.g., God as wise, powerful, and righteous) with those of a “companionable deity” (e.g., God as loving, faithful, merciful, and warm) and those of a “stern deity” (e.g., God as remote, impersonal, punitive, and threatening (Spilka, 1990).

Cognitive as well as psychoanalytic psychologies have shown that these images may be the result of a long process of development from undifferentiated and concrete expressions to differentiated and abstract concepts (Jean Piaget, 1958) and even projections of a fatherly figure from the need for security (Sigmund Freud, 1961). It has also been shown that there is a correlation between the God images a person has and his or her psychosocial well-being. Images of God as loving and supportive seem to enhance self-esteem and foster the search for truth and the use of religion as a guide for everyday living (Spilka, Addison, and Rosensohn, 1975). On the other hand, images of God as controlling and vindictive are often associated with low self-esteem, poor personality integration, and misuse of religion for self-aggrandizement (Benson and Spilka, 1973). Furthermore, ethnic prejudice has also been shown to be associated with images of God as impersonal, distant, and uninvolved in human affairs. The image of God does not serve as a model or guide for one’s attitudes and behaviors, nor is there any question of personal accountability (Spilka and Reynolds, 1975). Finally, distorted and negative God concepts have generally been observed among the severely emotionally disturbed (Lowe and Braten, 1966).

*Cultural Conditioning of Religious Experiences:  
Modernity and Post-Modernity*

Given the importance of the psychological roots of the images of God, spiritual directors would be well advised to urge the seminarians to examine them. However, images of God are conditioned not only by the seminarians’ more or less private psychological experiences but also by the wider, but no less influential, context of their cultures. The cultural factors of the seminarians’ experiences of God should be attended to as well, and this imperative is all the more urgent when the cultural context of the director is quite different from that of the directee.

By culture here is meant a set of assumptions of a group or society, passed on from generation to generation, often unconsciously assimilated, determining a way of life shared by the members of the group or society. These assumptions embody meanings and beliefs, ethical norms for behavior, and customs and traditions and express themselves in institutions and systems as well as in symbolic forms of the most varied kind. They serve as the source of identity and solidarity for the group or society (Luzbetak, 1988; Kraft, 1996).

With regard to North American spiritual directors, it is safe to say that culturally they have been conditioned to a large extent by the assumptions of modernity and what has been termed post-modernity. As has often been noted, modernity is characterized by liberal individualism. This individualism has three forms: political (one person, one vote), economic (the free enterprise system), and religious (the Church as a private free association), and has produced what Robert Bellah calls a "socially unsituated self." As a result of this individualism, there are three dichotomies. First, between individual and *community*: to achieve self-identity the person must at some point set himself or herself up apart if not against the family and group in a "post-conventional, autonomous, or principled level" (Lawrence Kohlberg, 1968). Second, between community and *institution*: the community is sentimentally conceived as warm and nurturing in opposition to the cold and alienating institution rather than as constitutive of the institution. Third, between institution and *tradition*: the institution is seen only in its here-and-now existence, severed from its past tradition which is regarded as oppressive and limiting (Goizueta, 1995: 53–65).

In sum, modernity tends to put a premium on individual dignity, personal rights, autonomy of conscience, and creative freedom. Buoyed by scientific, economic, and political successes, this modern anthropology promotes human control over nature and history, distrusts all forms of authority, be it secular or sacred, and reduces ethical values and religion to the sphere of merely subjective and private choice. Since modernity arose in the West and achieved its most spectacular successes in Europe and North America, it tends to regard its "Eurocentric" culture as the norm and other cultures as underdeveloped, inferior, or savage. North American spiritual directors, despite their best efforts, cannot, for good or ill, fully escape the influence of modernity in which they have been reared and professionally trained.

Since the first decades of the twentieth century, however, certain ideals of modernity have come under fierce attack. After the two World Wars and with the threat of nuclear annihilation and ecological destruction, the naïve and almost blind trust in science and progress, in untrammelled and universal reason, in natural human goodness has been shattered. We are now disenchanted with the disenchantment of the Enlightenment and are said to be living in post-modernity. Though sometimes interpreted as a right-wing rejection of the Enlightenment, post-modernity is in fact an application of the modern project of ideological critique to modernity itself. In this sense it is not the end of modernity but the self-critical transformation of modernity itself. As a result, over against the claims of pure objectivity and absolute truth by universal reason, there is a preference for "weak thought" and epistemological relativity. Instead of "logocentric" metaphysics and "totalizing"

meta-narratives about the meaning of history, people of today are content with fragmentary and partial stories and autobiographies; instead of the universal and common human nature, there is only the socially situated self; instead of affirming absolute values and moral norms, there is a retreat to socially constructed rules and personal tastes and preferences; and instead of discoursing on the presence of God, there is an insistence on God's absence (Gallagher, 1998: 87–100).

North American spiritual directors too cannot fully escape this post-modern cultural *Zeitgeist*, however much they may try. Instead of ignoring modernity and its dialectical prolongation in postmodernity in blissful and pious innocence, it is best that they explicitly and consciously acknowledge the profound and pervasive influence of these ideologies not only in the secular world but in the Church as well. Furthermore, spiritual directors should be aware that their own professional training in counseling and spiritual direction may have been undergirded by tacit modern and postmodern presuppositions and that they themselves may be operating out of philosophical and theological assumptions inspired by modernity and postmodernity.

#### *Spiritual Direction in a Multicultural Context*

Spiritual directors should realize that it is into this modern and post-modern culture of the West that minority seminarians will be willy-nilly inculturated. This awareness is all the more necessary since the cultures of minority seminarians, despite the process of globalization, especially through the media of communication and the dominant capitalist system, have remained in most cases premodern rather than modern and postmodern.

It is in the context of both the Western culture of modernity and post-modernity *and* their own cultures that ethnic seminarians will undergo their God experiences. And it is the task of spiritual directors to help them negotiate this double baptism in these two cultural rivers. It is essential that there be a twofold immersion into not one or the other culture but into *both*, because the Spirit of God as grace and communion is present in both, because there are good and holy (as well as bad and demonic) things in both, and because otherwise ethnic seminarians would fail in their providential mission of being the bridge-builders for people of different cultures, of being in-between cultures, of being the hyphenated persons for the universal Church (Lee, 1995: 29–53).

It is this *bicultural and pluricultural* approach to spiritual direction that is called for today in the emerging multicultural Church. This approach profoundly respects the *otherness* of cultures, learning to know them as much as possible, evaluating them in their own terms, recognizing their values and beauty, discerning their weaknesses and sinfulness, resisting the tendency to regard one's own culture as the best and

the norm for all others as well as to consider the unfamiliar as a threat or inferior, and bringing all the good things of cultures together into mutual fertilization and enrichment (Rakoczy, 1992; Phan, 1994: 195–211).

Through this pluricultural approach of spiritual direction, ethnic seminarians will be able to learn that it is possible to encounter God in the cultures of modernity and postmodernity which perhaps they are tempted to demonize because they appear threatening to their pre-modern one. From modernity they can learn that each individual is not just a member of the human species but is unique in his or her own dignity and inalienable worth, with freedom, with rights and responsibilities. From modernity they learn too that the struggle for freedom against oppressive power, be it secular or sacred, is a noble duty and that science and technology can be harnessed for the well-being of humanity. And, of course, from the Christian perspective, it is clear that God can be and is encountered in all of these features of modernity.

Even the deconstructionist mood of postmodernity itself, with its suspicion against totalitarian claims, can be an invitation to maintain a healthy distance between faith and manipulative power systems, including the ecclesiastical one. Its silence about God and its emphasis on God's absence may be a necessary protest against the idols of theism (an ally of modernity); a rejection of rationalistically packaged, often deistic, conceptions of the deity; a veiled quest for the divine Mystery; and a yearning for analogical language, akin to negative theology, about the divine. And even though some forms of postmodern spirituality seem to be narcissistic and superficial (e.g., the New Age movement), there is in our time a nostalgic return to religious experience (which modernity despises as illusionary and alienating) and an unquenchable thirst for the non-measurable, the non-controllable, the transcendent. Once again, spiritual directors in tune with these admittedly ambiguous trends of postmodern culture will be able to take advantage of them to promote the God experiences in their directees (Graham, 1996).

#### *Familiarity with How God Is Encountered in Different Cultures*

On the other hand, minority seminarians develop their images and concepts of God from their specific ethnic contexts. It is of course impossible to discuss here how each ethnic culture conditions experiences of God and shapes them into a particular and specific configuration. Furthermore, even if it were possible to identify all these specific features, still a careful account must be taken of each individual's unique spiritual history that disallows the possibility of any two identical spiritual experiences. Nevertheless, it is absolutely necessary that spiritual directors acquire some familiarity, both through formal studies and personal exposure, with the distinct ways in which experiences of God

occur in the three groups—African-American, Hispanic, and Asian—that make up the majority of ethnic seminarians in the United States.

Performing this task successfully is a tall order for most Caucasian spiritual directors. It would require of them a new sensitivity and even a new spirituality. At the very least, they must abandon the deeply entrenched notion that Western culture is superior and normative for all others. In general, they must mightily resist the sevenfold temptation, in the words of Robert Schreiter, to demonize, romanticize, colonize, generalize, trivialize, homogenize, and vaporize the “other” (Schreiter, 1992: 52–53). More positively, they must learn as much as they can how African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians, in their own distinct ways, relate to the transcendent, view the world, understand themselves, organize their families and societies, and appreciate what is true, good, and beautiful. In this way, they will acquire some acquaintance with their world views, their philosophies, their folktales, their feasts and celebrations, their customs, their arts, their foods, their social structures, their moral values, and their religions.

Thanks to a knowledge of all these elements of their cultures, spiritual directors can understand how their directees encounter God in their cultures. In the light of this understanding they will then help their directees discover and attend to God’s self-bestowal in myriad unexpected and unobtrusive ways, respond in faith, hope, and love to this personal and intimate self-disclosure of God, and live out the ethical and spiritual implications of this relationship with God in their daily lives.

But even to speak of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians as general racial or ethnic categories is unacceptably generic and vague. Little by little spiritual directors will learn to distinguish between and among different groups of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians with their own distinctive sub-cultures, noting their subtle similarities and differences. Finally, they learn to see each directee as an individual, neither as divorced from the cultural context to which he or she inevitably belongs (for without this background we would not be able to see him or her *as* an individual), nor simply as an instance of his or her ethnic group (otherwise we would miss his or her indelible and marvelous uniqueness).

#### DISCERNING GOD’S PRESENCE IN CULTURES

So far we have discussed the first task of spiritual direction, namely, promoting the directees’ experience of God in their cultural worlds. There remains a second task, that of assisting the directees to discern within their experiences, extraordinary as well as ordinary, what is of God and what is not. To approach spiritual direction in an intercultural and pluricultural way does not by any means lead us to the morass of

epistemological and moral relativism, preventing us from making a judgment either on the cultures of the minority directees or on the behaviors of the directee himself or herself. Nor does the act of moral judgment necessarily connote intolerance, intellectual narrowness, and cultural imperialism. Here the second task of spiritual direction, i.e., discernment of spirits, is of paramount importance. Spiritual directors should help their minority directees evaluate not only the modern and post-modern culture of the West but also their own.

### *Faith and Culture*

The fundamental issue to be considered here is the relationship between Christian faith and cultures. From the Christian perspective, based on the mysteries of creation, the incarnation of the Logos, Jesus' death and resurrection, and the Pentecost, this relationship, and hence the process of spiritual direction in a multicultural context, can be characterized neither by outright hostility toward culture (the conservative tendency) nor by a wholesale acceptance of culture (the liberal tendency)—not outright hostility, because culture is the creation of the human spirit under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, and not total acceptance, because culture, as any human work, is marred by sin and therefore needs redemption.

The attitude of spiritual directors as well as of their directees toward all cultures must therefore be one of critical discernment. As we have seen above, spiritual directors must help their directees encounter God in the expression of their cultures. On the other hand, they must also raise the possibility that the directees' cultures may contain aspects that are contrary to the gospel and therefore can block their spiritual growth. To help their directees recognize these, spiritual directors can ask them to find answers to the following questions. These are by no means intended to be exhaustive; they simply indicate some of the areas in which culture and the Gospel may come into conflict in the cultures of the three major ethnic groups.

### HEURISTIC QUESTIONS

*i. Questions regarding the authentic witness to the Gospel within each culture:*

- \* Which demands of the message of Jesus seem to be strangest and hardest in terms of your culture?
- \* In which ways can the experience of racism (African Americans), *rechazo* [rejection] and *mestizo* [mixed race] (Mexican Americans), Communist oppression (Asians) be overcome by the Christian practice of forgiveness and reconciliation? Are there ways in which these historical experiences can be used as excuses for unacceptable behaviors?

- \* Are there any aspects of your culture that call for change and even rejection in order for you to be faithful to the Gospel? In which ways can the emphasis on kinship ties (African Americans), on the community (Hispanics), on the honor of the family (Asians) jeopardize the rights and responsibility of the individual?
- \* Are there any practices, e.g., in sexual and family ethics that are condoned by your culture (e.g., polygamy and premarital sex) and yet are contrary to church teaching?
- \* Does your culture so focus on the well-being of the individual and the family (Asians) that it neglects issues of social justice?
- \* Does the emphasis on the necessity of harmony, especially within the family (Asians) lead to ethical compromises?
- \* In general, can you identify life-denying aspects of your culture?

ii. *Questions regarding the structural aspects of culture:*

- \* Is your culture so dominated by patriarchalism (Asians), by *machismo* (Hispanics) that the rights of women are jeopardized?
- \* Does your culture so prize economic success (Asians) that it considers poverty as shame and failure? In your culture and society, are the poor systematically excluded from full participation in the community (Hispanics)?
- \* Are there social and political structures in your culture and society that favor one race over another?
- \* In what ways can you be counter-cultural in your society by a preferential option for the poor and the oppressed?

iii. *Questions regarding the relationship between culture and church life:*

- \* Does the emphasis on *catolicismo popular* (popular devotions) and *religión casera* ("homespun religion"), combined with a certain form of anticlericalism (Hispanics) detract from the Church's liturgical and sacramental life?
- \* How can certain spiritual practices derived from other religious traditions, e.g., worship of ancestors (Asians) be harmonized with the Christian faith?
- \* How inclusive is your culture with regard to people of other cultural traditions? In what ways can your culture reach across cultural differences and in this way contribute to the catholicity of the Church?
- \* Are there any aspects of your culture (e.g., religious classics, philosophical ideas, moral practices) that prevent you from arriving at an authentic understanding and practice of the Christian faith?

Are there any customs and popular feasts that are contrary to Christian faith, sacramental celebrations, and moral life?

#### SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS AS INTERCULTURAL BRIDGE-BUILDERS

The negative tone of these questions is not meant to suggest that cultures should be approached with suspicion in spiritual direction. On the contrary, the two tasks of spiritual direction in a multicultural context—helping directees encounter God in their cultures and discern what is of God and what is not—are mutually complementary and should be carried out simultaneously. Both are necessary and neither can be neglected in Christian spiritual direction.

As members of a society and a Church that are becoming increasingly multicultural and as professionals whose mission is to promote personal and prayerful encounters with God in others, spiritual directors can no longer afford to be monocultural persons. Their challenge is to become intercultural bridge-builders. Like their ethnic directees, they live in-between cultures. With this threatening and yet enriching experience, they can in their spiritual direction contribute to the formation of a new person for a new age: culturally sensitive to the wide variety of world views and practices, able to discern what is good and demonic in them, committed to the promotion of equality and justice, attuned to the hidden presence of God in all cultural expressions, and working creatively, humbly, wisely to help others achieve the same psychological and spiritual dispositions. What David W. Augsburger has said of the cross-cultural pastoral counselor can be applied to the spiritual director as well: “a seeker of this God who loves the world, is at work and at love through out all the cultures of the world, and who prizes all of creation, creatures, and their re-creation” (Augsburger, 1993: 142).

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