

## Spiritual Direction

When it was originally suggested to me that I should lead the discussion on spiritual direction Fr Prior added the words 'in an authentic Benedictine way, not as pretend-Jesuits' and I had some doubts about whether I counted as a pretend-Jesuit myself, having done a three-year course in Ignatian Spirituality in London in the nineties. However, the more I have thought about the subject the more I have come to realize what riches in this field are offered to us by St Benedict in his Rule. I had already known that more than a little of Ignatius' inspiration came from the Benedictine tradition through the abbot Cisneros whom Ignatius encountered at Monserrat before he wrote the Spiritual Exercises, and I am sure that if we go deep enough we find no conflict between the two traditions.

As this is a meeting of nuns and monks whose job it is to look after guests it seems natural to start with Hospitality, that virtue so close to the heart of St Benedict. He expects us Guest Masters and Mistresses to be endlessly available, ready to drop everything to put ourselves at the disposal of guests even when they come at inconvenient times, interrupt us at the Divine Office, need feeding on a fast day, and so on. But perhaps the most important aspect of hospitality is that it should come from the heart, that we communicate the warmth of love. Many people have great difficulty in believing that God loves them; we who have given our lives to his service need to be able to demonstrate in a way that they can recognize that we do. And I have found that to hear anybody's story is to love them.

So the first thing is to enable people to tell their story. This requires that we give them enough time, that we communicate to them that we are genuinely interested in what they have to say, that we accept them as they are. I'd go so far as to say that we show them reverence. After all St Benedict urges us to treat even the kitchen utensils like the sacred vessels of the altar; how much more each precious person, made in the image and likeness of God?

I once received a card bearing the words 'Everyone needs a good listening to' and I believe this to be profoundly true. In my experience most people are craving to be heard at a deep level, with the ear of the heart to use Benedict's phrase. And I suspect that most people are longing to speak from their hearts, but unless they encounter a listener willing to give them loving attention – and time and patience – they might easily not get in touch with their own depths where God is speaking to them and guiding them, through their own deepest desires. I am convinced that the most precious gift we can give another human being is this loving attention and concern. In his book 'Listening with Love' Fr Robert Igo OSB says it is a way of washing people's feet (Jn 13) following the example of Jesus: 'Love one another in the same way that I have loved you...'. By making ourselves available for this ministry of listening we are revealing a deep compassion and a sense of great respect.

As an aside I wonder how much most of us give and receive this type of attention within our own communities. Cultivating the art of heart-to-heart encounter with members of our own communities could well be the key to forming communities which will attract new members and give them the support they need in order to stay, and to grow throughout their lives in the Lord's service.

There is no doubt that Listening is one of the key themes in the Rule of St Benedict. As we all know so well it is the very first word of the Rule. St Benedict urges us to listen to each other in Chapter 3 of

the Rule, placing particular emphasis on listening to the youngest, which must have been a very surprising thing in the fifth century. He mentions the wisdom of young Samuel and Daniel in particular – and this very morning we had the story of Samuel: ‘Speak, Lord, your servant is listening’. Yesterday our dinner refectory reading ended with these same words, quoted by Pope Francis in his document on the joy of the Gospel.

The concept of obedience, to which we’ll return briefly later, has listening at its heart. Monks are urged to listen to the abbot, to each other, to the sick, to visiting monks – and especially to the critical ones, with ideas about how things might be done differently and better. *Lectio Divina* is an exercise in listening attentively to the very voice of God himself, speaking to us through his inspired Word.

In spiritual direction the seeker is far more important than the other and what they offer is the substance of the conversation but very often they need a good deal of help in getting it out.

There are various simple ways in which the listener can enable the guest to get into the meat of their story without too much waffling – in the jargon to get into the process without over much content.

Open questions are the best: those beginning ‘How? What? When?’ I recall being told that ‘Why?’ is often received as too great a challenge, but I’m sure there is a place for it, perhaps when trust has been established. Phrases like ‘Tell me more’ can be enabling, and indicate to the speaker that you are interested in what they’re saying. The question: ‘What makes you feel really alive?’ can be a good one to help people talk about what really matters to them. ‘What is your image of God?’ is another important question.

I have found that people who have made a retreat at a Jesuit house are often very much better than others at getting to the heart of the matter, and at discerning what God might be saying to them through a passage of Scripture. We too can help people to focus on the essential by well-chosen questions and gentle comments.

We should also be attentive to what is not said, notice people’s body language, tone of voice, facial expressions. Is there a mis-match between what the words mean and the atmosphere surrounding them?

Another thing to watch out for is the images which people use, sometimes hidden in quite ordinary turns of phrase, clichés even, which can convey deep truths about ‘where they are’.

Poetry and art can be excellent tools to help one make a deep connection with the other person, especially if you can encourage them to explore their own creative gifts, whether for words, painting, collages – or anything you can think of. It is wonderfully satisfying to help a person discover a gift they never knew they had, or revive a gift long neglected.

There is definitely a place for teaching within spiritual direction. Very many people come seeking help with prayer, for example. On our course we were told to avoid ‘problem-solving’ which I think is another way of saying ‘Don’t tell people what to do; don’t give advice’. But I am sure that it helps to give people tools to enable them to access their own inner wisdom. This will often mean recommending books for them to read, as well, of course, as specific passages from Scripture which will help them to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to them.

Something that has always astonished me – both on the receiving and the giving end – is how the simple summarizing by the guide of what the seeker has said can come with the force of a revelation! Hearing your own stuff articulated by another is most powerful, and can help you move to a deeper level. I suppose this is partly because it shows that the other has really HEARD what you said. This is a rare and most precious experience.

Many people come seeking help with a dilemma, a big decision that has to be made. St Ignatius offers very good practical tools here. There are his famous rules for discernment, and in another place in the Spiritual Exercises he suggests that the person with the decision to make imagines him/herself on their deathbed – at that stage what decision would they like to have made NOW? This question helps them to focus on what it is they really want, what God is indicating to them through their own deepest desires.

Another excellent tool offered by St Ignatius is the daily examen, now, I believe, usually – and more helpfully, translated as the examination of consciousness. At its simplest this is a reflection at the end of a day, dwelling on those experiences, no matter how small, a smile, a flower, a good meal, for which one is thankful; and also on those things one regrets, would have liked to have done differently.

Very often people have a strong sense of having much to give to God and to the world but are in great confusion as to how this can be done, especially if they have had the experience of having doors seemingly closed in their faces, a failed marriage, a failed attempt to enter religious life. A tiny book: *Personal Vocation* by an Indian Jesuit Herbie Alphonso can be extremely helpful here. He urges the reader/retreatant to notice which passages of Scripture make her heart 'burn within her' in the search to determine which particular facet of God's goodness she is called to reflect and communicate to others. It is enormously affirming for people who feel rejected and worthless to realize that they have a unique vocation to be themselves; made in the image of God there is some particular facet of his beauty that gives meaning to their lives.

Fr Robert uses the Emmaus incident in St Luke's Gospel to invite us to look at what Jesus does when he walks beside those two dejected disciples. Jesus enters into their own understanding of what has happened. Through listening and sharing the Scriptures with them, he helps them to 'remember' and see their own story through the lens of God's plan. They are challenged, they are encouraged, and they are given the one gift they need above all, the gift of his presence.

In Benedictine circles quite often we are diffident about offering 'spiritual direction' believing that it is the preserve of Jesuits, real or 'pretend'. Augustine Baker famously said that the Holy Spirit is the only spiritual director. We dislike the word 'director' thinking that it implies telling people what to do. I would rather say that it indicates that the process is going somewhere, not just going round in circles. And I believe that many people need help, at least to start with, in discerning what the Holy Spirit, the real director, is saying to them. This includes those who are seeking God even if they see themselves as people with little faith, or the 'wrong' beliefs.

The Benedictine vows offer a splendid framework for anybody's spiritual life, and this may be something that we can offer to others in spiritual direction. Equally, our own living out of the vows can help us in our approach to those who come to us for help.

Stability is like the roots of the tree. It is about staying power, not giving up as soon as difficulties arise. Often people need encouragement to live in the present moment, rather than always be looking ahead, or living in the past, whether that was good or bad.

Obedience is the trunk of the tree, which is the Tree of the Cross. To put others first out of love is at the heart of listening, attention, open-ness to the other, being as Christ who came not to be served, but to serve. As we all know 'ob-audire' is connected with hearing, which involves listening.

Conversatio morum is like the branches and twigs of the tree, stretching out in proportion to the depths of the roots. First and foremost this demands our own open-ness to change, conversion, transformation. Only having experienced that can we walk with others on their own journey to Emmaus.

Before I hand over to all of you I'd like to make one final point: meeting another person at this very deep level is an enormous privilege and we Guest Masters and Guest Mistresses should be most grateful for it. And in my experience there is no joy like it.