TEACHING SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AS IF GOD WERE REAL

Robert R. Marsh

ONE PHRASE BECAME something of a mantra for me during my theology studies: how would I do *this* if I believed God were *real*? By 'this' I meant theology, but I also included all the other things I did as a Jesuit at the time—preach, preside at Eucharist, give spiritual direction, *be* a Jesuit. How would I do all of those things if I believed God were really real? And by 'real' I meant present, interested, involved, available for real interaction: and more than that—initiating, acting, relating, desiring and responding—pick your verb.

I found the question compelling because I was, at that point in my life, realising that for a long time I had precisely *not* believed that God was real in such a way. Of course, before that moment I would probably have *said* I believed that God was real, but something was happening in my experience that was convincing me that my grasp of God's reality was more notional than actual. That 'something' was receiving spiritual direction from someone who did believe that God was real and practised direction as if God were real.

For example, this director had the nerve to ask me about my experience of God. When she asked me what the God of my prayer was like, she expected me to be capable of answering in straightforward terms rather than in abstract notions. I remember in my first session with her she asked me what my God was like and I wasn't able to get much beyond 'sort of big'. Inwardly I was rather proud that my God was mysterious and beyond description, until it began to dawn on me that I really didn't know—and indeed didn't expect to know—what my God was actually like.

Now I was not, by any standards, a beginner at the game of spirituality. I had survived a Jesuit novitiate; I had made the full Spiritual Exercises; I had been in regular spiritual direction for nine years by then; I had done an individually guided retreat every year; I had read extensively in the subject; I had been trained in spiritual direction; I had worked in a retreat house and *given* the full Exercises several times, as well as dozens of shorter retreats; I had even devised a course in spiritual direction and taught it. But still I didn't expect God to be a living presence in my prayer or in my experience. I felt like a beginner again.

The Way, 53/4 (October 2014), 57–67

Contemplative Happiness, *by Raoulet d'Orléans, 1376*

Over several months, my director's gentle persistence and belief in God's reality (not to mention her insight and skill) paid off: I began to have glimmers of answers to her questions about my experience of God; I began to know what my God was like; and I began to trust that knowledge. I came face-to-face with God and God became real to me. It was an opening of the eyes for me, with repercussions beyond my own prayer. I had been doing spiritual direction myself for some years, but I found that when I reread Barry and Connolly,[1] that classic guide to the practice of direction, they had been talking all the time about noticing the experience of God, but *I* hadn't noticed. I certainly hadn't been able to do spiritual direction in a way that trusted that God would be there in other people's experience. That began to change too: once I *expected* God to be there in someone else's life I found God was—as long as I was, in my turn, patient and persistent enough to allow such experiences to emerge and be noticed.

Looking at God Looking at You

I found though that my directees often initially baulked, as I had, at believing God might be real and really available in their own experience and prayer. I began to wonder about that theologically, and chose to do doctoral work on the issue, exploring the kind of cosmology that might be more hospitable to believing and experiencing God as real. Then, returning to work in spirituality, I found I also read and gave the Exercises differently. Ten years or more after the initial opening of my eyes, I wrote for *The Way* about the reality of God by commenting on paragraph 75 of the Exercises, which seemed to me to be central to the Ignatian project.[2]

[1] William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).
[2] 'Looking at God Looking at You: Ignatius' Third Addition', *The Way*, 43/4 (October 2004), 19–28.

> A step or two in front of the place where I am to contemplate or meditate, I will stand for the length of an Our Father, raising my mind above and considering how God our Lord is looking at me, etc., and make an act of reverence or humility.[3]

I argued that this simple prelude to all prayer in the Exercises is foundational for Ignatian spirituality itself. First, because it puts the focus of all our spiritual practice on the activity of God, who is already involved and waiting for us—it makes our prayer and exercise a matter of response to a God who is real. Second, and possibly more importantly, it is confident that human beings have imaginal[4] access to the here-and-now attitude of God toward us—and not in the abstract but concretely, in *this* instance, *now*. It assumes it is possible to answer the question 'how is God looking at me?' and answer it by 'looking' at God. Prayer, in Ignatius' account, begins with God's initiative and our first response is one of discovery. This simple, easily overlooked paragraph from Ignatius unites imagination and discerned choice as two sides of an *elemental* Ignatian practice.[5]

This looking and discovering is basic to prayer and the Exercises but, as I was learning from my experience described above, it is properly the elemental activity of Ignatian spiritual direction too.[6] It is the role this plays—this noticing of God who first notices us—that I want to look at further, first in the context of spiritual direction and then in the teaching of spiritual direction: how would we teach spiritual direction if we believed God were really real?[7]

A Model of Spiritual Direction

When we focus on the experience of the real God in spiritual direction some key factors can be highlighted that allow us to sharpen up our practice of direction and our teaching of direction, too. What happens when we attend to the experience of God?

[3] Exx 75, translated by Philip Endean.

[4] I use the word 'imaginal' (meaning 'pertaining to the imagination') as a more neutral term than, say, 'imaginative' or 'imaginary'.

[5] I also described there how most of us are prone to find that practice hard to trust, and discussed some of the cultural (and cosmological) causes for our distrust and how Ignatius challenges us to try to be surprised.

[6] By extension, too, it provides a key to a way of supervising spiritual directors and offers a model for teaching and training in both spiritual direction and supervision.

[7] What follows in indebted to two experiences: being on the receiving end of direction, training and supervision in Berkeley, California, with George Murphy and Jane Ferdon (who was my spiritual director during my theology studies) and being on the 'giving end' in the spiritual accompaniment training courses at Loyola Hall Jesuit Spirituality Centre, where the 'model' was developed as a training tool in conjunction with Ruth Holgate and Paul Nicholson. Ruth Holgate writes more about the Loyola Hall courses in the current issue (below, 68–78). George and Jane, Ruth and Paul are not to be held responsible for anything I say here!

Strangely, there can be a resistance to speaking about one's experience of God in spiritual direction. Often other things come to the fore—ideas, worries, doubts, hopes, questions, dreams, insights and so on—but, though perhaps in the background, people also come with experiences of God—in prayer, while ironing, at work, at play, in church, low-key or fully floodlit. Very often, such experiences are not fully noticed and valued. They might be mentioned briefly, but they have not been noticed in their full breadth and implication and, above all, they have failed to become an opportunity for communication and developing relationship with God.

Paralleling the directee's reticence about his or her experience of God, there are often lots of other things a spiritual director might be drawn into doing in a session rather than paying attention to the traces of God—for example, just listening, helping someone pray in helpful ways, helping someone cope with a major loss or transition, teaching about decision-making, teaching about discernment, engaging in a little theological reflection, dealing with special circumstances, listening to dreams, appreciating art, and so on. But, as Barry and Connolly write:

> If spiritual directors do not focus on the religious experience of their directees, then this most intimate and challenging area of experience will ordinarily be skirted in their conversations. Other areas of life experience, and especially problem areas, will take up the time. Directees may get help with these areas, but they may not develop a deeper personal relationship with the Lord.[8]

The director's *essential* task remains to help the directee notice and develop the encounter with God already implicit in his or her experience. I call this essential in the way that fuel is essential to the working of a car. I do not want this focus on experience of and relationship with God to be read as promoting an individualised, 'me-and-Jesus' spirituality, but rather as 'letting the Creator deal directly with the creature' (Exx 15)—a Creator who is more than merely the projection of my desires.

How does a director accomplish this essential task? Ignatius doesn't give us a simple blueprint but, as I have pointed out elsewhere,[9] the structure of the 'hour' of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises can be read as a set of interlocking ways to focus the one praying on noticing the presence of God, noticing the way God is present and taking the initiative, noticing the way the praying person responds—all to promote

[8] Barry and Connolly, *Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 177.
[9] Robert R. Marsh, 'Imagining Ignatian Spiritual Direction', *The Way*, 48/3 (July 2009), 1–16.

an imaginal encounter with God. We can, as spiritual directors, focus on the directee's experience of God in a similar way, by being interested in the same things. A director promotes the encounter with God by helping directees notice more and more about the experience in question, by exploring what God is like there, how God looks at them, what they are desiring and how they are drawn to respond.

When a person talks about his or her experience in spiritual direction and a director helps maintain a focus on the God really present there, two things can be seen to take place. First, though directees may start by recounting memories of what has happened in which God is only *implicitly* present, this kind of direction helps bring out the *explicit* presence of God in those memories. As God's presence is explicitly noticed, the experience of God starts to move from the past into the present of the direction session. Directees may at first struggle to answer the question 'how *was* God looking at you in that experience?'[10] but, as the conversation continues, find themselves exploring the question 'how is God looking at me *now*?'.

In parallel, there is a passage from 'reflection' to 'encounter'. The conversation becomes less *about* God and more about encountering God in an interactive way. The session comes to life and can go somewhere new.

In a highly compressed form this can be expressed as an algorithm or recipe or simple *model* for spiritual direction:

1. Listen to what a person is saying.
2. Notice (and help the person notice) his or her implicit experience of God.
3. Help it become explicit experience of God.
4. Stay with it and deepen it, let it come into the present, let it develop.
5. Encourage it to become 'conversational'.[11]

Even though it is simple, simply following this process fluently can achieve a great deal. While a background in theology, spirituality, scripture, psychology and so on (and sheer wisdom) can all be helpful, any of these can also be a distraction from what I have described as the esssential task of direction, since each can, if clumsily handled, shift the focus away from the God who initiated the encounter. Our approach facilitates the encounter with God so that God can do the heavy lifting.[12]

[10] Bear in mind that this question is one of a family that can be asked in many different ways—this form serves as a shorthand.
[11] Ruth Holgate expresses this model even more succinctly as 'Listen, Notice, Stay/Explore' (70 below).
[12] Thanks to Roger Dawson for that metaphor.

Let me flesh out the model in some more detail. A person brings to spiritual direction a wealth of *implicit* experience of God. Often new directors are taught basic listening skills without being given any sense of what to listen *for*—indeed they may have been explicitly encouraged to be 'non-directive'. Of course we listen to let people's experience be aired in safety, to give them space for their concerns, to let them process and so on but, rather than that being either the end point or a prelude to analyzing or reflecting or pastoral counselling or therapy, what distinguishes spiritual direction in this model is that we listen contemplatively and discerningly to notice—and help directees notice—what may be the threads of their experience where God has been implicitly encountered. It implies a 'nose' for the traces of God, a sense of what experience of God is like; in a nutshell it implies an ability to discern the spirits and so let God do what God desires.

To discern the spirits and so let God do what God desires

In so far as such experiences are tentatively identified in listening to a person's story, the next step is to home in on one which seems promising and to linger with it. If you are interested in a person's experience of God this often happens naturally. We want to know more about the experience, what it felt like, what he or she was thinking, what kinds of metaphors or images were operative, what kinds of desires were evoked, what God seemed like. We want to relish the experience of God. It can be likened to walking around in an experience to notice it from many angles and appreciate its implicit richness. People realise by lingering, dwelling with an experience that they know more about it than they knew they knew. Staying with an experience allows more to be noticed, for the unnoticed to become clearer, the memory to become more immediate, the God in the experience to become more real. Or perhaps the tentative guess that this experience might be significant has to be revised and another experience explored. Dwelling with an implicit experience of God can be hard for beginning directors because it demands a balance between gentle persistence and not appearing pushy. The director might have to be more interested in the experience than the directee until the richness of the experience comes to the surface.

The next steps in this simple model of direction are to let the experience that is coming to life deepen and be explored in the present. It usually occurs spontaneously that the conversation shifts from the past to the present, from noticing how God was present in some remembered experience to noticing how God *is* present here and now in the direction session. As that presence becomes more palpable two new things become possible (and

they can run in parallel). First, noticing how God is present and how God wants to be involved (looks on, feels, touches, acts) allows directees to do what they probably didn't do in the original experience (or at least didn't do in an extended, developed way): it allows them to respond. To a degree this happens automatically. When people notice that God is present in a particular way they spontaneously respond with feelings, thoughts, desires and so on. However they might need help noticing *how* they respond. They might need help sifting between responses discernible as movement and those that might be countermovement.[13] They probably *will* need help to articulate the response they want to make to God. This brings us to the second new possibility: God's own way of being present will, in general, shift or change as God responds in turn to the directee's responses. And, in so far as that is noticed too, a virtuous cycle has been established: God and directee enter into some sort of *colloquy* or series of mutual responses.[14]

With some directees (and with all directees in some sessions) the process might only go a little way but, often enough, with sufficient focus and skill, a living encounter between the directee and God will develop and the session will find a creative momentum. Let me explain. Often a directee turns up for a session of direction with something on his or her mind—a life situation, a conundrum, some entrenched feeling—and for a director there can be a dual temptation. We are caring people so we want to help, we feel drawn to address the issues, solve the problems. Simultaneously we feel overmatched: we don't know how to get the person from A to B, we feel we don't have the skills or knowledge. If we can resist this pair of temptations and instead focus in the manner outlined above until we reach a living encounter with God then, very often, we experience the immense creativity of God's involvement. God finds a surprising way to get the person from A to B—or C or Z: we get to watch and savour.

In summary, doing spiritual direction as if God were real—having that *one* focus—can be described as a number of discrete steps in a process. The aim of such spiritual direction is to let God take the initiative in a person's experience and relationship and help that person respond in turn.

[13] Movement and countermovement are our shorthand terms for strands of experience motivated by the 'good spirit' and 'bad spirit' respectively. See Robert R. Marsh, 'Receiving and Rejecting: On Finding a Way in Spiritual Direction', *The Way*, 45/1 (January 2006), 7–21.

[14] Colloquy is the term Ignatius uses in the *Spiritual Exercises* for a conversation with God as 'one friend to another'. Sometimes in this model of direction a full-blown conversation does develop but more usually it will involve groping towards a sense of shifting responses of feeling: successive applications of noticing how God is looking at me and discovering my desired response and making it.

Teaching Spiritual Direction

Belief

Before looking at how we might teach the *model* of spiritual direction outlined above we need to step back a little. The question we are trying to answer is how to teach direction as if God were real. Our first goal in teaching is, then, to get our trainees to believe that God *is* real. Before they can give direction out of the conviction that God is to be encountered in experience they need to have encountered God in their own experience—and not just notionally but concretely. How? Well I came to that conviction for myself through a year's spiritual direction, but that isn't a practical means for most people.[15] At Loyola Hall we found two other means very helpful: prayer and demonstration.

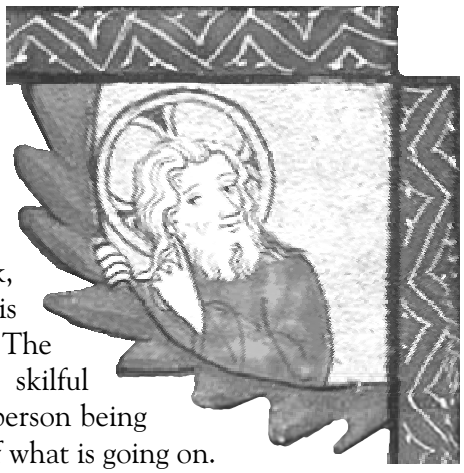
We used to ask participants in our courses to begin the day with prayer, so as to be able to talk later about their experience of God, but we didn't find this worked very well at inspiring the belief that God was real: they weren't praying as if God were real! Instead, we learnt to start the day with a more-or-less carefully crafted spiritual exercise lasting five or ten minutes bringing the participants face-to-face with God and asking, in one way or another, 'what is that God like?', 'what is God desiring for you?', 'how is God looking at you now?'. We then gave them the rest of the hour to let the encounter deepen and bring forth a response. This way we found that the participants collected a set of experiences (at least implicit ones) of God being real.

Another effective way of getting people to believe that God is real is by demonstration. If the participants can't have individual spiritual direction they can at least watch it being practised well. With a team of trainers one can direct another in front of a group of trainees. The 'directee' brings real material to talk about rather than trying to play a role and the 'director' tries to direct as he or she normally would, despite being on show. We found that watching discernment in action, watching the experience of God develop under such circumstances, shows the participants the model in action and gives them the chance to come to believe God is real.

Insight

If believing that God is real is the first focus in teaching spiritual direction it nevertheless unfolds in parallel with two others. At the start of this article I described my own spiritual director as having insight and

[15] Though perhaps it is a consideration relevant to Paul Nicholson's article on apprenticeship, below, 79–87.



skill. These are the two qualities we want to foster in our trainees, too. In a sense they correspond to the two parts of Exx 75: noticing God (insight) and responding (skill). The knack of direction is to notice the experience of God in a person's story, to see God at work, and to respond skilfully so that this experience develops and deepens. The two aspects are interwoven: by skilful responses the director helps the person being directed notice for him- or herself what is going on.

We will focus on skill in a moment, but skill without insight is useless. It is not just that, without insight, skill becomes a mechanical following of rules; rather, insight provides the raw material upon which skill can operate. If we are not aware of the movements and countermovements both in ourselves and in the directee we have nothing to do but listen aimlessly or resort to counselling. Skills can be taught and practised, but how do you encourage a person to grow in insight, the capacity to notice God? To some extent, we have found, people come with this gift in different degrees. But it is not as simple as an either/or distinction. In fact, where we talk about insight we might instead talk about discernment. To a degree some are more gifted at discernment of spirits than others (and scripture and tradition sometimes speak of discernment in this way), but Ignatius believed that, with the aid of some rules of thumb and the experience of the Spiritual Exercises, anyone can develop the capacity to discern.

In our experience people 'get the taste' for God by being exposed to God in a number of ways: in their own lives, certainly, but also by watching spiritual direction in action—either under demonstration conditions or in practice direction among trainees. In both cases facilitation helps. In a demonstration setting, a facilitator helps those watching to be aware of their own movements and countermovements as they observe. In practice direction, feedback from a trainer can help point out traces of God so that the trainees know where to look and learn to recognise.

Sometimes a participant 'gets it' in a sort of gestalt switch, and from then on is aware and able to notice and discern. In other cases, the awareness is gained incrementally. Either way, when people are able to notice the presence of God they can start to grow in the ability to foster it. Insight is matched by skill.

Skill

The core skill we are after is a certain kind of directed listening which helps people to stay with and notice and explore their experiences of God. In a sense it is a single skill, but it is nuanced as it moves though the successive steps of the model:

- learning to listen warmly and actively;
- learning how to help others notice their experiences of God;
- learning how to stay with movement and let it deepen;
- learning how to handle countermovement constructively;
- learning how to facilitate living encounter.

In most cases the people we train acquire these skills and become fluent in them in order, building one on the other. If directors can't listen warmly and accurately and build rapport they won't be able to discern where the movements in a person's experience might be. If directors can't yet notice the implicit signs of a remembered experience of God they won't be able to stay with one and let it deepen and so on.

Because the skills can be broken down like this they can be focused on and taught in turn. Teaching can come in different ways. It can be given directly as instruction. It can be illustrated in demonstrations of particular skills. It can be part of the feedback trainees are given on their own practice. It can take the form of individual coaching or can happen in supervision. For example, we present the simplified model by describing it, by bullet points, by live demonstration and by guided reflection. We link it to the theology and to the practice of discernment of spirits.

Perhaps the most effective way of learning a skill, though, is to practise it. There all the theory can be absorbed, synthesized and put into action to see what works and what doesn't. Often trainees know what they want to be doing but still find it difficult to do when faced with a real person with his or her own idiosyncratic way of having and sharing experience. We encourage the trainees to reflect on their own practice and to learn from the people they are directing how they are doing.

Because the skills identified in this model of direction build upon each other, those practising don't have to try everything at once: they can concentrate on listening until they can do it fluently, while growing in the capacity to notice movement and countermovement even if for the moment they don't know how to stay with the experience of God to let it deepen. Good feedback gives trainees something concrete against which to measure their progress. They know the kinds of things for which we are

looking; indeed we give all participants observational checklists itemising the different aspects of the skills found in the model. Those observing use these to guide their own feedback and members of the training team work to the same plan. We try to model the contemplative outlook by placing the emphasis of feedback on 'saying what we see' rather than giving advice on what might have been done differently. The simple clarity of the model allows feedback to be equally clear and specific. How did the director listen? Was the director able to notice the movement? Was the director able to help the directee stay and notice more?

Confidence

When insight and skill are refined by feedback the participants see their own growth and that of their colleagues too, and their confidence increases. I mean not just a confidence in their own ability as they progress down the list of skills, but their confidence that God will be real in every session of direction. Because the experience of God usually lies implicit in the directee's story, it takes trust and confidence (alongside skill) to wait for it to emerge; it takes confidence to persist in the noticing and exploring phase, waiting for God to begin to be present and immediate; and it takes confidence in God that as a colloquy develops God will be creatively powerful. That kind of confidence goes beyond believing, and is only acquired with the continual experience of God's reliability. One mark of such growing confidence is that participants find a balance between an expectant waiting for God to do the work and the fluent exercise of insight and skill to help God's work be noticed and accepted.

I remember thinking when I completed a training *practicum* with George Murphy and Jane Ferdon, that it had not just been about improving as a spiritual director, but it had seen a step change in my relationship with God second only to my first experience of the Spiritual Exercises. The model I have described here is a tool for learning, learning something more profound, learning that God is real, and learning how to help others learn that too. It offers the gift of a question: how would I do *this* if God were real?

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