

SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT

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P. Willibrord Driever, P. David Foster

P. Willibrord has recently submitted a doctoral thesis on this topic, an abstract of which is also available. P. David is the course director of the Holy Listening course, on the topic of Spiritual Accompaniment in the monastic tradition, which ran for the first time this July.

P. Willibrord's thesis gives a detailed study of the history of the question and some key questions that arise. His summary paper also gives some valuable indications about the content of a full treatment of spiritual accompaniment based on a scholarly study of the Rule.

Spiritual accompaniment is generally understood in an Ignatian perspective and based on the *Spiritual Exercises*. These were not aimed at the everyday life of faith, but meditations intended to reach decisions in a limited period of time (in principle, 30 days) about God's will for someone. They not only have a specific aim, but also a well defined content for a person's methodical meditation, while the discernment of spirits is the task of the person 'giving' rather than practitioner of the exercises. Ignatian accompaniment/direction in a more general sense has grown out of this.

Have we forgotten a genuine Benedictine tradition? Do we believe in the resources of our own tradition for understanding the process of accompaniment?

Whatever else might be said about the early history of this topic, the current predominance of the Ignatian tradition and the *Spiritual Exercises* owes much to the waxing of the Jesuit order (until 1773) even as, in the wake of the Reformation, the Benedictine order waned. Jesuits influenced the education received by monastic students, spiritual practices based on Ignatian methods were introduced (systematic meditation, examination of conscience, annual retreats). Jesuits were invited to lead the exercises in monasteries; they served as chaplains and spiritual directors.

Augustine Baker OSB (1575-1641) was a lone critical voice, not of meditation or the exercises as such, but of the way they easily became an obstacle to the mystical life that he protested was inherent in the teaching of the Rule.

In the Enlightenment and Josephinismus, monasticism adapted to the spirit of the times, and paid no attention to the practice of spiritual direction/accompaniment that is in the monastic tradition. Even in the renewal movement of the 19th century, Jesuit influences underlay the spiritual formation of novices (meditation, retreats). *Lectio divina* and monastic approach to meditative prayer were only rediscovered in the renewal of religious life in the later 20th century.

At the same time, the relationship of monastic and lay vocations have been differently conceived, both understood to be rooted in baptismal life. As a result we see a strong interest among lay people in the values of conventual monasticism and in the spirituality it supports. The forgotten tradition of Benedictine 'guidance and direction of souls' (the traditional expression) or of 'accompaniment' (more contemporary) not only needs to be recovered for people inside the monastery; it is actively being sought by people outside!

However, this change in terminology highlights an additional point, that a proper understanding of this work needs to take into account a fundamental shift from an older model of spiritual direction to that of accompaniment. This is due to the development of psychotherapy, with its client-centred methodology of appreciative

listening, acceptance and empathy. It aims to be non-directive, person-centred, dialogical. The method has been taken up strongly by practitioners of 'Ignatian spirituality'. The Rule itself captures the ambivalence of the relationships involved, both the more directive aspects as well as those of accompaniment.

The questions that arise are: does the change in terminology betray a change in what is going on? Questions arise for the way the Exercises are used, but in understanding the Benedictine tradition, does the Rule not actually envisage direction rather than accompaniment, be it catechetical, moral, ascetic or theological understanding? How does a Benedictine understanding of the way to God affect the contemporary secular trends in spiritual accompaniment? And to what extent can the practices of monastic discipline within a community be extended to the work of guidance of lay people outside a community?

To begin an answer to these questions the handout presents an overview of the relevant material to be found in the Rule.

P. David rather more pragmatically tries to present the thinking that lies behind the Holy Listening programme. It is intended to open up Benedictine spirituality for lay-people, Catholic and non-Catholic, including people who may be on the edges of Christian life. Nor is it intended specifically for Benedictines acting as guides; it is a response to people working in accompaniment who recognise the appeal that Benedictine spirituality has for many people in the world today.

In trying to develop a specifically Benedictine approach to spiritual accompaniment, the Holy Listening programme makes some heavy commitments in terms of monastic theology, which I will try to explain. They will also put in a particular perspective the way in which the work of accompaniment inside a monastic community might be understood.

(1) Unsurprisingly it puts an emphasis on *lectio divina*, as the monastic practice where the human being is in contact with the word of God, a heart to heart dialogue. It works on the hypothesis that the monastic institution, the school of the Lord's service, is designed to promote listening to, speaking with and living by the Word of God in all the ways in which God addresses us. We are used to the idea that monastic community is brought together by the Word; but what are the actual implications of this? How can human relationships within a monastery thrive because of the Word of God? What can monks and nuns do to find themselves and each other growing together in communion in Christ by their contact with the Word of God, and empowered by the Spirit to share in the Church's mission in the world?

(2) *Lectio divina* (in the strict sense) has usually been a private monastic practice, indeed one that can become rather one of thoughtful and affective study than of the discernment of spirits and earnest prayer to know God's will. But if the Word is about promoting communion and mission, it makes sense to find ways of sharing at a personal level the experience of how Jesus is addressing himself to me in his Word. Holy Listening is a three-way relationship where the individual and the guide try together to listen to the Word of God, and how it is addressed to the client, so as to help the individual open their heart more fully to Jesus Christ and in discerning the spirits, help him or her to respond more fully to the Spirit that Jesus is offering that person.

(3) In terms of problematic of direction or accompaniment, this method of Holy Listening understands the work of spiritual accompaniment to take place in, both in the 'fathering' of the life of the Spirit - and in the fraternal sharing of Jesus' presence

through that gift. The monastic virtue of 'obedience' responds to both experiences of Christ, as father and brother (not to forget the stranger). But the fathering is to make a fellowship of brethren. So a spiritual guide needs to play the first role for the sake of the second; and this is done by the master's putting himself at the service of the one who is already seen and regarded as a brother. Spiritual paternity is a diaconal (and kenotic) ministry. It is about playing John the Baptist, pointing to Jesus Christ.

(4) If monastic community (with its institutional structures) is there to promote friendship in Christ, this cannot be done institutionally. Friendship is about human relationships, and if it is friendship in Christ and not just a human thing, we need to find ways together of putting into words the way we are related in Jesus in our faith, hope and love. But friendship is not closed in on itself; the gift of Pentecost is evangelical. So spiritual accompaniment has a vocational orientation, accompanying a person to find ways of sharing the life of Christ with others.

This model has implications for a contemporary monastic theology and practice. To that extent it will be controversial. But it tries to think through a traditional cenobitic monastic theology in the terms of the spirituality of communion and of the call to evangelisation that are current in Church teaching on religious life as such. In the English Benedictine Congregation, we tried to explore the ideas in a booklet *To Prefer Nothing to Christ* published in 2015.