

JOS MOONS SJ

With a Foreword by Paul Nicholson SJ

The Art of Spiritual Direction



A GUIDE TO IGNATIAN PRACTICE

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FOREWORD

It was Ignatius of Loyola himself who compared the methods of prayer and reflection that he was describing in his most famous writing, the *Spiritual Exercises*, to physical exercises: ‘taking a walk, travelling on foot, and running’. One consequence of this is that the exercises need to be put into practice, not just outlined and analysed, if they are to have any effect. There is an exercise bike that stands in the corner of a room in the house where I live. It has unfortunately done little to promote the health of our Jesuit community, since no one has got onto it in the three years since it was given to us!

The Art of Spiritual Direction, the new book by Dutch Jesuit Dr Jos Moons SJ, clearly recognises this need to put theory into practice. It is true that it is rooted in a thorough study of the *Spiritual Exercises*, and the Ignatian tradition of spiritual direction that flows from them. But his desire in writing is less to analyse this tradition more deeply, and more to show how it can best be used in helping others to develop their relationship with God, and so come to know more clearly how God is calling them in the circumstances of their own lives.

Jos Moons speaks of two intended audiences for his book. First, it is offered to aspiring spiritual directors, offering them tools to use in their service of others through the process of spiritual accompaniment. Much of what is written here draws on training courses that he has offered in recent years. But it will also have value for those who have more experience in this field, sharing experiences of direction for them to compare with their own, and perhaps in that way putting words on approaches that they may have carried out in the past without too much reflection.

A particular feature of the book is its use of ‘verbatims’, transcribed conversations distilled from the author’s experience in directing others and leading workshops. These are themselves an excellent teaching tool, inviting the reader to pause and ask ‘What would I have said in response to that remark?’, or ‘Where do I think that this conversation is going?’. Experienced directors will develop their own style and approach. The point is not necessarily to parrot what the director in any particular verbatim would say, but to understand why they reacted in the way that

they did, and thereby notice more clearly their own habitual patterns of response.

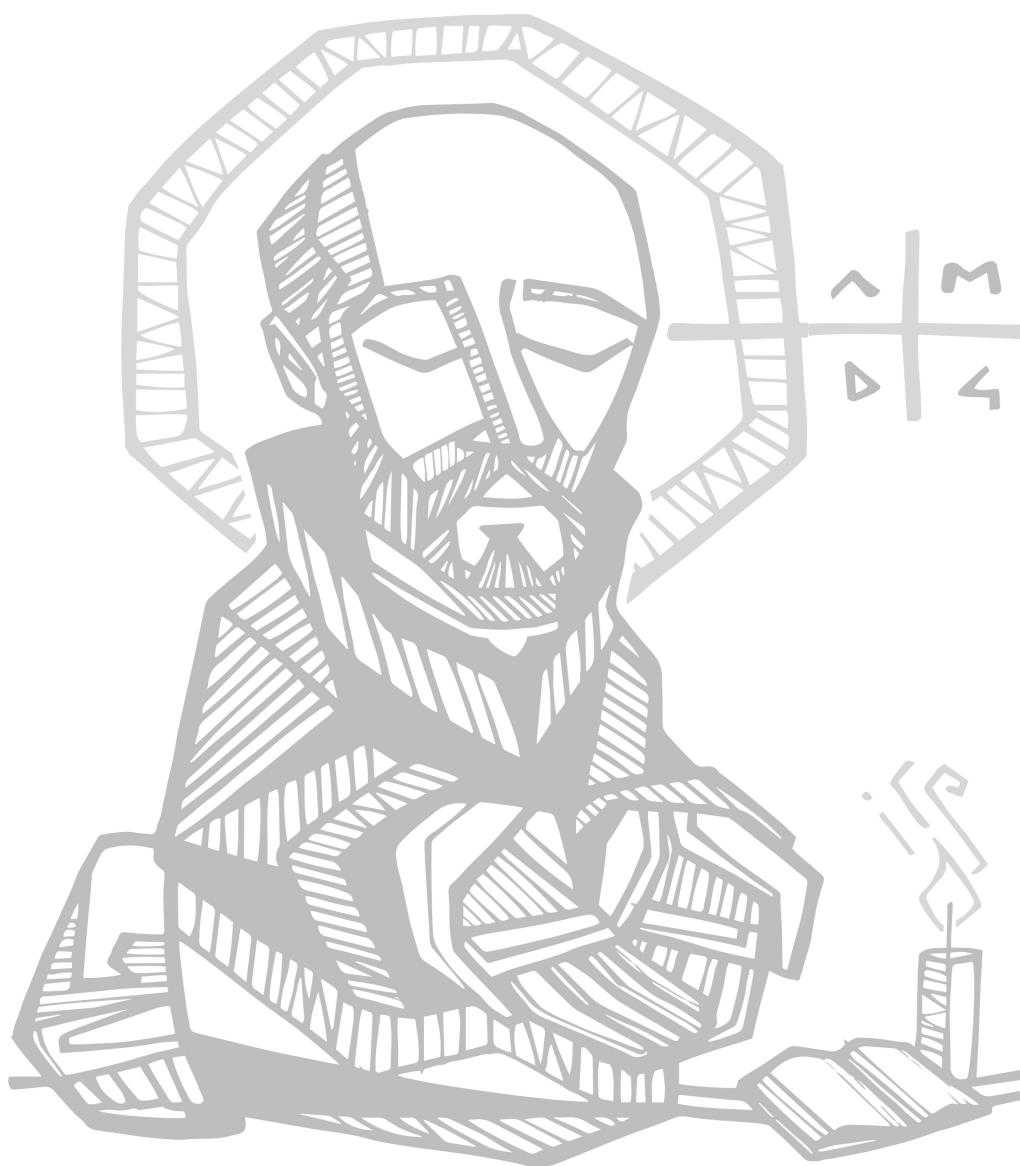
The work ends with a chapter on the accompaniment of vocational discernment. While it is important to be able to recognise the voice of God in life's everyday decisions, it is even more so in trying to choose which of many possible paths a whole life should follow. Here above all is where someone more ready to listen, and encourage the exploration of various possibilities without giving advice that shuts down options prematurely, is most needed. Ignatius was clear that ultimately it was God, not a spiritual director, who should point out to a person the path that they should follow. Jos Moons' work shows how that aspiration can be made a reality.

Readers may well be reminded of the ways in which Pope Francis has chosen to carry out his ministry since he was elected pope. His constant aim has been to help the Church and its members to become more discerning, to be able to listen to what the Spirit of God is saying in the midst of the clamour of other voices that surround us. Discernment is indeed an art, rather than an exact science. But, as with all arts, it can be improved by practice and by the guidance of other more experienced practitioners.

This book, then, is particularly timely, as the Church moves from government relying heavily on hierarchical authority to an outlook that draws more fully on the insights and opinions of all its members. If this process is to work well, those members must become skilled at reading 'the signs of the times' more accurately, attempting to recognise and put aside their own prejudices and knee-jerk reactions. A trained listener can be of immense help in enabling others to learn and practise this art of discernment, and what is written here can surely aid in the formation of such listeners. Whether as a resource for training courses, or a guide for those who find themselves called upon to accompany others, *The Art of Spiritual Direction* is to be warmly recommended.

Paul Nicholson SJ

Fr Paul Nicholson SJ, a British Jesuit, has served as director of Loyola Hall Spirituality Centre on Merseyside, and as novice-master of the North-West Europe Jesuit novitiate. He is currently Socius (i.e. assistant) to the provincial of the Jesuits in Britain, and is editor of 'The Way'.



INTRODUCTION



This is a book about how to give spiritual direction. While several books on this topic have been published over the last twenty years or so, none of them focuses on concrete, clear and practical tools. It is this lacuna that I seek to fill with this book. You could even think of it as a manual.

Beginners in the art of spiritual accompaniment, whether ministers, priests or lay people, will learn in these pages a few ‘tricks of the trade’ that will help them to make this art their own. If you are a spiritual director with some experience, this book can provide vocabulary for your unconscious or unreflective practice; from now on you will knowingly and purposefully use certain tools while avoiding others. Additionally, the theoretical considerations in the book provide a theological and spiritual foundation for your acquired skills. Established spiritual directors may find it refreshing to hear familiar things explained by someone else.

The goal of this book is to help address a paradoxical need in the Church. On the one hand, spirituality is of the highest importance. The great twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner noted that the Christian of the future – whether Anglican, Calvinist, Catholic, Evangelical, Lutheran or Pentecostal – will only exist if he or she is a mystic. Rahner described what the faith of the future would look

like and proposed that the most essential aspect would be a personal experience of God: ‘The Christian of tomorrow will be a mystic’.¹ It is, indeed, precisely this experience that spiritual direction thematises, with the aim of quickening, deepening, and purifying it.

On the other hand, churches are in desperate need of good spiritual directors. I once had a Dutch seminary rector ask me, ‘Where should I send my seminarians?’ After I moved to Belgium, a bishop once asked me: ‘To whom should I send young people who are searching for meaning? Or people who are discerning a vocation? Or those who are considering a career switch? Or those who cannot hear the voice of God?’

Furthermore, in a Roman Catholic context, this book is timely given the ecclesial culture that Pope Francis regularly promotes. This culture could be seen as not exclusively looking at the ‘letter’ of the law as expressed in the Catechism or in ecclesial rules, but as attempting to discern what is ‘good’ in a specific context and for concrete individuals. Spiritual direction is indispensable for this cultural shift.

The origin of this book lies in what I’ve learned as a Jesuit and from my experience as a Roman Catholic university chaplain and spiritual director in Amsterdam and Utrecht (The Netherlands) and Leuven (Belgium). In everything I have written here, I had in mind particular articles, spiritual directors, or courses. I recalled fragments of conversations and again was able to see particular names and faces. Missteps came to mind, as well as deep conversations that went very well. My specific background unavoidably shapes the style, examples, and ethos of this book, yet I hope that the book may be of service in other contexts than my Roman Catholic and Jesuit context. Here I think especially of our esteemed sisters and brothers from other Christian Churches.

¹ Here is Rahner’s quote in context: ‘The Christian of tomorrow will be a “mystic”, one who has experienced something, or he or she will cease to be a Christian at all. For future Christian living will no longer be sustained and helped by the anonymous, manifest, and public convictions and religious customs of all, and that precede personal experience and decision. That means that the usual religious education as practiced hitherto can only provide a very secondary kind of preparation for the institutional elements in religion’. See ‘Christian Living Today and Formerly’, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 7 (London: DLT), pp. 3–24, on p. 15. This is a substantially adapted translation on the basis of the original German, ‘Frömmigkeit früher und heute’ (1966).

The book is assembled in the following manner. The opening chapters explain the foundation and mainly contain theoretical considerations. In the first chapter, I discuss a few other books written about spiritual direction and explain why I've chosen the format of a hands-on practical guide. The second chapter is devoted to offering some explanation of the framework out of which I work, namely, Ignatian spirituality. From the third chapter onwards, this book follows the format of 'a guide to Ignatian practice'. Each of these chapters introduces a particular tool, with ample illustrations of how one could concretely apply it in real spiritual accompaniment. I conclude by discussing a special case, namely, the direction of those discerning a vocation. After the conclusion follows a word of gratitude, for what does anyone have that he has not received from others?

Finally, spiritual accompaniment is not reserved for men. To designate spiritual directors and directees in this book, therefore, I will alternate between 'he' or 'his' and 'she' or 'her' and, less frequently, 'he or she'.

3: FIRST TOOL

TAKING IT EASY



The first tool for spiritual direction that I would like to present is to take it easy.⁴⁸ The intimate work of the soul takes time; it requires some warming up. Anyone who tries to get down to business too quickly will shoot himself in the foot. The spiritual director should bear this in mind and should try to take it easy.

Imagine the following situation. Mark, forty years of age, e-mailed to ask for a talk with Hanna, his spiritual director. He explained that he wanted to talk about prayer. He felt a desire for prayer, but every time he tried to pray, it did not work. He didn't know what to do, and silence was difficult. Mark and Hanna made an appointment. However, when they meet, Mark starts to talk about all kinds of other things instead of addressing his difficulties with prayer and silence. He chats about his children and how they get good grades at school. He is so grateful for that. Work is another topic: he loves the projects he is involved in, although he is somewhat disappointed in his colleagues. Hanna decides to let it go for a while. Gently ‘humming’ – *hmm, yes, hmm* – she goes with the flow of Mark’s story. Yet after fifteen minutes she kindly intervenes: ‘Mark, so far, we’ve talked about your children, about their school, about your work, and about some other things ...’. Before she is able to complete her sentence, Mark says, ‘Yes, that’s right, I wanted to talk about prayer’.

⁴⁸ I skip a few practical matters, such as: where do you receive the directee, how often do you meet, what about remuneration, the issue of confidentiality, etc. These are important matters, yet this book focuses ‘only’ on tools.

This case illustrates that the directee often needs to ‘warm up’. Spiritual accompaniment involves a change of gears. We move from daily humdrum and business, where we stay at the surface level, toward the soul and its delicate intimacy. That move takes time. It’s better not to rush it. The spiritual companion shouldn’t hastily bring an end to the chatter and get down to business. With subjects as private as spiritual life, the soul, faith, and God, a person needs to take their time. Small talk is a time of preparation to hear each other’s voice, see each other’s face and eyes, get used to the space and become comfortable. Thus, small talk prepares for a second, more substantive phase of the conversation. By the way, the directee may not be the only one who needs this, because the director also needs to acclimatise.

In this chapter I would like to elaborate this tool of taking it easy. Firstly, I will focus on how it works concretely. How do you take it easy? Then I will discuss how you make the transition to the subject matter. How do you actually get started with the spiritual direction itself? After that I introduce another case to illustrate that in all of this God, without being explicitly mentioned, most certainly has a place. Finally, I broaden the theme by briefly discussing the importance of maintaining a kind of relaxation during the whole conversation, not just at the start.

Small Talk

The first tool basically boils down to friendly small talk. With students you can talk about their lectures and exams. If someone has just moved houses you ask about the move, and if someone has just changed jobs you talk about the new job. With monks you talk about their life in the monastery (about the vegetable garden or the renovation, and whether it is busy with guests), with young mothers and fathers about their children and how it is to be a parent. When it rains you ask if it was very wet on the way here, when the sun shines you say something about the nice weather, and at Easter time you may start with that. You don’t have an agenda except for warming up.

Sometimes you don’t have to take the initiative for small talk, as the directee gets the chitchat going. Other people might be a bit

uncomfortable at the start of their session of spiritual accompaniment. That's when you need to step in with some small talk that prepares the ground for a deeper conversation later on. It is best to put on an imperturbable smile, at least in a figurative sense, and resolve not to be discouraged by the other person's tangible discomfort. Your resolved warmth and friendliness can help the other person thaw out.

As a side note, when I receive spiritual accompaniment myself, I still like it when we start with small talk. The spiritual world is not new to me, I am not afraid of self-reflection and introspection, nor do I feel uncomfortable with my spiritual companion. It's just nice to be able to land before we start.

Plunging into the Depths

There comes a moment that you should make the transition from small talk to spiritual direction proper. After some warming up, it is time for the plunge. If that transition does not come about by itself, it's the director's job to take the initiative.

Take that initiative only after giving space and time for the growing familiarity of small talk and do it as gently as possible. The lighter you steer to the depth, the better. The phrase 'so far we've talked about ...' from Mark's case is a very light intervention. Doing no more than summarising, Hanna suggested that she was rounding off one part of the conversation and gave the hint at the possibility of changing the topic. In the case of Mark, it turned out to be sufficient. Mark understood the hint before Hanna finished her sentence and immediately turned the conversation to the topic of prayer. That's instructive: during small talk the directee rarely forgets what he has really come for.

Sometimes you need to insist somewhat and to be more forceful in steering to the depths. It's best to do that as calmly and tenderly as possible. Imagine that Mark was resistant to getting started with the actual spiritual direction. In that case, you could have used the information that was at your disposal. You knew the reason for the conversation, so you could have said, for example, 'I believe you said that another thing that's going on for you is related to prayer'. Probably, that would be

enough. You specify clearly yet humbly what Mark himself had stated. It is rare that you need to do more. Something like ‘What are you here for?’ risks sounding cold and coercive and thereby ineffective. People don’t lower their guard on command.

God in Everyday Experience

Maybe you are thinking, ‘This is a waste of my time! Why should I take it easy?’ After all, the director and the directee both know why they’re meeting. Why not get down to business and simply start? In my experience, this period of warming up is in no way a waste of time. Small talk is more than a useless prelude. Just as the prelude contains a rehearsal of all the important musical themes that follow, so does the time of warming up. Small talk matters. In fact, upon closer consideration, it is already about God.

Take the loving, patient attitude of the spiritual director. That attitude speaks volumes, even without naming God. Perhaps you have heard the saying attributed to Francis of Assisi, ‘Preach the Gospel at all times; when necessary, use words’? That is what you are doing here. God is part of ordinary small talk, present in the space that you offer and in the patience you radiate.

Moreover, what is discussed during small talk can point out what is going on in the soul; thereby it may lead to God. In that way too, ordinary chitchat may have to do with God.

Imagine Esther, a mother of three small children and the head of personnel in a regional hospital. She meets up with Renata, a lay pastoral worker and an experienced spiritual director. When they sit together, Esther passionately relates all of her recent ventures: the renovation of the barn that was overseen by her husband, the changes at her workplace, the fact that her second child has already started going to school. She is delighted that her family has such a good time on the weekends: she usually bakes a cake with the children, he makes coffee, then they all work together in the garden, and so on. In previous conversations, prayer had been an important theme. Renata therefore wonders if she should ask how prayer is going now, but she decides not to intervene too

quickly and wait and see for a while. Is Esther telling all this by way of an introduction or is there more to it? Is she – and is Renata – perhaps on spiritual ground already? As Renata is not sure, she takes it easy for a moment. The dialogue then develops as follows:

R: So many things happening, Esther! (*with a smile*) You're busy!

E: Yeah, indeed. I feel a lot of energy. At the end of the day I am tired, so I go to bed on time; the next day I get up refreshed. (*quiet for a moment*) I am so ... well, I guess, so happy to have so much energy.

R: You have a lot of energy and you are happy with that.

E: Yes. In fact, if I can be honest with you, I consider it a special grace. I feel strong, I can do a lot: my work, taking care of the children, everything.

R: Yes, I'm impressed that you do so much! And you said (*pauses for a moment*) that you consider it a grace?

E: Um, yeah. (*quiet for a moment*) I mean I see it as a gift. I strongly feel that I don't just do it myself. I'm given strength; I receive it.

This short conversation illustrates how a seemingly ordinary story may turn out to be more than that. Esther's active and energetic life appears to have an unexpected depth. She feels that her energy is a gift. Small talk is not really small after all. It can be very spiritual.

Taking It Easy with God

So far I've explained that it's good to take it easy and to be patient in your search for depth. Now I want to add that this also applies to God. With God too you should take it easy, as you should do with other explicitly faith-related themes. It is better not to speed ahead and introduce the subject of God or prayer, faith and grace. These are intimate matters, and they need some warming up to. The risk that these subjects will

be forgotten is minimal. After all, this is not a chance meeting; the directee came to you or spoke to you as a spiritual director. It is almost self-evident that you will eventually talk about God. The cases above of Mark and Hanna and Esther and Renata show that you don't have to worry about 'forcing' a spiritual conversation to be about God.

In addition, by taking your time, you increase the chance that you will talk about God *better*. The next few sentences from Esther and Renata's conversation demonstrate how that works.

E: Um, yeah. (*quiet for a moment*) I mean I see it as a gift. I strongly feel that I don't just do it myself. I'm given strength; I receive it.

R: You receive it. (*pauses*) What kind of experience is that 'receiving' you just spoke of?

E: What a beautiful question! It's a bit like a friend coming by unexpectedly, and then we have coffee and cake in the garden, and everything is well.

R: So you're unexpectedly catching up, in the garden, and then things are well.

E: Yes, that's how it is.

R: And when things are well, what happens? What do you feel?

E: It's very still and very overwhelming at the same time. This unexpected encounter was really nice. It brought some sort of a calm peace. Yet it was overwhelming too, because in all its simplicity it was so rich. It's like finding flowers everywhere: in the kitchen, in the living room, at work, in the bedroom, on the stairs. Almost too good to be true.

R: So when you say that your energy is a gift, a grace, that it's like someone who comes to visit, and things are well.

E: Yes, after such a meeting I feel very energetic again, very rich. (*smiles*) Then I can take on the world again!

R: (*with a smile*) And from what I'm hearing, that's exactly

what you do, take on the world! (*pauses*) Does God have something to do with that energy, with that experience?

E: Well, I think so. But I'm not totally sure. It's not as if I see a Jesus-figure in a white robe, speaking to me.

R: So there's no Jesus-figure?

E: No.

R: And no God either, really?

E: Well, maybe God. I feel that the energy I receive is caring and loving. I can do a lot of good with it. I think I see something of God in that.

This part of Esther and Renata's conversation demonstrates how the topic of God may come up almost by itself. Esther's spiritual director took it easy and waited until she felt that the time had come to see if she was right in suspecting that there was a deeper layer. Words like 'grace' and 'gift' suggested that Esther was saying much more than simply relating her day-to-day activities. This example shows the spiritual gains that may come with taking it easy. In this conversation, who God is and how he interacts with us are determined by what is happening in Esther's life and soul. God reveals himself to Esther through a very personal experience of grace, energy and love instead of through (preconceived) ideas taken from Scripture or theology. God is revealed here-and-now, not so much as a white-robed figure, but rather as a caring and loving presence.

In stronger terms, that means that if you bring up the topic of God too quickly, the conversation risks being too little about God. If the directee were to talk about God in an early stage of the conversation, she will quite probably say something perfunctory on the basis of common faith-convictions rather than personal faith-experiences. In other words, if you rush ahead with the subject of God, you may make it more difficult for God to reveal his face here and now. If you wait and first talk about experience before you address the topic of God, he reveals himself in his actual relationship with the directee.

Relaxation

Until now I have talked about taking it easy, warming up, patience, and not speeding into the topic of God. Another useful word is relaxation. Instead of getting down to business quickly, the spiritual companion should be relaxed. That is not just something for the early stages of the conversation but should be a feature of the whole session. For example, after something vulnerable has been said, a smile, a small joke or an anecdote can provide some breathing space or break the suspension. The dialogue between Esther and Renata gives some examples of this kind of relaxation. For example, Renata reacted with a smile to Esther saying she could take on the world. In this way she created a simple, short *intermezzo* before picking up the thread by asking if God had something to do with that. Small jokes can also be part of relaxation. You have to find your own way and to see what suits yourself, the directee and the situation. Obviously, delicacy is of the utmost importance. If you add a light touch to the conversation, it has to be right: laughing *at* somebody is out of the question, as is laughing away something serious.

Finally, it is important to say that you sometimes have to practice patience and relaxation for a longer period of time. Some people need a few conversations to warm up, to trust you, or to get in touch with themselves. In those cases, your motto should be *calm down and stay relaxed*, without getting frustrated or doubting yourself. Do not be afraid that God is not working in the life and soul of the other. Do not be afraid that God will not come up in the discussion. The greater your patience and relaxation, the greater the chance that you will witness the reality of God's presence in the directee's experiences.