

CHAPTER 4

Fostering the Contemplative Attitude

WHAT DOES A SPIRITUAL director do?

Everyone who engages in spiritual direction will answer this question differently. The way we list and formulate the tasks of the director will depend on the way we envision the needs of the spiritual life and the estimate we make of our own capabilities. In any carefully drawn list some place will be given to (1) empathetic listening, (2) paying attention, (3) affirming, (4) assisting in clarification, (4) raising questions when the directee wants them, and (5) helping the directee to recognize the affective attitudes that influence his or her attitude to God. All of these activities—and others—are indispensable to the work of direction. We could get lost in the list. More important, we could become so concerned with performing all these tasks well that we might lose sight of the reason people come for direction. Faced with this possibility one may have to ask oneself: What are the most fundamental tasks of the director?

Let us propose that there are two, and that they issue from this insight: the contemplative core of prayer and of all Christian life is conscious relationship with God. The tasks are: First, helping directees pay attention to our self-revealing God; second, helping directees recognize their reactions and decide on their responses to this God.

We will discuss these tasks separately. This separation is not intended to indicate that in practice they occur separately, and that the first must be completed before the second is begun. Often God reveals and the person reacts and responds almost simultaneously, and the director frequently, even usually, will perform both tasks in the same conversation. However, for the sake of clarity and some thoroughness in approaching both tasks, we will discuss them separately.

Relationships develop only when the persons involved pay attention to one another. We make an assumption based on Christian tradition that God is taking part in the relationship, is paying attention to the directee, is looking at and listening to him or her. The directee, however, if the relationship is to develop, must also pay attention to God. This is not a complex matter, but it is not necessarily easy either. There is, first of all, the difficulty we human beings have in paying attention to anyone else. Then there is the difficulty of paying attention to the invisible, mysterious, and all-powerful God.

The people who come for spiritual direction are usually not neophytes in faith or in prayer. They have been believers and praying people for some time, but now they are looking for something more. Often, however, the prayer to which they have been accustomed is not contemplative. Prayer, for many, has meant the use of set prayers like the "Lord's Prayer," the Book of Common Prayer, the psalms, the Rosary, petitionary prayer, meditation from a book of meditations, or the pondering of problems or questions. Many people have, however, been surprised by God through these prac-

tices. One seventy-five-year-old woman said that sometimes she "goes deep" while saying her set prayers and then she knows she is really talking to God and God is listening. The depth of the kind of prayer people are accustomed to should not, therefore, be underestimated. But it is not usually contemplative and is not as conducive to a conscious growth in relationship as is contemplation. Contemplation of its nature gives more room for God to take on a personal reality.

What is contemplation? We are not here using the word in its mystical meaning. We are using it in a sense that is closer to the meaning Ignatius of Loyola gave it when he proposed (in his *Spiritual Exercises*) that people look at Jesus as he appears in gospel events and let themselves become absorbed in what he is like, what he cares about, and what he is doing. Contemplation in this sense begins when people stop being totally preoccupied with their own concerns and let another person, event, or object take their attention. When it is a person who is being contemplated, they let that person, with his or her personality, concerns, and activity, take their attention. They let themselves be absorbed, for a moment at least, and at some level, in the other person. Contemplative prayer, as we use the term here, means paying attention to and becoming at least slightly absorbed in the person of Jesus, in God, or in biblical persons or outstanding Christians. A contemplative attitude can develop from such prayer and, if it does, it allows one to find some ease and spontaneity in paying attention to God as revealed in Scripture, creation, one's own life, and the life of the world, rather than seeing God simply as a background figure for one's own concerns.

There are two difficulties, however, that must be overcome if we are to have some facility in this kind of contemplation. The first is caused by the prior categories that often make it next to impossible to see and hear any "other" in his or her or its own right. We do not see the individual because we have already relegated what we see to a class: "another eucalyptus tree," "another sunset," "a

German." The second has to do with our tendency to look inward rather than outward, to be absorbed in our own concerns rather than in another person's. We have notions of prayer that preclude or attenuate looking and listening. We think of prayer as looking inward. When we hear the words "Let us pray," we automatically bow our heads and close our eyes. Often, too, prayer is seen basically as petition, as thinking something through, or as getting insights. And all these activities, while good in themselves, tend to preclude looking and listening. Spiritual directors must often work patiently and creatively if directees are to experience contemplation and see themselves as contemplative people.

If you have ever been so absorbed in watching a game, reading a book, or listening to music that you have been surprised at how much time has passed, by how cold or hot you are, by the anger of a friend who has been asking a question for a few minutes, then you know the power of paying attention to something, and you have a personal example of the contemplative attitude we are discussing here. Parents have been so concerned about their children in fires and accidents that they become aware of their own injuries only after the emergency has ended. Soldiers in battle have become aware of wounds only after the fighting has stopped.

Thus, one effect of paying attention to something outside ourselves is that it can make us forget ourselves and our surroundings. Contemplation leads to, or rather is an experience of, transcendence—that is, of forgetfulness of self and of everyone and everything else except the contemplated object.

Conversely, self-absorption makes the contemplation of anything or anyone else very difficult, if not impossible. Thus, a starving man will not enjoy a sunset. A student preparing in great anxiety for an examination may not notice a conversation taking place beside him.

Spiritual directors sometimes have to work long and patiently with people to help them reach the point of being able to forget themselves. Self-absorption can even mask itself unconsciously as virtue.

For instance, a man who concentrates on his failings and sins may be considered and consider himself an honest, self-knowledgeable man; yet he may never change his behavior. When he reads Scripture, he hears the words of condemnation and applies them to himself; but he never hears the words of forgiveness and freedom and never sees the look of love that God casts on the sinner. It becomes apparent that "humility" and "self-knowledge" are in his case synonyms for self-absorption.

The spiritual director will have to help such a person to forget himself and his problems and to look at God. The help may begin with assistance in looking at and listening to something other than himself—music, natural beauty, art, architecture, or anything else that will absorb him. Self-absorption is a concentration on weakness. The effort to help a person to look beyond herself is part of the appeal to strength that is the task of the spiritual director.¹

Another aspect of contemplation deserves our attention. The reactions of absorption, joy, pain, sympathy, love, and gratitude that are associated with contemplation are not willed. They are elicited from us by what we see, hear, and comprehend. Although conditioned by our past experiences, they are basically spontaneous responses to people and things outside ourselves. Here we have an important element to consider in spiritual direction. The clearest example, perhaps, is the reaction of love when one looks at the beloved. It seems to be a gift, something that arises because of the other, not because of any decision of one's own to love or to fall in love. Directors help people to realize that they can look at and try to pay attention to what God has done, is doing, has said, is saying, but that they cannot will their reactions. At most, they can hope that they will react in a certain way. But if a woman, for example, does not react as she had hoped—if instead of joy she feels anger at the words "O Lord, you have searched me and known me"²—she has nonetheless reacted, and she can choose to express her reaction to her God. She can choose, too, to ask God to help her with her anger.

The person contemplating can have no control over the other. We cannot force a sunset to be brilliant. All we can do is to hope and to look. Contemplation leads to an attitude of reverence and wonder before the other. If the other is a person, then all we can do is ask him or her to reveal themselves and wait for that to happen. This insight is the reason for the prayer for what one desires that Ignatius of Loyola puts at the beginning of each of the exercises of the *Spiritual Exercises*. At one point retreatants are asked to pray that God will reveal their sinfulness to them so that they may have shame and confusion. At another point they pray that Jesus make himself known so that they may love him and follow him.³

Here the relationship between contemplation and transcendence appears even more clearly. When we are dealing with another person, we are not in the same position as when we are dealing with an object. Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince on his asteroid needs to move his chair only a bit in order to see another sunset, but he is powerless to see the reality and uniqueness of his flower until she chooses to reveal herself to him.⁴

Spiritual directors encourage their directees to ask for what they want from God. In the beginning their desires may be very broad: to experience God's presence, to know God better, for instance. Such requests should reflect their real desires, and part of the work of spiritual directors is to help directees to clarify and say what they really want. The directees, at the beginning of a period of contemplation, first ask for what they want, and then look at or listen to whatever happens in the contemplation. In other words, they place themselves in relationship with the Other by asking that the Other reveal self and then pay attention to the One being revealed.

To pray for God's self-revelation opens us to the mystery of the Other. Such openness runs counter to much of our usual personal activity. We try to control our perceptions; we are threatened by newness and strangeness. As a result, we often see only what we want to see or what our perceptual and cognitive structures let us

see. To try to contemplate means to try to let the other be himself or herself or itself, to try to be open to surprise and newness, to try to let one's responses be elicited by the reality of the other. So, when we contemplate God, we ask God to become real to us and thus overcome our projections, and to be real ourselves before God.

The actual experience of transcendence falls somewhere between total self-absorption and total absorption in the other. In any human experience there is bound to be a mixture of both self-consciousness and awareness of the outside world. Spiritual directors can help directees to realize that the contemplation of God is no different from the contemplation of any other person in this regard; one can be in the intimate presence of a very dear friend and still be aware of the ache in one's feet, of wondering whether one put out the lights in the car, of the work still to be done for class tomorrow. "Distractions," in other words, occur even in the most intimate relationships and should be expected in prayer, too.

Finally, in an intimate conversation, reflection on what is happening or on how well one is contemplating (especially with the idea of writing about it in one's journal or using it as an example for a chapter like this) is an instance of self-absorption and can disturb the communication. Spiritual directors can help people avoid this disturbance by suggesting that they do their reflection after the period of prayer is over.

IN THE BEGINNING PHASES of spiritual direction, directors usually have to help people to contemplate God. What kind of help do directees need? They usually find that intensity and effort in looking at or listening to God are not very helpful; these usually end in self-absorption. They would benefit more from spending time at first in some activity they enjoy that has a contemplative aspect to it. This might be anything from bird-watching to admiring the architecture of a city, from listening to the surf to listening to Bach—any

receptive experience that helps them forget themselves and become absorbed in something else. They might consider this experience one that they share with God in much the same way that they might want to share it with a close friend. We also suggest that people ask God to be with them during this time. Then they look at or listen to what it is they enjoy. After each period of doing this we ask them to reflect on the experience: What happened? What did they experience? Did they notice anything that might suggest God's interest in what they were doing?

It is surprising to observe what happens when people begin to do something like this. At first they may object that such nonreligious activity cannot be prayer. Moreover, since prayer for them has often meant brooding, insights, and resolutions, they often need time and patience to become accustomed to this new way of prayer and to find out that spiritual directors really mean what they say when they advise such activity. Then, however, they begin to find such prayer times enjoyable and relaxing. They find themselves surprised by feelings of joy and gratitude and a sense that Someone is present who loves and cares for them. They often find that they can admit things to themselves that they were always afraid or ashamed to look at, and they begin to feel freed, healed.

These reflections bring us to the question: Are there any privileged places or privileged events to which we can go to put ourselves more explicitly in God's way? The traditional answer has been that there are, and that they include the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, Church teaching, the Scriptures, and the other works of God, especially nature. Nature and the Scriptures are the privileged places most often recommended by spiritual directors and so deserve particular attention.

Traditionally people have found peace and refreshment in the beauty of nature. The fact that most retreat houses, houses of prayer, and monasteries have been located in or near scenes of natural beauty testifies to the common belief that we find God more easily in such

locales than we do in urban environments.⁵ The Judeo-Christian tradition, moreover, has persistently spoken of God as revealing self in created things. Without intending to say that the countryside and the seashore are the only places where God can be met (for God is present in the city, too, and there seem to be times when spectacular natural beauty is a distraction from prayer), spiritual directors often try to help people to meet and listen to God by encouraging them to look first at natural beauty.

When they try to help people to contemplate God in nature, directors should suggest that they look and listen and not give them ideas to ponder—ideas, for example, about continuing creation and the indwelling of the Spirit. Most of us have been accustomed by reading, by courses in Church teaching, and perhaps by philosophy and theology classes to the truth that God is in all things, but few of us have ever looked long enough at a flower to let God reveal self as the maker of that flower for me. Before I can see a tree as an embodiment of God's activity, I must first see it, touch it, and smell it as a tree. First of all, then, the director suggests that people look at and listen to what is around them.

The second suggestion for the contemplation of nature is that looking at natural beauty can in itself be a way of relating to God. Words are not necessary. Just as I relate to an artist by taking an interest in what she has made, by taking time to look at it or listen to it, so, too, I can relate to God by contemplating what God has made. Creators like to have people show interest in what they have done. They enjoy our interest still more if we like what we see and smile or sigh or express delight in their presence. Such responses are elicited by what we contemplate, not willed by us, and they are communications to the artist. When the artist is God, the communications are called prayers of praise. They do not have to be couched in "prayer language." Indeed the prayer is often made before a word is formed. When a person has begun to react to natural beauty, then the spiritual director might point out that these responses are similar

to the responses of the author of Psalm 104, responses that he expressed poetically. Not everyone is a poet, but almost everyone can be thrilled by a dazzling sunset or sunrise, or by the sun's light on fall leaves, and feel a deep sense of wonder.

People contemplating may not, however, be content with looking at the beauties of nature and admiring God's handiwork. They may also want God's self-revelation, want God to speak personally to them. They begin their period of contemplation by asking that God do this. Does God respond? How will they know? The question here is directly concerned with the ordinary ways in which God reveals, not with mystical experience—although such experience occurs more often than we sometimes realize.

A woman might be walking along a beach at night and see the moon touch with silver the crest of a wave. She delights in the sight and suddenly feels at peace and in the presence of Someone else who delights in such things. Unaccountably she may feel that she is still loved, even though she does drink or eat too much, get angry with her family too often, or has just lost a job, and she may feel free to face herself more honestly and with less self-pity. Or a young man might sense his insignificance under the stars, and yet feel that he is important in the whole scheme of things. Or a man quietly looking at a mountain peak wreathed in cloud might sense a call deep inside himself to change his way of life. In all these instances these people may be hearing or sensing the voice of our self-revealing God. When the experiences are keenly felt and exciting and challenging as well as comforting, God may have begun to take on a new reality for them.

We can look at the contemplation of Scripture in a similar way. Scripture is not God, but a privileged place to meet God. However, one must pay attention to Scripture in the same way that in the contemplation of nature one has to pay attention to trees or sunsets or mountains. One must have a contemplative attitude toward Scrip-

ture, let the Scriptures be themselves, listen to them, and ask that God reveal self while we are listening.

There is no reason why spiritual directors should have to argue about whether other religious texts might also be privileged places for meeting God. History and contemporary experience tell us that many other texts have been and are such privileged places. We are accepting as given, however, the fact that the Bible has primacy of place for Jews and Christians as the word of God.

It is good to listen to the Scriptures themselves, not our projections onto them. Spiritual directors and their directees, like everyone else, have been affected by modern scriptural scholarship. They may wonder how they can use Scripture in prayer, for we moderns have many questions about what Jesus actually said or did. If the search for the historical Jesus has been such a problem for modern biblical scholars, can we still use the gospels to come to know him?

The first point to be made is an obvious one: It is not finally helpful for prayer or Christian living to base it on a delusion. Hence, it is important to see the gospels for what they are. They are not biographies of Jesus, but four different expressions of the faith of the early Church and what it remembered in faith about Jesus. Each gospel has its own point of view, its own theological focus, its own life situation. Contemplation of Mark's gospel, for example, means taking that author's work on its own terms and trying to listen to his work as he meant it to be heard.

Second, it should be said that one need not be a Scripture scholar to use the gospels for prayer. God can still be self-revealing to a person who believes that angels did sing "Glory to God in the highest" at Bethlehem provided that the person is willing to let the living God be revealed. But the more one knows about a gospel, the better one can look at and listen to it and not to one's own cultural and personal projections onto it. Thus, Scripture study can be a help to contemplation. To be able to contemplate Mark's Jesus and

know that it is Mark's Jesus one is contemplating and not necessarily Jesus in all his historical reality is a help to one's perspective. For one thing, one will not then be dismayed by every new discovery of biblical scholarship. More important still, one is emphatically aware that the person one wants to meet is not the Jesus of the past, but the present living Lord whom we believe and experience in faith as continuous with Jesus of Nazareth.⁶

Now we are at the heart of the matter for spiritual direction. The purpose of contemplating the gospels is to come to know the living Lord Jesus. Once again the wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola as a director becomes apparent. Before every contemplation of events from the gospels, he has retreatants pray for what they desire: "an interior knowledge of our Lord, who has become human for me that I may love him more and follow him more closely."⁷ Then they listen to the gospel text and treat it for what it is: literature intended to inspire people's imaginations and enkindle their faith. But the desire is not to know the Scripture text better. Rather it is to know Jesus better.

Often in spiritual direction a conversation like the following will occur: (Mary is the directee, John the director.)

Mary: I was really struck by Jesus in the cleansing-of-the-temple scene.

John: How did he seem to you?

Mary: He seemed very angry.

John: Angry?

Mary: Yes, he seemed so thoroughly involved in what God deserved and in the contrast between that and what those people were actually doing.

John: He seemed very involved with it. That seemed important for you. Could you say more about it?

Mary: About the way it seemed to me?

John: Yes, about what he was like.

The director in this exchange is helping the directee to concentrate on what Jesus seemed like in the prayer. A number of his comments seem banal. Their purpose is to do no more than help the directee to keep looking at her own impression of Jesus. He does not try, at this point at least, to encourage the directee to look at implications of Jesus's action for her own life. He does not yet ask the directee how she felt about her impression of Jesus. He simply helps her to stay focused on Jesus and on what he is doing.

Often when directors have had this experience of helping the directee to focus on Jesus and what he is like, they find that the directee has seen more than she realizes and that Jesus's actions have a significance for her that she has not yet recognized. Let us continue with the exchange.

Mary: Well, he was angry, as I said. He was really involved with the merchants doing business in the temple.

John: Why don't you take a minute now and look back on the way that scene seemed to you? You seem to have been engaged by it.

Mary: (Pause.) He really felt a lot about God. He seemed to feel that God was being insulted and that bothered him.

John: It bothered him?

Mary: Got under his skin. You know, it really seemed to affect him the way an insult given to somebody in your family who is dear to you might affect you. (Pause.) That's what it seemed like.

John: And that seemed to be a moving thing for you?

Mary: It was. I've experienced things like that, harsh things, for example, said about people who meant a lot to me, so I could appreciate how he felt. It made me feel somehow more familiar with him.

John's willingness to help Mary to look at the impression she has received in her prayer has in this second part of the dialogue resulted in her expressing and apparently seeing more clearly something that seems important to her. If the director had not offered her an opportunity to continue looking, she would not have spoken of this development and perhaps would not have noticed it. As a result of noticing it, she has begun to speak spontaneously of her feeling reaction to Jesus. The contemplative dialogue with Jesus can now continue at this depth.

Experienced directors will recognize that helping people to look more persistently at God in prayer and to express what they have seen is not always as easy as it appears here. Directors will often feel that asking the question, "When you prayed, what was God like?" is a futile enterprise because the answer so often is "I don't know." Many people do not seem to think in those terms when they pray. Yet if the persons coming for direction want to be closer to God, it is important to help them keep looking at the way God seemed to them. We do not come closer to anyone by not knowing what the person is like. The fact seems to be that people who pray continue to pray because they do have the impression that God is attractive and inviting. It is, however, very difficult for them to express this. Is the effort worthwhile?

The way directors answer this question has a great deal of effect on the kind of direction they give. Persistent returning to looking at what Jesus is like when she prays can gradually develop Mary's ability to see her prayer as dialogic. Her perception of Jesus as he appears in the prayer will gradually become keener. As a result, she will react more frequently and more fully to him. The prayer thus comes to take on a life of its own.

It is not that questions like, "What does this mean for your life?" cannot be asked when we are talking about prayer. The issue is, rather, whether John will help Mary see what Jesus is like to her in the prayer before he begins to help her look at implications. In

other words, John tries to help her engage with the contemplative substance of her prayer and does not sacrifice that effort to attempts to get at meaning.

Some directors may feel that the people they direct cannot talk about experience, or that experience is not an important factor in their prayer. Perhaps they have not been persistent about pursuing the question, "What is God or Jesus like?" As a result, the people they talk with have not really looked at what God or Jesus is like for them. It may be that it is not a matter of their being led in another direction by God but a matter of the director not helping them recognize what can happen if they pay attention to God.

If directors do help directees to pay attention to God, they find that the simple act of looking at God in a scriptural event, or in some other event or situation, is in itself productive prayer. This contemplation produces, all by itself, sprouts of love, affection, and desire; and these in turn lead the person to look more closely at God. The looking more closely can gradually bring about a new trust in God or a deeper companionship. The search for meaning, while valid in itself, can in the context of contemplation be a distraction from this process. The person has to judge which of the two is more likely to result in the relationship he or she wants.

The experience of people who pray seems to show us that the contemplation we have described has led them to deeper choices that are more involved with the wellsprings of their lives than the choices they make outside the ambience of this kind of contemplation. This is another reason why "staying with the directee" can be one of the most valuable services the director renders. It is not a service that builds up the director's sense of self-importance, however. The director does nothing but act as the servant of the contemplation that takes place in a directee's prayer. And everything he or she does in this staying with the contemplation is aimed at focusing on the way the directee is seeing God and on avoiding letting either director or directee get distracted from it.