

MISSIONARIES IN ISOLATED PLACES

AND

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

by

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A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries.

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I INTRODUCTION

When I began this paper my first thought, when considering “missionaries in isolated places”, was geographical isolation, but as I began to delve deeper into my own experience, and the experiences of others, as a result of the responses to my initial questionnaire (Refer Appendix 3), I became aware of the many forms of isolation we can experience when on the mission, so my paper now embraces three forms of isolation:

1. **geographical isolation** –

- My husband and I were very isolated and met once a year at a conference where a bible teacher would minister to us¹

- There was no access to anyone nearby²

2. **an image of God**, when it is different from that of the host country to which one is missioned –

- The God I thought I knew and related with seemed to disappear and I needed what I called a third world God.³

- all of this because I was immersed in situations quite different from a God ‘who cared, one who loved, one who protected and one who saw to it that evil, oppression and violence did not dominate in the lives of the poor.’⁴

3. **language as an isolation barrier** –

for a number of years I was not able to express myself sufficiently in the host language to be able to share my journey⁵

¹ From participants responses to the questionnaire in Appendix 3

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

Though this paper will address the first type of isolation more fully, I feel that the other two forms play an important part and cannot be dismissed entirely.

II DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED WITH REGARD TO SITUATIONS OF ISOLATION AS MENTIONED ABOVE

Ideally, Spiritual Direction is seen as happening on a regular basis. However, there are many instances in the life of a missionary when this is not possible. Some have mentioned the possibility of having spiritual direction via email or telephone, but when you are in a situation where there is no telephone in the area or there is one for the whole village, this is not viable. I was also in an area where the postal service was non-existent so letter writing was not a possibility either

My Experience

Some years ago I was missioned high up in the Andes of Peru, with one other person who spoke English, that was the other member of my community. Though we did not know each other before, and therefore had no shared experiences, over a period of time we did share quite deeply with each other and became good friends, but we both felt the need to have ‘**an other**’ with whom we could share our inner journey. One day we decided to take some personal space. We packed a lunch and walked to the outskirts of the village to find a quiet place where each one could find her personal place to be alone with the Lord. On the way we passed the home of a woman from the parish who was sitting on the doorstep knitting. She asked us where we were going to which we replied: “to enjoy nature”. She pondered this for a moment then said: “I’ll come with you”. What could we say?

We spent the day together and returned refreshed, perhaps not in the way we had envisaged but nonetheless rested and renewed. As we approached the woman's house she told us that she had accompanied us because it was not safe for two young women to walk alone in the bush.

Reflecting on this later in prayer, I recognised the delicacy of the Lord, sending us a *guardian angel* to protect us as we sought to come closer to him. During my four years of isolation in the Andes I was surprised again and again at the innumerable ways the Lord looks out for and directs the soul that searches to do his will. As Saint John of the Cross says:

“...faith and love will lead you along a path unknown to you, to the place where God is hidden”⁶

BACKGROUND INFORMATION (see Appendix 2)

I sent out *twenty* questionnaires, *thirteen* of which were returned. Of those thirteen *nine* were lay persons, *three* were religious sisters and *one* was a minister. There were *eleven* females and *two* males; *six* people were married and *seven* single; *one* person was in the 40 – 50 age group and the others were all *50+*. *Eight* people had received professional training, *four* tertiary education and *one* secondary level. *Eight* also had spent *more than sixteen* years on the mission field; the areas of mission were distributed as follows: *seven* in the Pacific, *two* in

⁶ “The collected works of St John of the Cross”, p19
Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh OCP & Otilio Rodriguez OCP
ICS Publications, Washington DC 1991

Asia and *two* in the Americas (one person had been missioned in two different areas).

Of the thirteen questionnaires returned all mentioned the absence of

- *an other* to share their experience with
- *an other* to listen to their story
- *an other* to challenge them when necessary

They then went on to say that after varying times of feeling alone, and not knowing where to go or what to do, they gradually began to read the Scriptures more, to listen to tapes, to spend more time alone with God, to take walks alone in the bush or along the seashore, to feel the need for a more contemplative prayer, a time of quietness in prayer. This God of ours is not limited in His ways of nourishing us and making up for what appears to be lacking in the absence of that *other* to share our journey with. We can take courage then from the fact that others have been there before us and have been drawn along the same paths. And again I quote from John of the Cross

*'... now more than ever he could listen to nature through his senses; the flowers, the whistling breezes, the night, the dawn, the rushing streams all spoke to him. God was present everywhere.'*⁷

*'...(he) spent more time in prayer, going off to a cave on the property where he could view the countryside and have solitude for his deep contemplation.'*⁸

BUT there is still that void that one feels when the need arises to share with another human being.

⁷ Ibid p20

⁸ Ibid p22

III WHAT TO DO IN THE ABSENCE OF A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

Yesterday I was talking to a Spiritual Director about the theme of my paper and she said:

*“I have just seen someone who has returned from a situation that you describe. The directee needed to be able to talk to someone who understood her ‘**image of God**’ and her life experience. She also needed to express what was happening in her own language. By the end of the session she heaved a sigh of relief and said that she felt as though a weight had been lifted from her. That she had been heard and her experience was all right and that now she had the courage to return to her mission with a joyful heart”.*

The ways that the participants dealt with this absence of *an other* were varied. Some took to journaling on a regular basis. Others spoke of sitting in a room on their own with an empty chair and chatting to the person in the other chair. Some who had had spiritual direction on a regular basis were able to draw on the wisdom that they had received in those earlier sessions. One person related that she was so isolated that she could go out to the cliff top alone where no one could see her or hear her and shout out all her cares to the Lord over the sea. For her that was what kept her going until her next home leave.

Thomas Green in his book the *Friend of the Bridegroom* has this to say

“A directee of mine [was] transferred to a place where no good direction was available to him. I urged him to continue to seek it, but meanwhile to trust the Lord.

Eventually I came to see that this was the Lord’s plan, that it was really good ... that meant that he had to depend totally on the Lord to guide him.”⁹

⁹ “*The Friend of the Bridegroom*”, Thomas H Green SJ, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame IN. 2000

That brings me to my next point, that of total dependence on the Lord.

I believe that God does not ask us to do anything that is beyond our capacity. Though it may seem impossible to us at the time, if we look hard enough and have patience we will eventually find that little by little God supplies all that we need to survive in any given situation. Here I would like to share a personal experience. Usually when I am asked to assume a new work, I tend to put up many obstacles to begin with; I feel inadequate, unprepared, there are others who can do it better than I and so on...then as time goes on I become aware that my God is there with me, showing me the way, carrying me when I need to be carried and challenging me when I need to be extended. And so it was in the experience that follows.

I had been in South America for just on four years and was just beginning to get the feel for the culture and the people and to get my tongue around the Spanish. I was in a mission area high up in the Andes. I loved the mountains and was really enjoying the new challenges of learning to ride a horse, to live at 2600metres above sea level and to participate in a much slower pace of life. Life was looking good!!!

Then out of the blue I received a letter asking me to be the formation directress for our congregation in Latin America. This meant that I would be based in Lima, would have to set up a house for formation and generally get things going. It also meant that I would have to leave the people and places that had become so dear to me. After a time of discernment and prayer I replied that really I did not think I was familiar enough with the language, customs etc. and that maybe (I named two

others I thought would be better for the job) would be more apt for the position. But after receiving a second letter, I thought, all right then Lord, but you have to come with me, and so I packed my bags and went. Some weeks into the job my feeling of inadequacy was threatening to overwhelm me again when I received a visit from someone who was very interested in the history of beginnings. We talked about how things were going for me and for the women in formation with regard to the initiation process and then I confided my feelings of inadequacy to him. He just smiled at me and said: *“when you think that you are ready for the job and know what you are doing then it is time to leave the job!”*

He then went on to say: *“When you feel inadequate, you are more likely to ask questions and listen to the answers in your search to do the job as well as you can. When you know the answers you stop listening.”*

During those eight years I recalled his answer again and again as I asked the Lord to show me the way. My prayer became one of Help me! Show me! Where are you? Why? And then gradually, You are my strength! Teach me your ways that I may do your will! I learnt to trust the Lord and totally depend on him.

This total dependence also became the recurring theme with the participants of the questionnaire.

- *I developed a strong trust in God and in his word to me in the bible*
- *I kept up a regular, every day, personal bible study and prayer*
- *I listened to God through creation*
- *I took time apart, and learnt to depend on my Lord*

- *I read, listened to meditative music*
- *I took time with nature listening to God in creation*
- *I spent more time in contemplation and meditation*

IV CONCLUSION

Barry and Connolly define Christian spiritual direction as

“... help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God and to live out this consequence of the relationship.”¹⁰

And, as we have seen, this is the desired mode of carrying out spiritual direction but when it is not possible to meet with a spiritual director because of isolation in its many forms, then we can take courage from the following quote from the same authors

*“Spiritual direction has always aimed ultimately at fostering union with God and has, therefore, had to do with the **individual’s relationship with God.**”¹¹*

Thomas Green also gives heart to the one who is isolated or alone

“I would advise the mature pray-er to be open to direction. Don’t refuse it but don’t panic if you cannot find it. God may wish that at this point in your life you learn to depend totally and exclusively on Him.”¹²

*“...[in cases where] formal direction may not be available ..., we can be helped greatly by scripture and by reading the great masters of prayer; **Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross,***

¹⁰ *“The Practice of Spiritual Direction”, p 8,*
William A Barry and William J Connolly, The Seabury Press, 1982

¹¹ *Ibid* highlighting mine

¹² *“The Friend of the Bridegroom”,* Thomas H Green SJ, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame IN. 2000 p109

the Cloud of Unknowing to mention a few.

Each person will have his own set of guides from the literature of spirituality ... many have told me how helpful it has been to return to the words of wisdom of their guides when face-to-face direction is not possible.”¹³

These responses from the authors above have obviously resulted from their own lived experience or the shared experiences of their directees. The replies of the participants of the questionnaires support these findings and reinforce what I have also experienced, that the Lord is always there giving us what we need whether in the person of a spiritual director or, when formal direction is not possible to rely totally on Him.

In the words of Thomas Green

“...to learn to depend totally and exclusively on Him.”

As a spiritual director then, I would suggest to a missionary who is going to an isolated place, that a useful way to prepare for that situation could be to

1. Make a summary of the helpful things that have surfaced in spiritual direction to date and take that summary with you to refer to in those solitary times
2. Make a list of the spiritual books that have been of most assistance to you in your spiritual journey and choose two or three to take with you
3. Consider keeping a daily journal if you do not already do so and ...
4. Through it all learn to depend totally on the **One** who is **the Spiritual Director**.

¹³ *Ibid*

APPENDIX 1: Letter to Participants

Sister Joan Gore
28 Shelly Beach Road
Ponsonby
Auckland 1001

Dear

I am into my second year of the Spiritual Growth Ministries course – Formation of Spiritual Directors. To complete this course I am doing a research paper on the following topic – **Missionaries in Isolated Places and Spiritual Direction.**

I am sending this questionnaire out to twenty people hoping that some of you may be able to help me in this research paper by filling out the said questionnaire.

You may write as little or as much as you wish on the questions provided or if you prefer write something that would speak to this topic.

Whatever you write will be much appreciated.
Please return the questionnaire to the above address no later than June 30, 2004.

Your participation in this project will be much appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Sister Joan Gore smsm

APPENDIX 2: Background Information

Please tick(√) your answer:

1. Are you a
 - a) lay person **(9)**
 - b) priest --
 - c) religious sister/brother **(3)**
 - d) pastor/minister **(1)**

2. Are you
 - a) male **(2)**
 - b) female **(11)**

3. Are you
 - a) married **(6)**
 - b) single **(7)**

4. What is your age?
 - a) 20 years and below
 - b) 21 – 30 years
 - c) 31 – 40 years
 - d) 41 – 50 years **(1)**
 - e) 51 years and over **(12)**

5. What is your educational background?
 - a) primary school
 - b) secondary school **(1)**
 - c) tertiary education **(4)**
 - d) professional education **(8)**

6. How many years were you missioned
 - a) 1-5 years **(1)**
 - b) 6 – 10 years **(2)**
 - c) 11 – 15 years **(2)**
 - d) more than 16 years **(8)**

7. Where have you been missioned?
 - a) Pacific **(7)+**
 - b) Asia **(5)**
 - c) Africa
 - d) Americas **(2)+**
 - e) Europe

+one person was missioned in two areas

APPENDIX 3: QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What were your needs with regard to access to spiritual direction/spiritual nourishment in your mission?
2. How were your needs met?
3. What was lacking?
4. What did you do to make up what was lacking?
5. What was your particular difficulty?
6. How long were you in this particular situation?
7. How did you nourish yourself spiritually?
8. How did you prepare to live in your isolated mission?
9. Is there anything else you would like to comment on?

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