

The Order of Preachers and Spiritual Direction

by

Anne Aalbers

**A special interest paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries.**

Introduction

Spiritual direction hasn't always been the way we know it. Like goldfish in a bowl, we are, perhaps, too deeply immersed in the way we "do" spiritual direction to appreciate – or even be aware of – the value of past, historic understandings of the ministry. It is my belief that an exploration into the history of spiritual direction in the tradition of the Order of Preachers, founded by St Dominic and given papal approval in 1206AD, can give us a deeper and broader understanding of that gift, which is spiritual direction to the Christian church.

Spiritual Direction for the Laity

Although the tradition of spiritual direction is found both inside and outside the Christian faith, both before and after the inception of the church, it is dated, mostly commonly, within the Christian tradition from the time of the Desert Fathers in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. "Disciples would seek out advice and guidance from the holy men and women, the *abbas* and *ammās* of the desert."¹ Over the next several centuries in the West, however, under the influence of Augustine and then Benedict, the monastic movement flourished so that eventually spiritual guidance became restricted to those who had set themselves apart, and direction became a matter between a monk and his prior. Added to this, by the time the Dominican revolution of the 13th century occurred, the church in Europe had become corrupt in the eyes of the common people. The stage was thus set for a renewed need for spiritual directors for ordinary believers.

One may well wonder why a religious Order, founded for the express purpose of preaching, should be the first, since the Desert Fathers and Mothers, to open the ministry of spiritual direction beyond the monastery, to the laity, and to make it a priority. Yet, it was the case and history attests to it.

It is also characteristic of the Dominican spirit that the direction of souls should have taken on the importance of a direct aim in the Order. In the twelfth century, indeed, spiritual direction was usually conceived according to the old monastic pattern, in which the abbot, the superior of the community, was normally the director of his subjects' consciences; in any case, a fervent spiritual life outside the cloister was hardly to be thought of. In the thirteenth century, however, the interest of spiritual masters turned toward the laity. This was to be one of the glories of the Dominicans, although the Franciscans did much in the same direction. The guidance given by the Preachers

¹ Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend* (Harrisburg, PA: Moorhouse, 2001), 37.

consisted in giving the lives of laymen as monastic an outlook as possible, taking into account their state of life; that was the whole point of the “third orders.”²

Dominicans have continued to be at the forefront of integrating the life of the laity with a fervent spiritual life. Even the Friars’ mandate tends to bridge this gap between the secular and the sacred, *Contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere* (to contemplate and pass on to others the fruit of contemplation). There is other evidence of the Preachers resisting that natural human tendency to see the secular and the sacred as a hard and fast division rather than a fluid connection. For example, the 20th C Dominican R Garrigou-Lagrange has criticised the two-way theory (i.e. that there is an ordinary Christian calling and an extraordinary one), as it relates to prayer. Relevant to us, as 21st century spiritual directors, he has argued that contemplative prayer is not for extraordinary saints but all believers. “[A]ll Christians are called to attain contemplative prayer, since this is only the flowering of the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to all in baptism.”³

The Search for Truth

Although this “fervent spiritual life outside the cloister” was the goal of the ministry of spiritual direction among the laity – held in common with the preaching ministry of the friars – this was not, accurately, Dominic’s primary motivation in founding his Order. Having been moved by the austerity and, paradoxically, the immorality of the Waldensian and Albigensian heretics of southern France, Dominic founded his Order with the single-minded intention of spreading the truth. Hence, *Veritas* (truth) became the motto of the Order. The heretics believed that matter was evil and only what was spiritual was good. With all the resources available – the power of the Scriptures, prayer, study, reason and sound argument, Dominic and the brothers⁴ set out to preach the truth.

² Leclercq, Vandenbroucke and Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality, Vol II: The Spirituality of the Middle Ages* (London: Burns and Oates, 1968), 323.

³ Benedict Ashley O.P. *Spiritual Direction in the Dominican Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 30.

⁴ This assignment might seem to be sexist in its use of exclusive/masculine language, but this must be excused on the basis of the understanding of the time. It was literally “the brothers” since the women were not allowed to preach but only to pray, at least until the third order was established and even then preaching was not seen as fit for women. Simon Tugwell laments the fact that the early Dominicans did not utilize more fully the potential of both the men and women converts to the Order who had been preachers as heretics. Instead the women were silenced. [Simon Tugwell, O.P. *Early Dominicans* (London: SPCK, 1982), 30.]

In as much as spiritual direction was linked to a desire to disseminate truth, it was also a platform for individual advice, if not teaching. This raises questions for us today, who have moved into a more therapeutic and non-directive model of spiritual direction. There are those who come seeking advice about specific situations and wanting answers to concrete questions – in much the same way that disciples sought the wisdom of those who had gone off into the desert for solitude in the early Christian centuries. Admittedly, the wise ones sometimes gave an answer that sent the disciple seeking further into his own heart. The tradition, nonetheless, raises a challenge to our own fear of advice-giving, in our post-modern culture which recognises no definitive truth.

Though it seems inappropriate for today, spiritual direction has even known a time when it was the role of the director to offer correction. Thus the 14th Dominican, Catherine of Siena, was reminded by God of “the Christian duty of fraternal correction (Matt 18:15-18) which arises when a director sees that a client is falling into behaviour that is objectively seriously sinful. Then it is necessary to confront the client with the norms of the gospel . . .”⁵

But even in the current climate, according to Benedict Ashley O.P., the giving of theological instruction in the context of spiritual direction is not inappropriate, and may be more helpful than just leaving a client to analyse his or her own religious experience. Of course there is no need for “wordy sermons” or “moralizing exhortations” but: “The good director will listen much, and say little, but she will not fail, in what little she says, to instruct, to deepen the client’s understanding, relating the client’s experiences to the great truths of the Creed.”⁶ This raises some very awkward questions and at first may appear to be incompatible with the current non-directive model.

A Theological Tension

Here is the proverbial “can of worms”: it raises the question of how we define “truth.” There is no question in the case of a directee examining a subjective religious experience, since this is always “truth” to the individual, in the sense that no one else may define another’s experience or interpretation of it. For Barry and Connolly, there is no issue:

⁵ Benedict Ashley O.P., “St Catherine of Siena’s Principles of Spiritual Direction,” *Spirituality Today* 33, 1 (March 1981), 48.

⁶ Ashley, *Spiritual Direction in the Dominican Tradition*, 84.

For us, therefore, religious experience is to spiritual direction what foodstuff is to cooking. Without foodstuff there can be no cooking. Without religious experience there can be no spiritual direction.⁷

In the Dominican model, on the other hand, truth is less subjective than objective. Our contemporary culture has made it increasingly difficult to define, or even accept, the existence of “objective truth,” because of past abuses (in who might define those truths). This denial of objective truth strikes at the heart of Dominican (and Augustinian) theology, because, in the works of the famed Dominican theologian, Thomas Aquinas, God is truth and God is objective reality. Because Dominican tradition is so immersed in study and rational thought, as well as prayer, guidance itself is more concerned with what is objective in the spiritual journey of an individual rather than what is subjective. Thus, the external and observable are more the content of spiritual direction than the internal. This leaves the metaphorical door slightly ajar to let into the contemporary arena of spiritual direction such things as intellectual propositions, theological instruction, teaching and reasoned argument, if this is the directee’s way of relating to God.

It may seem that the Jesuit method of guidance – taking feelings very much into account as the content of spiritual direction⁸ – is opposed to the Dominican bent for objectivity. Indeed the religious experience of the two founders is very different from each other and this explains, in part, the different emphases. Ignatius’ own conversion in hospital was centred on his recognising feelings of consolation or desolation as an indicator of God’s leading for him. Dominic, on the other hand, was a canon in the church from a young age, focused on prayer and study. This academic bent was accentuated when he was called to battle the heretics.

It is precisely here, I believe, that Dominican spirituality can enrich our understanding of spiritual direction, which is currently more in the Ignatian tradition of paying attention to feelings. Hence contemporary guidance is a lot more user-friendly to those on the Myers-Briggs scale who prefer “F” rather than “T” orientation. Spiritual direction in the Dominican tradition holds the potential to invite “T” personalities more deeply into an integration of their personality and spirituality. It is a small step to say God is both a subjective experience and an

⁷ William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (HarperSanFrancisco), 8.

⁸ E.g. Barry and Connolly, chapter 7, devoted to evaluating religious experience, is almost completely taken up with directees’ identifying of feelings as the essential component of direction.

objective truth, and there is room for discussion of both the subjective and the objective within spiritual direction, if that is what the directee needs.

Some Common Ground

But the “objective truth” that acts as the cornerstone in Dominican tradition is not as alien to the markers given by Ignatius for the guidance of others as first appears. There is a common thread that spans the centuries of spiritual direction, of which the Dominicans and Jesuits are both a part. In the same way that, universally, contemporary spiritual direction, including that given by Dominicans, has been affected by Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, so Ignatius himself stood on the shoulders of the Dominicans who preceded him, and even more so, on those of the Desert Fathers.⁹ The tradition as a whole, then, has always maintained, from the earliest centuries, that there are objective criteria for judging spiritual growth. So, for example, one of St Catherine’s principles in guiding others is that we “should not judge their [the directees’] progress merely on the basis of subjective experiences, but rather on their realistic growth in humble self-knowledge and the other virtues.”¹⁰

This is thoroughly consistent with Dominican spirituality, which looks for signs of spiritual growth in the evidence available.

Thus, in this life Christian perfection is growth in true love of God, of self and of neighbour for God’s sake. It is vital that the spiritual director constantly refer to this standard as the one by which the progress of the client is to be judged, and by no other standard. Extraordinary experiences and even extraordinary actions tell us nothing about the progress of the Christian, but only the evidence of genuine love.¹¹

Ashley also comments that, in Aquinas, it is the theological virtues of faith, hope and love that are the indicators of the height of unitive contemplative prayer – these three are the simple but failsafe indicators of union with God. Likewise, for the spiritual director, these three are the pivotal points of spiritual growth. “It is essential, therefore, for directors to make it clear to Christians that the earthly goal of the spiritual journey is not some extraordinary experience but simply union with God by profound acts of faith, hope and love.”¹²

⁹ Ashley, O.P., “St Catherine of Siena’s Principles of Spiritual Direction,” 50.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 48.

¹¹ Ashley O.P., *Spiritual Direction in the Dominican Tradition*, 69.

¹² *Ibid*, 138.

Where I think this ties in beautifully with Ignatian discernment is in two ways. Firstly, in the making of a decision, Ignatius, as our spiritual director, encourages us to pay attention to our feelings and ask the question, “Will this decision / action lead me to faith, hope and love, or will it lead me away from those things?” Or, “As I sit with my feelings on this,” as Ignatius himself had done on his sick-bed, “in which direction am I headed?” Aquinas, on the other hand, would bid us pay attention to the objective standard of our decision / behaviour, but the criteria are the same: Does this spring from / Is this consistent with faith, hope and love? The *diakrasis* (judging or discerning) is intellectually based, not taking feelings into account. But the plumb-line of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love is the same.

The Inadequacy of Human Feelings

There is a second way in which I believe Dominican and Ignatian emphases in spiritual direction enrich and confirm each other. This is also connected to discernment but has to do with the “basic orientation” of the directee. According to Ignatius, once again as our spiritual director, if our heart is set toward God and we are seeking to do his will, then “good spirits” and feelings of “consolation” will be our indicators that we are on the right track. Likewise, a path that God does not want us to follow will be accompanied by troubled feelings, indicating that this path will not lead to faith, hope or love. But, in complete opposition to this, if our basic orientation is not toward God, these indicators will deceive us. We may well feel what seem to be positive feelings but we are, in fact, being led off the path. If our heart and will are not consecrated to God, then the action of “good spirits” may well give us troubled or confused feelings. So the feelings are not “directors” in themselves. In my experience, this is borne out often in the spiritual direction process, where something more is needed than a simple exploration by the directee of his or her feelings.

The Dominican approach also acknowledges a basic orientation in the human person, something like an inbuilt compass. In according with the tenets of natural theology, there is the assumption that the human person, created by God and for God, has God as the goal of his or her existence.¹³

¹³ This is reminiscent of Augustine’s “We were made for thee, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”

Thus, if we ask what is the special Dominican contribution to spirituality, the answer seems to be that it bears witness that the deepest, although often hidden, yearning of every human person is to enter into the community of truth where alone true love can flourish, the community of the three persons who are truth itself.¹⁴

The potential for commitment to achieve that goal, to satisfy that yearning for God, lies deep in every soul.¹⁵ Spiritual direction, then, is concerned with help in discerning those actions and pathways that will help toward that goal. “Sin” could be seen as taking a sidetrack away from the goal, and what is “moral” is consistent with achieving the goal of reaching God.

This cannot always be detected by what we feel. As human beings we do not always know what is best and often it will happen that what seems attractive may, in fact, be a diversion – hence the need for spiritual direction. Our feelings can pull us away from our true goal. In this respect the story of Adam and Eve is the story of all humanity. The desire to be “like God” is innate in human nature, and not evil in itself. But the temporary attraction of a forbidden fruit, which blinded the first humans to the truth, proved, and still proves today, to do little but delay the achievement of the goal for happiness.¹⁶

To pull these threads together, perhaps we could say that, while admitting that Jesuit tradition holds a much more positive view of the role of feelings generally than does the Dominican, there is some common ground between the two at a deeper level. Both traditions accept that what is more crucial to the whole process is recognising the direction of the person’s journey. This can be termed in a variety of ways: “orientation;” “goal;” possibly “the will” as the Church Fathers would have called it; or even the Biblical understanding of “heart.” But however we define it, both traditions seem to agree that, between the two thinking / feeling aspects of the human person, “feeling” must needs be the subservient partner.

A Happy Marriage?

It is difficult, if not presumptuous, to discuss fairly the attitudes of those who lived eight centuries ago, and what follows is open to correction. But I am becoming convinced that, in its original form, Dominican theology gave little credence to the value of feelings. This does not mean that early spiritual directors had no compassion – to the contrary! Neither does it mean

¹⁴ Ashley, O.P., *Spiritual Direction in the Dominican Tradition*, 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 46.

¹⁶ Ashley, O.P., *Spiritual Direction in the Dominican Tradition*, 48.

that contemporary Dominican spirituality has no place for exploring the meaning of feelings. But, I am coming to the conclusion that the past has seen the human faculty of reason as much more highly honoured in the guiding process.

In an attempt to reconcile the Jesuit and Dominican traditions in this respect, I would offer the fact that may seem obvious: both the rational and the affective are equally essential components for effective spiritual direction. There are times when the directee's feelings are clear as indicators of God's movement in the soul. The director may rightly take a non-directive role in the sense that the client is comfortably exploring his or her own interior experience. There are other times when feelings are confusing and need to be put aside – they do nothing but distract from the path toward God. Because the director is outside the emotional world of the directee, he or she may have a clearer view of the way ahead. I am, therefore, of the persuasion that, in its season, a directive approach has its value.

Likewise, while one client may be much more connected to God by discussing his or her feelings, another may sense the Spirit of God much more powerfully through bringing his or her theological understanding to bear on his or her life situation. On the condition that the issues involved relate personally to the directee and to his or her relationship with God, direction need not exclude intellectual discussion. It may imply, though, that spiritual directors need to do more theological training!

Bibliography

- Barry, W. A and W.J. Connolly. *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. Harper San Francisco.
- Ashley, B. M., O.P. *Spiritual Direction in the Dominican Tradition*. New York: Paulist Press, 1995.
- Ashley, B. M., O.P. "St Catherine of Siena's Principles of Spiritual Direction." *Spirituality Today* 33, 1 (March 1981): 4-33.
- Ashley, B. M., O.P. *The Dominicans*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990.
- Holmes, U.T. *A History of Christian Spirituality*. Minneapolis: Seabury, 1980.
- Jones, C., G. Wainwright, E. Yarnold (eds.). *The Study of Spirituality*. London: SPCK, 1992.
- Leclercq, J., F. Vandebroucke, L. Bouyer. *A History of Christian Spirituality Vol II: the Spirituality of the Middle Ages*. London: Burns and Oates, 1968.
- Leech, K. *Soul Friend*. Harrisburg, PA: Moorhouse Publishing, 2001.
- Rankin, P., O.P. "Dominican Spirituality and Spiritual Direction." Unpublished essay, SGM Formation Programme, 2005.
- Tugwell, S, O.P. *Early Dominicans*. London: SPCK, 1982.
- Von Matt, L. and M-H Vicaire, O.P. *St Dominic*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957.

For further reading:

Michael Stock, "Spiritual Direction from a Dominican Perspective," *Spirituality Today* 33, 1 (March 1981): 4-33.

As far as could be traced, there is only one copy of this particular issue of this Journal in NZ, which was unavailable at the time of writing. Neither could it be located electronically.

With reference to the section, "The Search for Truth," p.2-4, readers may also be interested in:
Peter Bengé: "How Directive Should Christian Spiritual Direction Be?"
SGM Special Interest Project on www.sgm.org.nz

Anne Aalbers
Ph 09-8351577, 0274980012
annieaalbers@whoosh.co.nz