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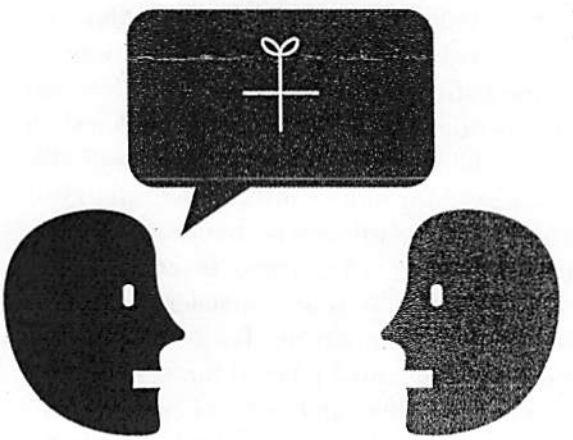

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THE APPEAL OF CATHOLIC SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

As a purely practical matter, Catholics who write about spiritual life today develop a readership among Protestants. Some writers do this without knowing it. Others, encouraged by editors, readers and colleagues, deliberately use language that "crosses over" into many denominations. Henri Nouwen was such a writer. Today Thomas Merton and other distinctively Catholic writers have a large Protestant following. In my own case, I have no exact figures to tell me how many of my readers are Catholic, Protestant, or unchurched. But as I travel to various speaking engagements, meetings and conferences, I notice how many Protestants are attracted by Catholic spirituality. They want to learn about contemplation, meditation, and retreats. They practice the kind of prayer called *lectio divina*. They are attracted by silence and solitude. They are eager to benefit from spiritual direction; and they want to become spiritual directors themselves.

My first hint of this came twenty years ago when I heard a Presbyterian pastor, Eugene Peterson, talk about the importance of spiritual direction. Speaking informally to a gathering of Christian writers, Peterson urged them to commend spiritual direction as a practice which could have broad benefits for the whole of

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Christianity. More recently, Peterson, who is best known as the author of a Bible paraphrase called *The Message*, has written a small book about spiritual direction, entitled *The Wisdom of Each Other: A Conversation Between Spiritual Friends.*

In *The Wisdom of Each Other*, Peterson avoids the term spiritual direction, opting for spiritual friendship instead. The book is not exactly a work of instruction. Instead, Peterson writes an imagined correspondence between himself and Gunnar, a man returning to Christian faith after a long time of unbelief. Gunnar has issues, and Peterson wants to help him address them. The style of the book is very much like C.S. Lewis's small volume, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. Gunnar, like Malcolm, is a fictional character, a composite of many people Peterson has known. As in *Letters to Malcolm*, the conversation is one-sided. Peterson's letters answer Gunnar's questions but Gunnar's letters do not appear.

Peterson's long years as a pastor are evident in this book. He is a ready listener, a wise counselor, attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit in Gunnar's life. Surely, he is acting as a director though the term is obviously not quite comfortable for him. Occasionally, while he guides Gunnar, Peterson also blows off steam about superficiality and trendiness in Christian life. Yet his principal task is to keep Gunnar on the right path: "I would encourage you," he tells Gunnar, "to re-conceive your day as a ritual–a rhythmic series of movements in sacred space and time–which you enter, rather than as a schedule into which you fit yourself." Just a few paragraphs later, he reminds Gunnar of Paul's advice about how to "Pray without ceasing."

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES: A RESTORATION

Well, what precisely is going on here? During the twenty-five years since I became a published writer of Christian spirituality, I have seen many aspects of what seems to me like a restoration. Ancient Christian disciplines, long practiced and guarded by Catholics, are now being adopted by other Christians. Richard Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline*, explored twelve spiritual disciplines long appreciated by Catholics: prayer and meditation, fasting, study, solitude, simplicity, submission, confession, service, worship, guidance and celebration. While Foster did not emphasize spiritual direction he began to encourage Christians to practice the spiritual life in a dedicated way. Disciplines were presented as a way of discipleship. The operative words were spiritual formation and transformation, buttressed with Biblical citations. By 1988 Foster had founded his own movement: Renovaré (the Latin verb meaning "to renew"), which calls itself Christian in commitment, ecumenical in breadth, and international in scope. Essentially, Renovaré is a teaching movement, and does not focus on membership. Those who attend Renovaré's conferences and retreats are encouraged to commit to a "covenant" statement: "In utter dependence on Jesus Christ as my ever-living Savior, Teacher, Lord, and Friend, I will seek continual renewal through spiritual exercises, spiritual gifts, and acts of service." Yet Renovaré's followers pay no dues and are not referred to as "members." Such a minimalist approach, Foster likes to say, is modeled on the words of Samson, who wanted to "light the tails of the foxes and let them go."

I have worked with Renovaré for more than ten years, the only Roman Catholic on Renovaré's board and speaking team. During this time I have watched Renovaré encourage the development of spiritual formation groups, with a structured order of meeting. Renovaré's regional and local conferences train people to participate in spiritual formation groups. A wide range of Christian devotional reading is recommended as well. Only recently have I noticed spiritual direction and "spiritual companioning" as part of the Renovaré approach. However, without endorsing any spiritual directors or programs, the Renovaré website lists many academic sources for training in spiritual direction. Notable to me among these sources are Creighton University, Weston School of Theology, and Regis University (in Denver.)

During these last ten years I have also heard many Protestant colleagues mention that they are seeking spiritual direction from Roman Catholics.

UNITED METHODIST TRAINING PROGRAMS

The United Methodist Church is moving toward spiritual direction, by conducting training programs for spiritual formation and direction. One has been active in my neighborhood in Louisiana: a program from the Academy of Spiritual Leadership of the Louisiana Conference of the United Methodist church. The course is given as a two-year series of retreats entitled "The Path of Spiritual Direction and Spiritual Formation in the Congregation." Directed by the Rev. Carole Cotton Winn, this two-year program is now being offered for the fourth time. It began January 1, 2006. In its brochure, the program is described as follows: "the scope of the retreats includes the art of training in spiritual direction, and takes a broader look at bringing the practices of spiritual formation to the congregation. It is for those who want resources and skills which invite persons and small groups into the presence of God and which deepen the spiritual life of the congregation."

I have not attended these training retreats, but I am acting as a spiritual director for several who have gone through or are now going through the training. Each person enrolled in these training sessions is expected to have regular contact with an experienced spiritual director. My task, in our meetings, is twofold: to do what spiritual directors should do, and do it well; and to help the directees reflect on the process in ways that will strengthen them for their own work in spiritual direction.

DEVOTIONAL LITERATURE, MYSTICS AND MODERNS

One thing that struck me as I began working with these Protestant candidates was that they were being introduced to some Catholic mystics as part of their spiritual formation. Mind you, I was not recommending these books. The Methodist training program had specified them as required reading.

Especially I noticed: John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Origen. The reading list also included a number of modern Catholic teachers on the spiritual life: William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction;* William A Barry, *Discernment in Prayer: Paying Attention to God*; Thomas Green, *Weeds Among the Wheat* and *Drinking from a Dry Well;* David Regan, "Mystagogy and Experience." For help with hard-to-find books, students were referred to the Newman Bookstore in Washington, D.C

Yet not all the expertise was recognizably from Roman Catholic sources. Protestant publishers were well represented on the reading list: Upper Room (Methodist) and InterVarsity Press as well as Westminster/John Knox Press (Presybterian) and Pendle Hill Publications (Quaker). A number of the recommended authors were Anglicans or Episcopalians. Among these authorities were Gerald May, Alan Jones, Kenneth Leech, and Michael Gemignani.

Slowly, I began to realize that denominations are not so significant. Whether Catholic, Episcopalian, Mennonite or whatever, the recommended materials were all drawing from well-established and historic practices of spiritual direction and formation.

A NEW VOCABULARY

What strikes me about this experience? First of all, I realize that I am serving as a director in two senses. I need to do just what good directors do, that is, listen attentively, ask questions when needed, apply spiritual principles sparingly and judiciously, wait for the Holy Spirit. At the same time I suspect that I am the first spiritual director with whom these people have met or worked. Therefore, I'll be forming their opinions on what a spiritual director is like. I have a double obligation to act well.

Also, I am conscious that these directees are developing a new vocabulary for spiritual life. They are devout Christians, long time churchgoers, practiced in their own style of worship and devotion. Yet such notions as spiritual formation and spiritual direction ask more of them. And interestingly, they are entering into this program in behalf of their own congregations. They want to make the spiritual life more widely practiced and better understood.

Not all of them, by the way, are lay people. Some, both men and women, are ordained ministers. I must develop a new vocabulary, as I remind myself to think of clergy differently than in a Roman Catholic way.

DE-MYSTIFYING DIRECTION

Although I am a lay spiritual director (and fairly approachable in my personal style) I sense that newcomers come to our first sessions with a certain trepidation. "*What will it be like?*" they are wondering. Often they have read about spiritual direction from writers like Thomas Merton, who set a pretty high bar for the

contemplative life. If they haven't yet read John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila, they fear that they are about to do so. What in the world will be expected of them? In a sense they remind me of Catholic children approaching the sacrament of reconciliation, wondering whether they'll have to invent a few sins to impress the priest.

I remember a conversation with a Protestant Christian writer, a friend of mine, telling me she was starting spiritual direction. "I want to do the dark night of the soul!" she told me. That one conversation gave me a clue that reading the mystics may give an exaggerated view of what spiritual life is all about.

Part of my task, then, is to de-mystify the process of direction and keep spirituality down to earth. As we ease into the conversation, I encourage beginning from the ordinary business of living, lowering expectations of how grace will make itself known. Usually, though, I don't have much to do except listen. People who have come to the sessions wondering what they have to say are filled with observations, stories and reflections. I can't get a word in edgewise.

Sometimes, either before or after the session, I remember my own first experiences of spiritual direction, in rooms set aside for pastoral counseling in Catholic parishes far away from where I live now. I remember my first director, a priest who arrived in a cassock, in a room with a picture of St. Michael the Archangel overcoming the Devil. By contrast, I meet my directees in our personal library, where one wall is spiritual books and the other half more or less secular titles, with sunshine (most days) streaming through the window. Though my current environment for giving direction is less churchy and more casual, I want to be faithful, in all the ways that count, to the Catholic formation and training I myself have received.

CULTURAL DISTANCES AND "TRANSLATIONS"

As the sessions unfold over time, I become conscious that much of my Catholic cultural formation may be beside the point. The holiness of the experience comes about through our attention to the Spirit, not through any ostensibly sacramental environment. Other directors tell me they always light candles during their sessions. Not me! I find my heart turning in another direction, wanting less ritual and more simplicity. The presence of God bubbles up from the directee's life and my response, not from any external formalities we might apply.

Also, I attempt to cross the cultural divide as much as I can. While my directees may be reading Teresa and John of the Cross, I remind them that they also have Protestant writers–the Wesleys, William Law and the Quakers among them–who are deeply plunged into the spiritual life.

DIRECTEES "COMPARING NOTES"

I suppose it is inevitable that in training programs the candidates will compare notes on their spiritual directors, making recommendations, exchanging phone numbers, offering critiques. Possibly in the training sessions they have been asked to make evaluations. Should I regard this as part of the natural commerce of the process? Maybe, but here again, my Catholic reserve kicks in. I resolve to remind them that our sessions are protected by confidentiality on both sides. I am bound by secrecy in their behalf, and they should protect me (or any other director) as well. No chattering about "Here's what my director told me." Also, the director herself should remain detached, leaving open the possibility that the candidate may want to change directors.

I find myself wondering, at moments like this, whether Protestants and Catholics have different attitudes in these matters. Do Protestants set less store by confidentiality? Or are Catholics too concerned about such things?

A priest with whom I chat about this reminds me that spiritual direction is different from the sacrament of reconciliation. It is not "under the seal" or the protection of the sacrament of reconciliation. Even so, I realize I believe that confidentiality–privacy–is essential to the free exchange of the process.

SOCIALIZING

Another definite boundary, for me, has to do with socializing. If someone is my director, I need to keep him or her at a certain distance from my ordinary circle of friendship. This allows for greater objectivity and keeps the director free from the social politics of my life. I have occasion to apply this rule when one of my directees invites me to a party at her home. After some reflection, I decline. Later, when our relationship in spiritual direction may have ended, I can accept such invitations, but now, I think it best not to blur the lines between direction and casual friendship. Yes, direction

is a form of friendship, but it has a definite structure. This is part of my received wisdom as a Catholic. I think it is prudent and makes good sense. I resolve to find ways to pass this wisdom on. (On reflection, I realize I have been influenced by Catholic clergy and religious I have known over the years, who are charming in company but keep a certain distance from parishioners. It's hard to define how it works, but it seems to be a kind of propriety or decorum.)

WHAT HAVE I LEARNED?

As I work on the platform with such speakers as Richard Foster (Quaker) and Glandion Carney (Christian Reformed) and worship leaders like George Skramstad (Assembly of God: Anderson, Indiana), I am conscious of the heritage we have in common. They convey to me a high regard for Catholic spirituality. I admire the depth of their spiritual lives as well. Though I know we may differ on certain matters of doctrine, I am touched by their love of God. I like to think–I fervently hope–that with my small efforts I am hastening the time of greater Christian reconciliation, though it's hard to get the big picture when you're not serving on some high ecumenical commission.

Certainly, I have learned that God sends grace into all open hearts. But more than that, I am increasingly conscious of the appeal of Catholic practice, the ways that certain styles of Catholic prayer may deepen the spiritual lives of other Christians.

Some Protestant spiritual leaders worry about the shallowness of their congregations. They are concerned that many Christians are engaging in a kind of legalistic activism within their churches, serving on capital fund raising committees, lining up vigorous and well-attended programs, but neglecting the dimension of deep spirituality and prayer. Lamenting this activism in an interview with *Christianity Today* several years ago, the Denver-based Christian psychologist and best selling writer Larry Crabb said the following:

"Daily devotions, no drinking, faithful church attendance, busyness with church programs, performance-oriented Sunday worship and preaching," he says, didn't lead him to "a dynamic enjoyment of God." In fact, they seemed to be interfering. "I was finding water for my thirsty soul in classic Catholic writings." (See Agnieszka Tennant, "A Shrink Gets Stretched: Why psychologist Larry Crabb believes spiritual direction should replace therapy" *www.christianitytoday.com*, posted 05/02/2003.)

James Houston, a founder of Regent College in Vancouver and one of Crabb's mentors, has voiced similar concerns. Houston believes (as quoted in *Christianity Today*) that too many evangelicals have sought God "through activism, programs, conferences, applying methods, or ministries."

Programs in spiritual direction (advocated by both Larry Crabb and James Houston, among others) are cropping up at many evangelical colleges. A journal called *Conversations*, begun by Crabb, David Benner and Gary Moon, celebrates this. Through New Way Ministries (See Romans 7:6) Crabb also runs a School of Spiritual Direction and SoulCare Conferences. He has written two books that touch on spiritual direction and friendship. One of these, *Connecting*, celebrates spiritual friendship as a source of healing. Crabb calls spiritual direction "the art of discerning the deepest recesses of the soul with a sensitivity to what the Spirit is doing." A second book, *Shattered Dreams*, takes a long look at the relationship of Naomi and Ruth. To me it seems obvious that this evangelical Protestant leader is not inventing a tradition, but tapping into one that Catholics have long held dear.

When Crabb identifies thinkers who helped him design his model of spiritual direction, he mentions some Catholics: Augustine of Hippo, John of the Cross, G. K. Chesterton, Thomas Merton, Peter Kreeft and Brennan Manning. Protestants who have influenced him include Francis Schaeffer, Peterson, Houston, and Michael Card.

Brennan Manning, a resigned Catholic priest (who continues as a practicing Catholic) has also served as Crabb's spiritual director. Manning (*The Wisdom of Tenderness*) is best known for encouraging a deeper spirituality, especially among men, and is widely admired and read among Christian evangelicals. I expect that Manning's book, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging*, has inspired the recent Larry Crabb title: *The Papa Prayer*. Of *Abba's Child*, one enthusiastic reader said: "great reading for worn-out evangelicals" (amazon.com) and insisted his work draws one into the mystery of the Gospel in ways that evangelical "plans of salvation" fail to do. Manning and Crabb, no doubt manifesting their long years of brokenness and self-confessed anguish, take pride in displaying overt personal affection. On meeting after long absences these two macho males kiss one another on the lips. (So much for my concern about protecting the identity of one's director!)

THE CATHOLIC "EDGE"–REAL OR IMAGINED?

Having spent some years listening to Protestants idealizing Catholic spirituality (including spiritual direction) I find myself wondering whether much of this is inflated enthusiasm or hype. My own attraction to Catholic faith (I entered the church 42 years ago) was partly based on the attraction of Catholic worship and prayer. And I have not been disappointed in my quest. Even so, I am sure that Protestants who admire our spirituality are partly driven by a romantic streak. Peterson describes this well:

> A number of years ago, when I was able, I used to attend Vespers with a community of Benedictine nuns. I loved the quiet simplicity of the worship, the nuns anonymous in their habits, their liturgy so natural and unforced. It always seems much more spiritual than the murkiness and fuss of my Presbyterian congregation.

Peterson got to know one of the nuns quite well. She sensed that he was romanticizing the Benedictines at prayer. One day she burst out: "You think we're in ecstasy all the time in here don't you, Eugene? You probably think we levitate while we are washing up the dishes! Well, let me tell you something. We are a community of saints and martyrs, and the martyrs are those who have to live with the saints! That cured me," Peterson confesses, "for awhile at least."

The truth is, a genuine prayer-life, a relationship with God, may be romantic at first. (Catholics sometimes call this "first fervor.") But over the long run the spiritual life can be a hard slog, requiring perseverance and encouragement–from friends, directors, and the Christian community at large.

In this unglamorous kind of spiritual life, the help of a good director is priceless. And when both parties are attentive to the Holy Spirit, differences of denomination seem to melt away.

RECOMMENDED READING

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