Advance Praise

"Invitation to Practical Theology is an important book both for programs aimed at preparing people in ministry to be practical theologians and for academic theologians seeking fresh insight into how attention to practice can enrich their thinking. Contributors have been chosen from among the best U.S. Catholic theologians, and the topics they address ring true to the concerns and cultures of the Catholic world. As such, the book represents a true 'coming of age' for Catholic practical theology. It will be read with great interest not only by Catholics, but by all who are passionate about the dialogue between practice and theological traditions."

—Mary Frohlich, RSCJ, director of the Ecumenical Doctor of Ministry Program, Catholic Theological Union at Chicago

"The resurgence of practical theology has long needed a wide-ranging contribution from U.S. Catholic perspectives. Thanks to Claire Wolffeich and her superb group of collaborators, now we have one."

—Timothy Matovina, professor of theology and executive director of the Institute for Latino Studies, University of Notre Dame

Invitation to Practical Theology does indeed invite us to a diverse table of plenty, one in which refreshing, embodied, ecumenical, and interdisciplinary hands have prepared a meal where the Kingdom's laborers from the working fields of chaplaincy, liturgy, spiritual direction, ethics, teaching, and social activism can share not only food but also the sacred faith it engenders.

—Eduardo C. Fernández, SJ, professor of pastoral theology and ministry, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University and Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California

"A powerful and highly creative contribution to practical theology by one its foremost contributors. Certain to be widely discussed in the church and academy."

—Richard Osmer, Ralph B. and Helen S. Ashenfelter Professor of Mission and Evangelism, Department of Practical Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary
CHAPTER 10
THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION
A Theologically Complex Process

JANET K. RUFFING, RSM

The practice of Christian spiritual direction is a complex process that is inherently, although not exclusively, theological. Spiritual directors also draw on insights from various psychological perspectives, the history of Christian spirituality, and tools such as the “Experience Cycle” adapted from the pastoral circle as well as models of supervision. Spiritual direction supports the directee’s graced discernment in recognizing God’s self-communication and action in the whole of a believer’s life and in responding to that grace in concrete and practical ways. It is one of the oldest recommended spiritual practices in the Catholic tradition for those who desire to practice their faith in a deep and reflective way. Spiritual direction also is particularly important in contexts of ministerial formation. Seminarians, candidates for diaconate and religious life, and those preparing for lay ecclesial ministry participate in a variety of spiritual practices that foster their spiritual life and their “personal appropriation, both intellectual and practical, of the tradition” in such a way that it promotes their personal spiritual growth and informs their ministerial practice.
Spiritual direction is thus a significant practice to be studied and taught by practical theologians and pastoral leaders. I would argue that spiritual direction also is a form of practical theology enacted by both director and directee; in this sense, spiritual direction illustrates a kind of lay practical theology that follows an experience-theology-experience rhythm and is highly attentive to the grace of experience as theological source.

In order to discuss spiritual direction, it is necessary first to offer a field definition of "spirituality." As a scholar-practitioner in the academic field of spirituality as it has developed since the 1970s, I situate my practice of spiritual direction within this recently defined discipline. David M. Perrin offers an apt description of the subject of the study of Christian spirituality:

Christian spirituality is the experience of transformation in the Divine-human relationship as modeled by Jesus Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit. Christian spirituality is appropriated as a lifestyle within all relationships in the broader Christian community as well as in society in general. While Christian spirituality embraces Christian traditions and beliefs, it exceeds the boundaries of established religions and their theologies. As such the way the Spirit of God is actively incarnated in human history, whether within the Christian traditions or from outside of them.

As a spiritual director, I am attentive to the whole of directees' lives as they identify movements of the Spirit in all of life's complexity, whether or not these movements take place in Christian contexts or directees talk about them in explicitly Christian terms.
responses. As Hans Georg Gadamer has argued, participants in a tradition not only receive a tradition, they also contribute to it through new experience.  

Sandra Schneiders comments that “one of the most interesting characteristics of Christian spirituality as lived experience is its capacity to be outside of or even ahead of theological developments and to introduce into the theological and/or religious purview of the Church insights and convictions which stretch the received theological categories and paradigms.” In my own experience, creative theologians and directees may be “ahead” of the received categories for a considerable period of time. All forms of liberation theology come to mind since they arose out of the experience of socially disadvantaged people. Practical theologians helped whole communities articulate theologies that led to action for social justice or internally supported the full humanity of each group. These theological developments were deeply liberative for those who espoused them. In many instances they were based on scripture. These new readings of scripture not only illumined experience but also created conflicts within various communities and could be deeply threatening to those who embraced them and then found themselves at odds with their church leadership and some members. Others avoided these insights because they sensed that entertaining them might result in their abandoning or being excommunicated from their particular church tradition. Spiritual directors often provided a holding environment that allowed their directees to voice their insights, discern their responses in prayer, take prophetic action for social change, and entertain new ways of living the gospel while respecting their tradition’s norms—all in God’s company.

A SELF-REVEALING, LOVING GOD AT THE HEART OF THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Contemporary spiritual direction takes place in this borderland of freedom where two Christians (who participate in and symbolize the larger community of faith) focus on how God is revealing God’s self to the directee through every dimension of human existence. Together they interpret these movements and their claim on the directee to respond. How else can the Spirit change minds and hearts, inspire prophets, and bestow charismatic gifts for the good of the community? It is important for spiritual directors to be aware of their own theological assumptions in this ministry. Reflection on case work and supervision challenges spiritual directors to recognize when and how their espoused and operative theologies influence their work. This helps them notice and explore similar discrepancies in their directees’ accounts of religious experience as well as wait for grace in their directees rather than impose their own theology on them.

Thirty-year-old Sister Mary...is seeking greater intimacy with Jesus in her prayer. While on retreat, she discovers through the help of her director that although she believes Jesus is loving, compassionate, and interested in her (her espoused theology), she actually harbors a hidden fear that to get closer to Jesus will inevitably result in suffering (her operative theology). Her director suggests to her that her relationship with Jesus might feel different if she stopped approaching it as if she were going to the dentist.

All Mary needed was this observation, which freed her to revise her embedded theology. She understood that suffering was a part of every human life and not necessarily a result of her deepening relationship with Jesus. She easily adopted a theology of the paschal mystery that was more open and hopeful; this theology was available in her tradition. Most religious traditions develop some form of spiritual guidance among their most committed practitioners that places the practical wisdom accrued from the learning, personal experience, and practice of the more experienced at the service of both
neophytes and peers. Wise spiritual teachers and elders developed the practice of consulting another of equal or greater spiritual development as a useful practice to counter their own blindness, ignorance, egocentricity, and internal obsessive preoccupations even as they served the neophytes who came to learn and share their specialized way of life. More important, such a teacher or elder provided essential encouragement on the spiritual path.

**AN ANCIENT SPIRITUAL PRACTICE AMONG THE DESERT ASCETICS**

Within Christianity, spiritual direction is an ancient practice that originated among the desert ascetics in the fourth century. In this form of spiritual guidance, newcomers placed themselves under the tutelage of a more experienced person, often living with or nearby the elder, learning this way of life from observation of the elder, practicing silence, reciting psalms, meditating on the word of God, regulating food and sleep, renouncing sexual relationships and the responsibilities entailed by them, and doing the mundane tasks required for sustaining life. Once martyrdom began to diminish, this austere life was embraced as a more intense form of Christian life. The practice led to growth in holiness not possible in ordinary, settled, agrarian or urban life.

In this model of spiritual direction, the one seeking direction was free to choose an elder of either gender and to ask for a “word” related to a concrete situation. If the elder responded with a charismatic word, which depended on the dispositions of the seeker, it was usually a brief response of direct advice, a parable, or an enigmatic statement that the neophyte pondered until its possible meanings opened. The Holy Spirit was considered to be the primary guide for the ascetic, along with the cell (solitude), meditating on the scriptures, and only then this “word” of the elder. Discernment as both discretion or moderation and discerning the spirits influencing the person seeking direction was the core of the practice of spiritual guidance, along with encouragement in the life itself. This form of spiritual direction was charismatic, freely embraced as a necessary practice for the neophyte, and recommended for the experienced.

Elements of this original practice of spiritual direction continue today despite several intervening historical models. In its most institutionalized form following the Council of Trent, these earlier charismatic origins and the respect for each person’s unique experience of God were minimized and the role of director merged with a clerical confessor to whom the penitent owed obedience.

**THE PRACTICE OF CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION ROOTED IN VATICAN II THEOLOGY**

In its contemporary form, restored and renewed as a result of theological developments before and after the Second Vatican Council, spiritual direction enjoyed a renaissance, rapidly extending to include all Christian lifestyles understood as participating in the universal call to holiness taught so eloquently in *Lumen gentium* and influenced by the many renewal movements that followed the council.

Within Catholic life and practice, spiritual direction became one of the most important spiritual practices supporting the renewal movements inspired by Vatican II. Spiritual direction became a privileged place for individual exploration of the effects of new religious experiences, dramatic change in lifestyles, and theological understandings. Those who practiced spiritual direction appreciated growth in discernment of spirits through careful reflection on personal experience in conversation with an experienced guide. Thus, spiritual direction supported rapid adult spiritual development among those who participated. When Roman Catholic ecclesiology emphasized the rightful role of the entire people of God in the church, and explicitly taught the universal
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call to holiness as well as lay responsibility for Christian mission in the world, academic programs in the discipline of Christian spirituality began to develop. These academic programs built on the retrieval of individually directed Ignatian retreats within the retreat movement and renewal movements in religious life for both men and women that preceded them. The theological changes, both the return to ancient sources and the development of the new theology, directly influenced the retrieval and renewal of the practice of spiritual direction.

THE THEOLOGICAL GROUNDING OF THE DIRECTOR

I can think of no more complex theological activity in a practical context than the ministry of spiritual direction, although describing this practice theologically may not be the most common approach. I consider first the theological grounding of the director since the experience and competency of accompanying another as a spiritual director is not identical with the experience of being a directee. Directees articulate a narrative of their experience of God, grace, challenge, conversion, and mystery before they might notice theological themes in their stories or the theology informing this practice. As I argue in To Tell the Sacred Tale, the director intimately influences the narrative a directee creates orally from session to session; this essentially collaborative narrative process is already a meaning-making activity in the directee’s life. This is a form of grassroots narrative theology, focusing on the story of experienced grace, informed as it already is by the biblical narratives of theophanies, call, mission, sin and conversion, healing, suffering, death, and new life in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. These stories are shaped by a relationship with Jesus through sacramental life, the story of Jesus as enacted in the liturgical year, and the Gospel narratives and teachings that form a privileged medium of prayer in individual lectio divina or Ignatian contemplation. Christians believe that God reveals God’s self through scripture as well as within ordinary life. Frequently, these already biblically encoded theologies and spiritualities provide the first shared language for interpretation in spiritual direction.

There are many ways of describing the theology that both grounds this practice and that may surprisingly flow from it both as concrete action on the part of the directee and as a new word about God, an experience-based theological insight. In practice, the director’s espoused and operative theologies are constantly at play in dialogue with the directee’s experience within this particular pastoral conversation. The director brings a lifetime of experience of practicing the faith and the theology, beliefs, and convictions that inform it. This includes the director’s espoused theology, how the director understands and has appropriated Catholic belief and the corresponding behaviors and spiritual practices that flow from that belief, and operative theologies that may or may not match the espoused version. Likewise, directees come to spiritual direction with similar theological perspectives, whether implicit or explicit, that may be similar to or different from those of their directors.

Most contemporary models of spiritual direction dramatically shifted away from a prescriptive model of spiritual direction that subordinated the spiritual longings and experience of directees to doctrinal formulations and their behavior to the dictates of moral theology. Instead, it took the religious experience of the directee as its starting point, trusting that God is a self-revealing, self-communicating God and exploring the directee’s awareness of and reaction to these movements.

The first moment of interpretation robustly elicits this story of grace from the directee and then explores the directee’s response to it, first in the initial moment of awareness of this communication or in prayer and then how it might lead to future action in response to this amplified understanding of this incident. This is a shared exercise of practical theology and discernment. Is this impulse consonant with who God is for us? Is it coming from some other source?
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This exploration begins with the experience—what happened? What more might be there that wasn’t noticed at first? Frequently, the directee notices the implicit theology within in this step. Second, the directee moves toward discerning a response or possible responses, and then over time, traces the pattern of events and responses in order to discern a deeper response or a decision guided by the pattern of grace over time.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE MODEL OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

The Center for Religious Development (CRD) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, explicitly developed a religious experience model of spiritual direction in 1971; the model spread rapidly in Roman Catholic circles and beyond. It focused almost exclusively on the religious experience of the directee. The CRD contracted for a course on the theology of religious experience for the associates it trained. This course was based primarily on Karl Rahner’s theology of grace and his essay “The Experience of the Spirit” as well as theologian Brian McDermott’s treatment of the grace of Christ, which drew on both Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx’s understanding of the grace of Christ as “an experience” of the disciples that is described in the scriptural narratives in a Christic pattern.16

In my own work influenced by these same sources, I tried to describe the narrative process that spiritual direction employs as its primary discourse, which always embeds this experience of grace in a story; thus both the director and the directee can easily notice themes from the Creeds and the Gospels as they emerge because these are essentially narrative forms of theology that interact in unpredictable ways with the directee’s story. This faith narrative is learned and rehearsed over the liturgical year in and through the eucharistic community of believers who are already in communion with a trinitarian God. Directors need sufficient theological literacy in order to recognize when and how their directees’ accounts disclose how they are living the gospel or enjoying an experience of shared belief of the community of faith that has been elaborated theologically so that they can reflect it back to their directees, enabling them to appropriate these themes as living mysteries. Spiritual direction is thus also a dialogical narrative form of practical theology.

I believe such theological grounding is essential to the practice of spiritual direction, which, since the 1970s, sometimes had a more psychological emphasis, helpfully informed by depth psychology, developmental psychology, and transpersonal psychology. While I, too, believe that these insights from another discipline are helpful and necessary to be able to engage in spiritual direction responsibly, spiritual direction as a practice is not psychotherapy but a pastoral ministry that is more focused on the mystery of God’s relating to the human person and thus more informed by theological sources than psychological ones.

William Reiser, SJ, a systematic theologian who later provided a course on the theology of spiritual direction at CRD, notes that he expanded his reflections beyond the theological understandings of experience. Reiser came to see that embedded in the Christian practice of spiritual direction are particular theologies of revelation, the church, the gospel, and the human person. A theology of revelation presupposes that God continues to reveal God’s self to individual believers and to communities of believers. As he wrote, “The divine mystery is first experienced and only then schematized” as theology.17

The ecclesial element of spiritual direction is increasingly problematic because of the number of people who were caught up in the conflict of interpretations over Vatican II and who find themselves on the margins of ecclesial life. These conflicts deeply affect the spiritual lives of those on the side of ongoing reform and renewal, many of whom continue to feel called to prophetic witness to the ecclesial community as well as to prophetic action in ministry to the underserved in society. The spiritual direction rela-
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tionship can be a safe and grace-filled place of support and shared commitment between directors and directees on the prophetic margins. At the same time, the irregularity of participation in eucharistic community of many can undermine how directees and even their directors experience their ecclesial belonging.

Yet spiritual direction embodies an ecclesiology from below—two Christians who usually share a rather broad sense of coherent belief centered on Jesus, all of which is contextualized by a community of believers, however differently each may believe. The spiritual direction relationship is an intimate ecclesial community and is today exceedingly important, as are many other faith-based small Christian communities that represent the reality of church beyond officially constituted parish or diocesan structures. Many laity who have not had the advantage of theological education beyond their own sacramental formation at a much earlier time in their lives may struggle in their spiritual lives because they do not have an adult understanding (theology) of their faith. Spiritual direction cannot provide this education, but directors can recommend that they pursue some form of theological updating that enables them to become as adult in their faith understanding as they are in the rest of their lives.

Case Study #1: Spiritual Direction in the Wake of Hurricane Sandy

In order to exemplify some of these themes, I draw on a directee’s account of a session that occurred shortly after Hurricane Sandy struck the Northeast. Jane is a mature woman religious currently involved in a ministry serving trafficked women. She described our spiritual direction session as follows:

We spoke initially of the hurricane and the effects on so many in the NY area: flood damage, loss of power, no heat—so many were affected in this way and many others through the shortage of gas—lots of stress and anxiety flowing from

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the disruption of life in the city. I became aware of how this anxiety stirred up my own propensity to be anxious. We spoke about intercessory prayer—I was aware I was doing this—breathing deeply and holding individuals and situations in my heart. The breathing is healing and opens my heart to what is situational and what is my own anxiety.

In this first portion of the session, I was attentive to her particular experience of the hurricane and her community’s housing a displaced family. Jane was simultaneously noticing that some of her anxiety was not related to the disaster.

Jane has long practiced a silent kind of contemplation, and I asked her about her intercessory prayer during this time. She was practicing a breathing prayer, but as a result of my question, she noticed that while she was praying for others, her own personal anxiety was also being healed. Jane then moved to a discussion of how a book on contemplative prayer I had recommended to her was affecting her.

I begin to understand what he is saying—he is putting words on my experience—and yet at the same time he is opening up my experience for me. I am being drawn into knowing God in a deeper silence...it isn’t an intellectual knowing...but a knowing in the silence.

This text gave her words that resonated with her and helped her make the connection between head and heart as well as opening into prayer. As a result of Martin Laird’s “putting words” on her experience, she was able to notice and tell me more about her prayer than previously. As we lingered with her prayer experience, she noticed:
As we talked I was aware of a gratitude welling up. A gratitude for what I did not know! Janet offered the following observation—Gratitude is the deep response to the gift of life—God is all there is!—simple words that mean so much! I know this. It is not as if this is a gratitude for something, anything, a material good.

"God is all there is"—only—belief and trust in God—this is the foundation. Janet spoke of Liberation Theology and a sense of dependence on God. I experienced this on my trip to Peru—the people lack many of the daily necessities yet share the little they have and celebrate life amidst their poverty—they have a deep dependence on God. The gratitude stayed with me as we spoke—what I am becoming aware of, are the movements taking place—the profound gift that is life—the word "Emeth" speaks to me of this (a Hebrew word of mine from the past)—the paradox of those places/wounds in myself that cry out for healing are the gifts that actually bring healing—I am not sure I understand this...but I am knowing this on another level. The scripture, "by his wounds we are healed," is speaking to me. Is it the very wounds that bring us/me to know life in its fullness?

In this final part of Jane's account, simultaneous with experiencing her own gratitude that was present initially but not noticed, she begins to extend the very brief opening into theological reflection on her own. She first identifies with my mention of gratitude as a major theme in liberation theology by connecting it with a fairly recent experience in Peru. As gratitude continued to well up within her as she was speaking and reflecting, she describes and develops her own theological reflection about how she is being touched by God right within the session. She continues with a scripturally based theological insight that is part of her own religious history and that takes her deeper into the mystery of God healing her through her wounds, and through the wounds of Christ. And she arrives at her own conclusion about how she wants to learn this gratitude.

As a director, I can see in this account how I had offered this particular directee a contemplative text in the previous session, leaving her and God free to make use of it. This was intuitive on my part, an act of discernment, recognizing without saying very many words the quality of her silent contemplative prayer despite anxiety states rooted in her personal psychological history. I inquired about what was happening in her intercessory prayer in the context of Hurricane Sandy, which led to an account of how God was healing her anxiety even as she was concerned about others. She was able to differentiate between her prayer for others and God's grace to her personally within this cycle of breathing prayer. In probably less than one short paragraph, I made a theological connection between the gratitude for the gift of life, for God's presence in the midst of suffering from liberation theology, holding together a first-world experience of a disaster affecting so many but each differently. By naming the gratitude she was feeling but had not yet named, she did her own practical theology, describing it in her own words and in relationship to her graced history and her own theological language. Spiritual direction can help directees do practical theological reflection on their own lives. Discrete experiences of God begin to accumulate meaning, and patterns emerge that connect directees to the larger faith community and help them to appropriate the mysteries of faith more deeply.

As directees grow and mature in the spiritual life, directors should begin to see in each one a unique and original appropriation of the mysteries of Christian faith. It is reasonable to expect that those whose spiritual lives take place within the context of Christian faith communities will change, personalize, and grow in their theological understandings and articulation of their faith. They will discover these mysteries coming alive within their own experience and frequently turn to scriptural themes or theological language to express them.
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Case Study #2: Recognizing the Mystery of Grace in the Practice of Forgiveness

William, a professor at a college of criminal justice, provides another example of reflecting theologically on his experience of receiving the grace of forgiveness as a result of a larger transformation from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. This first change in his character might be described as growth in virtue through awareness of his defects, practicing altruism, and focusing more on Jesus than himself.

There was a time when I had a terrible ego problem. I've learned that the me, the ego, is...something to be ignored, putting one's personality aside and thinking of the other's needs. Now I place my ego to the side, saying [to Jesus], "What do you need, what do you want, what would you do?"

In describing this change in himself, he spontaneously began to engage in theological reflection. William recognized that he had gradually become less self-centered through the ongoing grace of Christ over fifteen years. He realized that this growth in altruism was not something entirely in his power but turned to Jesus in his prayer asking for guidance.

I've been able to go to people that really hurt one of my daughters. I went to my enemies and I knocked on the door and I said, look, I'm a Eucharistic Minister and I know your father is dying. Would you like me to bring communion? So I became a sacramental minister to people that injured my family. It was a beautiful gift, but if my old ego had been in place, my pride would have [gotten in the way], and I would have been unforgiving, I would have been condemning myself because we are going to be forgiven as...as we forgive.

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So when the whole thing was over, I said, "Oh my God, you gave me this gift to forgive people that were so injurious to my family. You helped me to forgive them. Now if terrible me can forgive, how much more will my God be able to forgive me."22

When "his enemies" were suffering, he discovered the answer to those questions. Notice how he reflected theologically on his experience. He realized he could never have offered communion to his neighbors in his former ego-state. He expressed awe and gratitude at what God had done in him. He named it as the gift of forgiving his enemies. Even more than that, he discovered something about God. William's way of thinking about God had perhaps changed. He did not forgive his neighbors because that is the condition for God's forgiveness. He forgave his neighbors because God enabled that forgiveness, and as a result William appreciated God's goodness and willingness to forgive.

According to the storyteller-theologian John Shea, religious traditions provide believers with a common language, symbols, and rituals that help us interpret our experience.23 William knew from the scriptures that Christians ought to forgive their enemies, but he was unable to do so. When he received the grace of forgiveness, it felt differently from what he had imagined. Yet he recognized that grace-empowered forgiveness had come alive in him.

It is important that directors pay attention to the theological interpretations of their directees when they emerge in their narratives and explanations. This noticing and theologizing is best done first within their directees' worldviews in order to foster their ongoing response to God and the mystery they are encountering. There are times when a director might gently offer an alternative perspective to a directee whose world is too limited, but this challenge can be done in a climate of empathy and acceptance of the other.

Such theological reflection is only one aspect of the conversation and may not be explicit in every session. Experiences that
are not explicitly interpreted theologically, however briefly, can remain so inchoate that directees may not be able to make the connection between their experience and the faith of the community, and as a result they may fail to welcome its mystical deepening. William’s interpretation of his experience led to a second theological insight about God’s willingness and ability to forgive. Had William focused only on his empowered forgiving, his director might have asked what, if anything, his experience suggested about God. Such a theologically based prompt invites directees to express their changing understandings (theologies) of whatever mystery of faith is already present in the conversation, both in a single session and over time.

CONCLUSION: SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AS THEOLOGY IN A PRACTICAL MODE

In both accounts of these directees’ religious experience and their reflection on them within a spiritual direction conversation, theology in a practical mode is already evident. Because spiritual direction encompasses the whole of directees’ lives, they become increasingly skilled at discerning responses and next steps in response to grace. Jane moves more deeply into gratitude as she discovers it already present. She implicitly but not explicitly associates the distress wreaked by Hurricane Sandy to a kind of liberation theology, although her experience in Peru is more consciously linked to it.

William’s insights into his self-centeredness led him to make serious efforts over time to center himself around Jesus instead of himself. His interior grace that impels him to make an overture to his “enemies” circles back to an awareness of God’s transforming action in him. He discovers how he has become a Jesus-kind of person as he reflects on how grace moved him to respond to his enemies’ losses in such a way that the gift of forgiveness was given. Gradually, the enmity fades between these two families.

William’s response to the Spirit’s prompting enables him to take the first step and gradually several subsequent ones.

Practices of spiritual direction thus display a form of practical theology. It is an ongoing process of recognizing Spirit-initiated actions felt in the life of believers. When they bring these impulses and situations to spiritual direction along with their often inchoate or partially formed insights and sort through additional responses, they engage in both practical theological reflection and discernment of spirits in conversation with a spiritual director. Ideally the spiritual director opens up greater theological insight, loving possibilities for action, and mystical deepening that is unique for each directee.

Notes

between director and directee as important issues for directors to explore in supervision. Her model presumes that a theology of religious experience informs the practice of spiritual direction and encourages directors to process their theological differences with directees in supervision so that they remain free to support directees in being affected by God in ways that enable directees to expand these meaning-making assumptions through deeper reflection on their own actual graced experience rather than on espoused beliefs alone.


5. “Spirituality is that part of theology which deals with Christian perfection and the ways that lead to it. Dogmatic Theology teaches what we should believe, Moral Theology teaches what we should do to avoid sin, mortal and venial, and above them both, though based on them both, comes Spirituality or Spiritual Theology. This again, is divided into Ascetic Theology and Mystical Theology,” Pierre Pourrat, cited by Sheldrake in “Trinity and Anthropology,” 60.

6. This is a fine example of Don S. Browning’s view that theology or theories are already embedded in practices so that they “are meaningful or theory-laden” and not simply the application of theology to a practice. A *Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 6.


9. I think of the theologians who dismantled the theology that maintained apartheid in South Africa, black theology in the United States that resisted the effects of racism and supported the civil rights movement, the retrieval of the prophetic imagination among mainstream traditions that supported resistance to "royal consciousness" both in churches and in society, feminist theologies that supported the full personhood of women in church and society as well as contested exclusively male images of the Divine, and systematic theologies that spoke about God as mystery and love that diminished the hold of punitive and sadistic images that developed in popular imagination on the basis of theologies of atonement.


11. Ibid., 60.


well as certain mystics in order to subsequently articulate her mys-
tical experience, which occurred before she recovered speech and
other motor abilities after surgery. As an experienced spiritual
director, she also uses case material from her directees that show
these same themes at work in her directees, essentially a God who
embraces us in untamed love; see also Brother Emmanuel of
Taizé, Love, Imperfectly Known: Beyond Spontaneous Representations
of God, trans. Dinah Livingston (New York: Crossroad Publishing,
2011). He draws on the Gospel of John and depth psychology in
order to challenge the obstacles many people experience from
God-representations that are essentially rooted in their own psy-
ches that prevent belief in and experience of a God of love. In
many instances these psychologically rooted, negative God-repre-
sentations become embedded in theologies of God that become
an obstacle to people’s experience of God as unlimited love. In
personal correspondence, Brother Emmanuel described the mys-
tical experience that initiated his call to religious life and that led
him to try to free others of God-representations that prevent the
very love God offers all of us.

16. See Denis Edwards, The Human Experience of God (New
York: Paulist Press, 1983). Edwards offers an accessible presenta-
tion of Rahnerian themes in less technical language; see also
Edwards’s Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit (Maryknoll,
NY: Orbis Books, 2004). This more recent work is a pneumatol-
ogy that shows the Spirit at work in the world from the begin-
ing of creation that supports appropriation of the new cosmology
and ecological themes so necessary today as well. See also Denis
Edwards, Ecology at the Heart of Faith: The Change of Heart that
Leads to a New Way of Living on Earth (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis
Books, 2006); Karl Rahner, “Reflection on the Experience of
and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1967),
86–90. Excerpts of this essay along with some of his teachings on
mysticism, prayer, and mission can be found in The Practice of the
Faith, which is organized around the theological virtues of faith,
hope, and love; see more recently, Karl Rahner: Spiritual Writings,
ed. and intro. Philip Endean, Modern Spiritual Masters
(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004). Also very accessible is Brian
O. McDermott’s What Are They Saying about the Grace of Christ?
Experience of Jesus as Lord, trans. John Bowden (New York:
Crossroad Publishing, 1981) is clearly more difficult.

17. William Reiser, SJ, Seeking God in All Things: Theology and
18. Because this session had taken an explicitly theological turn, I asked Jane to write an account of the session and give me permission to use it.


20. Spiritual reading of this nature is another time-honored spiritual practice. The spiritual direction conversation depends on the directee’s other spiritual practices of prayer, reading, journaling, eucharistic life, and the ongoing noticing of how she is being affected by grace on a day-to-day basis. This directee is theologically literate and creates continuity between her previous spiritual history and this present moment through “Emeth.” She had not yet made the connection for herself about how her immersion in anti-trafficking work might also be related to the experience she associates with Peru. When she returned for the next session life had moved on to completely different themes so I did not bring up this previous session.

21. Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998). Norris describes her struggles with the received vocabulary of Christian tradition and infuses these words with meanings to which she can relate from her own gradual experience of coming to belief in adulthood. These literary gems resemble the way directees articulate their experiences of faith in more fragmentary and less literary expressions of their lived theologies.
