

DEPRESSION AND SPIRITUAL DESOLATION

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OUR INTERIOR LIVES ARE LARGELY HIDDEN from us. It follows that it is not always obvious how we should respond to what we find ourselves experiencing. Any spiritual director with Ignatian training wants to ensure that the person to whom they are listening comes to recognise what is at the root of their life-experience. These days there are very many who label as 'depression' what is really just weariness, exhaustion or overwork. Similarly, it happens that many others label as 'spiritual desolation' what is simply disappointment regarding an idealized spiritual life, and only sometimes true depression.

These confusions arise because the Christian spiritual life, while having its own reality, occurs in and through the human faculties. If we are to avoid such confusions, we need some minimum criteria for distinguishing between spiritual desolation and depression. One resource that helps us is the Rules for Discernment given in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, who has bequeathed to us an invaluable little treatise on spiritual desolation. Another resource is the essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' in Freud's *On Metapsychology*,¹ where Freud tells us what characterizes a true depression. As a Freudian psychoanalyst and a disciple of Ignatius, I will try to draw out in this article some of the criteria that allow spiritual directors to distinguish spiritual desolation from depression. Three case studies will help us.

A Person in Desolation: Florence

Florence talks nostalgically about the time of her conversion: 'I was given to taste the word of God and to be nourished by it every day'. She

¹ (London: Penguin, 1984 [1917, 1915]).

remembers her daily life at that time, when she fulfilled her tasks as a mother under God's gaze, and experiencing God's presence. One question constantly comes to her lips: 'How could the inner joy that I was experiencing have disappeared? I have not only lost that path of happiness, I have even lost myself.' Indeed, a completely different state has followed that blessed time. Florence states: 'I hardly pray at all any more, and I don't understand why I no longer have the courage to go to the Eucharist, which for me was bread for the journey. Anyway, the Lord has left my house, and I am in despair about it. Also, I no longer have the heart to perform my household chores. . . . Painting is the only activity where I can find myself. In fact, it is my own kind of prayer, since I have decided to make an offering of it to Christ.'

But the memory of that time of conversion was stronger than everything else, so much so that Florence sought out a spiritual director. Reviewing her experience allowed her to realise that she was living out certain characteristics of the spiritual desolation described by Ignatius:

- Desolation comes after spiritual consolation, and is everything that is its contrary. There is no doubt that Florence experienced an authentic spiritual consolation. She is disconcerted by the contrast between her present state and that of the blessed time when, as she puts it, she knew an inner joy and when she was being given to love 'in the Creator of all things' (Exx 316).
- The disappearance of the felt effects of consolation leads to a real darkness of soul. Florence does not understand what has happened to her; it is as though she has gone blind, and she says she is 'lost'.
- Her faculties are disturbed and in turmoil. Cognitively, she misinterprets what has happened to her ('the Lord has left my house'); her sensitivity is heightened by the loss and causes her to become centred on herself ('painting is the only activity where I can find myself'); her will has become weaker ('I hardly pray at all any more', 'I haven't the heart to perform my household chores').

- ‘The soul is completely listless, tepid and as though separated from its Creator and Lord.’ (Exx 317) Florence no longer has the courage to go to Mass.
- ‘In time of desolation, it is chiefly the evil spirit who guides and counsels us.’ (Exx 318) Florence no longer prays and adopts deceptive thoughts as her own: ‘The Lord has left my house.’ She has succumbed to temptation.

A Person in Depression: Peter

Peter is a student who is very involved in scouting. The team of head scouts that he supervises sees in him the authority that they need, so much so that in October new responsibilities are offered to him. He makes a request for spiritual direction, because, as he says: ‘I can’t get to the point of making a decision’. At the time of the direction, Peter seems disturbed, and very quickly turns the conversation to what is tormenting him. He had failed his physics examination in June, and the incessant brooding on this failure during the summer had, according to him, caused him to lose sleep. Falling asleep is still a problem; getting up in the morning is even worse.

However, paradoxically, it is not the failure itself that seems to be touching him directly, but the supposed disappointment of his parents. Peter says that his father regards him as useless, although he shows him deep respect on many occasions. Moreover, though Peter’s story is marked by self-reproach, there is little shame in it. Finally, a question emerges: ‘I’m so incapacitated, how could I take on more important responsibilities?’ At the same time, Peter incessantly repeats that he has but one desire: to run away from all responsibility, all relationships. But he immediately adds every time: ‘And yet, I do pray, because I always have confidence in God. But it’s useless to pray to the Lord to give me his light. I don’t see clearly with it any more. That’s why I am knocking at the door of a servant of God like you, and hoping for God’s light to come from you.’

The story provokes a question: has Peter knocked at the right door? The truth is that in some of the elements contained in his account, we find the characteristics of certain depressions:

- A *triggering event*: his failure sets off in Peter a profound psychological disturbance, without it being possible to establish a causal connection.
- A *contradiction* which raises a difficult question: how can Peter be so convinced of his father's disappointment, and at the same time be able to acknowledge the esteem that the latter has many times expressed for him?
- A *lowering* of his self-esteem.
- *Insomnia* indicating an anguish on which he has no grip.
- A *loss of interest* in the outside world: responsibilities and relationships have lost all their attraction for Peter.

The spiritual director notices that Peter's torments are caused above all by his relations with others and with himself, but do not in any way weaken his confidence in God. He is still praying. Moreover, when that prayer gives him no clarity he is coming to place his trust in a servant of God. The content of his thoughts does not lead back to events, to concrete or precise realities, but seems largely to derive from his imagination.

A Person in Desolation and Depression

Edmund, a priest of about 40, is considering asking his bishop to relieve him of certain responsibilities. 'I've been keeping them at arm's length for several months.' Edmund's director was not surprised by this: their recent conversations had been marked by a recurring complaint on his part. 'For me, all activity is like trying to lift a mountain. It is only out of faithfulness to my priesthood that I get up in the morning. I have to celebrate the Eucharist from 7.30 a.m. Though "celebrate" is a pretty big word, and I can't even manage to prepare a brief commentary on the day's gospel any more. In any case, am I worthy at this point to celebrate the Eucharist, I who no longer have a taste for the Word of God? My parishioners expect from me an expression of faith, but have I still got any faith? I am at the bottom of a quagmire, and it's no good for me to pray; God doesn't grant my prayers. Because of that I have got to the point of not being able to trust God any more. Speaking of God's love to my parishioners sounds like hypocrisy. My priesthood used to give meaning to my life, but, today, it doesn't mean anything to me.' At the heart of all this, another request is heard: 'All this struggle is exhausting

me, I spend hours slumped in an armchair, unable to do anything; it would be better for me to be completely relieved of everything and go away for a rest.'

The depressive state of this priest is obvious:

- A *profoundly painful mood*: 'a recurring complaint'.
- The *inability to choose* new areas of interest: 'It would be better for me to be completely relieved of everything'.
- An *inhibition*: 'I spend hours slumped in an armchair, unable to do anything'.

But there is more to it than depression. Edmund presents, in fact, some traits characteristic of a state of *spiritual desolation*:

- The feeling that *he no longer has faith or hope*. It is thus really his Christian spiritual life, the free gift of a relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, that seems to have been attacked at the root. The person who welcomed this gift and responded to a personal call has come to doubt it: 'Have I still got any faith?'
- *False thoughts* concerning the celebration of the Eucharist. False, because, as any priest knows, the validity of this sacrament does not depend on his feeling worthy or unworthy to preside.

Similarities and Differences

It is not easy, even for the person concerned, to distinguish between what derives from a spiritual desolation and what comes from a depression; and one can be suffering from both at the same time. Nevertheless, on the basis of the three situations just described, we can note that these conditions have some traits that are similar, and some that are truly different. First the similarities:

- The complaint refers to *past experience*: by contrast, current experience is presented as affectively unsatisfactory, tedious, painful.
- The faculties of the will are weakened; those of the understanding are *operating inappropriately*.

- A whole dynamism of life and of interest in the outside world seems to have *run down*.

But then we also have criteria for distinguishing the two states. In someone living in *spiritual desolation*:

- The complaint refers chiefly to the person's relationship *with God*.
- The focus of the problem is on *how the effects of consolation have disappeared*.
- The faculties are working in a *distorted* way.
- The root cause is a *temptation* to which the person has more or less succumbed.

In a person who is *depressed*:

- The complaint revolves around the image that they more or less consciously have *of themselves*, or around the image that they think others have of them, or around both.
- The focus of the problem is *puzzling*, and attempts to locate and describe it are not convincing, even for the person concerned.
- The faculties are to a greater or lesser extent *inhibited*.
- The root cause lies in *unconscious processes*.

Two Types of Listening

Spiritual Listening

Ignatian spiritual directors base their listening on the following:

- The gift of discernment and the art of accompaniment, which they develop principally through their knowledge of the Rules for Discernment in the *Spiritual Exercises*.
- An unwavering assurance of the Holy Spirit's presence and action in the soul of the directee.
- Familiarity with Scripture, intimacy with Christ, and knowledge of the paths of the Christian spiritual life.

Psychoanalytic Listening

Psychoanalysts base their listening on the following:

- Knowledge and professional training.
- The conviction that, if repression excludes from the conscious mind a certain number of images and affects, these are not simple static elements buried in the unconscious. They are symptoms freighted with the conflicting intentions and drives that lie at their source. They represent provisional and unstable compromise solutions, perhaps waiting to be developed or reconfigured.
- A familiarity with the ins and outs of the transference and counter-transference relationship—the space where the particular unknowns of a psychoanalytic cure are played out.

Thus, the listening of an Ignatian spiritual director is based on faith and a tradition, whereas that of the psychoanalyst is based on scientific competence. This article is concerned only with spiritual accompaniment, whether of a person in desolation or in depression, or in both at the same time. We will therefore now develop what is appropriate for each of these types of accompaniment.

Accompanying a Person in Spiritual Desolation

When listening to a person who is clearly living through spiritual desolation, the conduct of the director is clearly indicated in the Rules for Discernment presented by St. Ignatius:

- Assisting the person to *recognise in themselves* certain features of desolation, as Ignatius names them in Exx 317 of the *Spiritual Exercises*. Thus, Florence will become aware that she is living ‘everything the contrary of’ the spiritual consolation that was given her at the time of her conversion. The director also affirms that she has a real spiritual life, a living relationship with the Lord.
- Inviting the person to remain *patient*, because this time will not last if the person takes ‘unremitting action against such desolation’ (Exx 321).

- Seeking with the person the *cause* of this desolation. Florence is lost when faced with how the felt effects of consolation have disappeared. Of the three main causes presented by Ignatius, she will recognise that this desolation allows her to realise what she is worth and how far she will go 'in serving and praising God without so much pay in consolations and increased graces' (Exx 322).
- Recognising the *work of the enemy* of human nature. Florence has been deceived by his suggestion, because she says, 'The Lord has left my house', but this deception is thwarted, because she has entrusted herself 'to another spiritual person who is acquainted with his trickery and malice' (Exx 326).
- Emphasizing the *freedom* that she has, by considering with her 'how the Lord has left her to her natural powers' so that she may resist the enemy, for she can do this 'with the divine aid, which always remains with her, even though she does not clearly perceive it' (Exx 320). The memory of the inner joy experienced at the time of her conversion has not enclosed Florence inside herself, because, through grace, she was driven to request spiritual direction.

Directing a Person in Depression

Any director listening to the plaintive story of a person trying to communicate their psychological suffering is careful not to interrupt. This attitude of profound respect allows them to detect in the story certain elements which help them to note that the person is not experiencing spiritual desolation. Thus their conduct will consist of:

- Assuring the person that their suffering is *being heard*. Thus Peter has lost sleep, he is haunted by the supposed disappointment of his parents, he devalues himself. . . . And affirming that none of this allows the conclusion that the suffering described has a spiritual origin.
- Being careful *not to give advice* about this psychological suffering, because what led to the depression is not within the realm of spiritual direction.

- Helping the person to notice that their spiritual life is in no way altered by this suffering. Thus Peter's director would affirm Peter's great faith. Not only does Peter affirm that he prays and preserves great trust in God, but also, faced with what he experiences as silence from God, he does not hesitate to come knocking at the door of God's servant. The director will also emphasize that, even if Peter cannot come to a decision, he is still motivated by charity: he remains attentive to the request that has been made of him.
- Suggesting that the person consult a psychotherapist who has the skill to help them. Peter's insomnia should be taken seriously. He is being rendered relatively powerless by the incessant brooding on his failure. . . . All of the content of Peter's story gives good reason to conclude that the suffering he is experiencing is of a psychological nature.
- Considering with the person how they can continue to nourish their spiritual life. In Peter's case, this will mean looking at how to maintain his prayer-life without its being adversely influenced by the fact that he says he has not received the light he is hoping for.

Directing a Person in Both Depression and Desolation

This direction is more delicate. It is important to be clear on where one is, so as to avoid serious error.

In the first place, the person should be helped to recognise what in their complaint indicates *suffering of a psychological nature*. For Edmund, all activity is 'like trying to lift a mountain', and he is spending hours slumped in an armchair. But this should not be understood as the avoidance and refusal of any effort, as a symptom of laziness. What he presents is a sign of an interior blockage over which he does not have much power. It is a matter of common sense to make him understand that this will not be relieved by spiritual direction, but through psychotherapeutic intervention.

In the second place, the person should be encouraged to face their desolation. For this is possible, despite their depression. The gift of grace received at baptism cannot be destroyed by a bad physical or

psychological condition. The director will therefore be concerned with the following:

- Emphasizing all that indicates an *authentic spiritual life* in the person. Edmund is continuing to celebrate the Eucharist and to pray, difficult as this may be for him. In the most essential, he is faithful.
- *Naming the temptation* to which the person has succumbed. Here, the priest has allowed himself to be deceived by false thoughts and to be influenced by the feeling that he might have lost his faith.
- Inviting the person to *fight against the temptation*, at the same time as helping them to recognise that they are depressed. Thus Edmund was invited to make an act of faith, and did so freely. He resolved to kneel before his crucifix every evening. In the following weeks, his union with Christ was shown by a profound peace, on which the symptoms of his depressive condition had no hold. This peace came from outside; it came from God.

A Final Thought

Psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis provide much insight into the self. But spiritual directors need not be expert in these matters. They provide a service which is distinctively their own. They must persevere with integrity at their own proper task: that of 'helping people to recognise themselves as both graced and sinful at the same time, receiving their lives from God and yet evading God'.²

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² Odilon de Varine in *La Croix* (27 October 2001). This present article was first published in the January 2003 number of *Christus*, and is translated with the Editor's kind permission.