

Walking together in faith

By Dominic Maruca, SJ

For more than 45 years the mission entrusted to me by the Society of Jesus has been one of caring for persons seeking some kind of spiritual help. In carrying out this mission I've responded to requests to minister throughout the United States, Europe, Asia, Africa, the South Pacific and South America. The assistance people were seeking covered a wide range of relationships that cannot be placed neatly into tidy boxes. The terms "guidance, counseling, psychotherapy, spiritual direction, spiritual conversation" are used by many interchangeably; they can at times overlap.

I have learned over a long span of years how important it is to establish *contractual clarity*. I asked, quite simply: "What precisely is it you're seeking in coming for help? Am I the best person to assist you as you seek to satisfy this need?" This eliminated misunderstanding, frustration, anger, and disappointment. Let me indicate how I learned to arrive at such clarity.

Asking questions

I took my cue from the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber: he observed that God regularly began a conversation by asking a question: Of Adam: "*Where are you?*" (*Genesis 3:9*). Of Elijah: "*Why are you here?*" (*1 Kings 19:10*). Jesus of Nazareth asked Andrew and John: "*What are you looking for?*" (*John 1:38*).

I usually asked these three questions to persons who

came to me for some kind of assistance. After they had spent some time in prayerful reflection, I listened to what they had to say. Depending on where persons saw themselves, we would decide together whether I should be the one to guide and accompany them on

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the stage of life's journey they had reached.

At times we decided that it would be advisable for them to consult someone better qualified than I to meet their needs and expectations.

For example, a person suffering from some deep disorder or psychic conflict clearly would sense they would be best helped by some-

one trained in a specialized program, professionally supervised and formally certified. They needed frequent meetings scheduled at regular intervals with clearly defined roles and boundaries. They of course expected to pay a fee and saw themselves as *patients*. I regularly referred them to professionally trained therapists for treatment.

Fellow pilgrims

Most persons who came to me, however, seemed to be looking for spiritual companionship, accompaniment or direction. They didn't want counseling or psychotherapy. They were more comfortable with an atmosphere of friendly exchange; of intimate personal sharing that could have profound spiritual significance.

In such circumstances, I preferred to be viewed as a fellow pilgrim on life's journey. Like them, I was walking in faith, as God gradually illumined the path ahead of me. I insisted that I too had to take one step at a time. Like them, I was in the lengthy process of growing in intimate communion with God. Such interaction is characterized by some as spiritual *conversation* rather than as spiritual *direction*. Terminology was not my concern if the relationship was au-

WHERE ARE YOU?

Why are you here?

thentic and clearly beneficial.

My purpose in relating this experience is to raise, perhaps, a question in your mind. Has God provided you with the right qualities, the necessary disposition to minister to others as a companion? How can you know whether you're called to this ministry to others?

Well, ask yourself: "Have I been trying to live my baptismal commitment faithfully over the years? Have I reflected prayerfully over my experience? Have I been praying over the daily liturgical readings? Have I faithfully participated in the Church's worship celebrations? Have I availed myself of retreats and workshops and tried to clarify my lived experience through guided reading and consultation?"

If your answers to these and similar questions are humbly affirmative, perhaps God is calling you to become a spiritual companion for others.

I personally acknowledge that you as a layperson – single or married, separated, divorced or widowed – may be better qualified than I as a priest and a consecrated religious to accompany persons who are searching for God as you are searching.

The fabric of faith is fashioned by the interweaving of many strands of life. Is God perhaps inviting you to serve as an instrument for guiding and encouraging others? They may find themselves disoriented and discouraged, but they're trying to discern how to walk with God. Perhaps what you are struggling with or have suffered can have salvific significance for someone else. Is God inviting you to share with others the gifts entrusted to you?

Emmaus experience

By way of conclusion, allow me to dwell on what is called the *Emmaus experience*, after the way in which Jesus ministered to his disoriented disciples when they were walking away from Jerusalem (*cf. Luke 24:13-36*). This scene is one of my favorite stories because over the years, I've found that walking, talking and dining together can be a most pleasant human experience!

May I suggest that when someone isn't in need of professional psychotherapy – and let's presume that there isn't always such a need! – could it be that what that person may really need is a friendly invitation to go for a walk with you? As you walk along, you may begin to

What are you looking for?

FAITH INTO ACTION

talk about what both of you find deep in your hearts. As you walk along and talk, perhaps a Third Presence will emerge from the shadows and fall into step with you.

After listening patiently to you, that Presence may enter into your conversation.

Perhaps as you hear again the story of his life and suffering, things begin to fall into place. Perhaps your hearts will begin to burn within you. Like the two disciples, you will recognize that everyone who is anointed by the Spirit of God must follow the path pioneered by Jesus Christ.

As you observe that the evening shadows in your life are lengthening, you may invite this mysterious Presence to abide with you and dine with you. Perhaps as you are breaking bread, recognition will dawn on you. Instead of being disoriented and discouraged, you may find yourselves able to make sense of your own life and suffering.

With the light of faith, you may recognize that all of us are called to live through the Paschal Mystery: to die and rise with Jesus as was symbolized in our baptism. The two disciples became ecstatic – which doesn't mean a loss of consciousness, but a loss of absorbing, depressing self-consciousness. They found it easy to return joyfully to Jerusalem, which is the living Church. After walking and talking and dining together, you may feel like doing the same!

If you're attracted by this prospect of walking along the way to Emmaus together with others, look around. Is there someone to whom you might reach out? Someone you can call? Is there someone you would like to invite to go for a walk with you?

St. Ignatius Loyola, after spending some years as a solitary adventurer, found it more enjoyable to go through life arm in arm with companions; that is how the *Company of Jesus* came to be. Ask St. Ignatius Loyola to help you discern whether God is calling you to embark on a similar mission.

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Shall we walk together?