

Emmaus Programme

Taking Care: Ethics and Boundaries

Introduction

However we may see it, spiritual accompaniment means that another person is entrusting the guide with their personal spiritual experiences, and their private thoughts and reflection, and therefore there is an imbalance of power in this relationship. It is not equal or 'symmetrical' – you are being trained to listen and say less, share less; and to establish yourself as a trustworthy and reliable person.

This opens the possibility of misuse of this information, or misunderstanding the nature of the relationship, which risks leaving the other person exposed or even feeling let down or hurt. Understanding boundaries, and what we are here for and what we are not, is very important. Also we need to be clear about our role, since from that some clarity about the relationship emerges.

The heads that you accompany can realistically and reasonably expect you to behave in an ethical manner, and as professional people they will have a clear idea of what this means. In professional settings ethics are usually set out in a normative way – giving principles (such as confidentiality and respect for autonomy) and do's and don'ts that flow from these and emerge from reflection on good practice.

What is also important is the character of the person: good people tend to behave well; wise people tend to make wise decisions. One thing we can hope for in dealing with Christians is that we are dealing with people who, though sinners, are people of good character – and in this case are also reflective and discerning.

Roles and Rules

You are training to undertake the role of a spiritual guide, to provide spiritual accompaniment. When we take on a role, there are a set of expectations that go with it – and there is a reciprocal role that the other person takes on which matches or 'fits' your role. If, for example, your directee tells you nothing about their interior life, does not talk and tries to get you to do all the talking, then they have either misunderstood the role or are somehow refusing the role.

Here are some of the features of the role of spiritual guide: turns up on time, be open and interested, listens sensitively, does not talk too much, responds appropriately to what is said, summarises and explores, makes suggestions (ie, ideas for prayer, scripture), does not self-disclose unless it is really helpful, and manages the time.

The directee meanwhile is expected to: talk about their spiritual life, does their best to articulate their experience, be prepared to reflect on what is said to them etc.

Once we are clear about the role, certain rules flow from it. And also it makes it clear what is not the role: ie, not friendship, not coach-mentor, not manager. These roles may be more familiar and may need to be consciously set aside.

Boundaries

Boundaries set limits and separate 'me' from 'you/not me', 'my space' from 'your space'. They can relate to: Time – Space – Person. All relationships have boundaries – and they vary according to the relationship.

In this setting, boundaries are there to establish TRUST, to allow the task to be done well (by setting limits), and to protect both parties. They create a safe space.

Normative Ethics

Most professional Codes of Conduct are based on normative ethics, that is, they provide norms and guidelines or rules for behaviour. These are often sensible and based on experience and where things have gone wrong. Some clear ones for spiritual accompaniment would be:

1. Keep confidentiality
2. Treat the person with respect
3. Allow the person to make their own decisions
4. No intrusive or inappropriate physical contact

The Character of the Person

This approach does not ask 'What are we going to do? How are we going to behave?' but 'What sort of person do we want to be? How are we going to be?' This refers to 'character' – because the good person acts in a good way, and their actions flow from inner attitudes, decisions and convictions formed over years and decades.

These qualities of the person are virtues – habits of the heart that have become so habitual that they are part of who we are. The virtues needed for this sort of work are: *trustworthiness; altruism; prudence; love; and holiness.*

- i. **Trustworthiness:** This describes values like fidelity, honesty, loyalty, fairness, truthfulness, helpfulness. This is ESSENTIAL: it needs to be exemplary.
- ii. **Altruism:** This is the 'habit of a generous spirit'. It involves love and care for another person, and is not related to what the person can do for me. My position/role/power used for the other person's interests.
Note: the 'fiduciary obligation' is common to all professions and is "The duty to exercise power and authority in ways that will serve the person's need – and ensures that their vulnerability will not be exploited". This means that in this situation we give preference to the other person's interests over own.
- iii. **Prudence:** This does not mean cautiousness or timidity, but practical wisdom. It requires the ability to 1. See clearly; 2. Deliberate on all the relevant info; and 3. Decide and choose: the *right means ... for a good end*
- iv. **Love:** This is expressed by acts of mercy, kindness, loyalty. It involves compassion (= "suffering with"), and can be defined (non-sentimentally) as *desiring the best for the other person*. It also involves self-care (love for self, desiring the best for oneself too).
- v. **Holiness:** The holy person knows God and has closeness to God. That relationship gives *strength, direction and focus* to their life: God is the centre, not the self. Typically they will express love – by acts of mercy, justice and compassion. We experience holy people as genuine, accepting, non-defensive, self-aware, and 'God-aware'.

Note: holiness is no guarantee of being a nice person!

These characteristics are based on actions: so practise, practise, practise! Good people of character do the right thing and seek to behave well. They have a clear 'moral vision', but recognise that life is complex, and can deal with complexity.

For us: Jesus is the role model ... and the Kingdom as our moral vision and horizon.

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