

St. Gaspar as Spiritual Director: Gaspar's Letters to Orazio Bracaglia

by Jerry Stack, C.P.P.S.

Today we usually think of spiritual direction as a face-to-face encounter between the director and the directed which takes place for a set period time on a regularly scheduled basis. This may be the norm today, but in the past direction was sometimes conducted by mail. This is fortunate for us because we have the correspondence of our founder St. Gaspar with a student (and later ordained member of the Congregation) and thus a record of how one saint conducted spiritual direction.

Direction by Mail

Gaspar conducted spiritual direction by correspondence with Orazio Bracaglia on a rather irregular, almost casual basis. It is also unusual, for us in our day, least, that Gaspar, a religious superior, would agree to direct one of the seminarians of the Society who was boarding student at Sonnino. (He was one of the few or perhaps the only missionary educated in our own schools to have worked closely with Gaspar later on.)

The correspondence I looked at consists of letters to Bracaglia from Gaspar during the period 1827-1832. In the last year of this correspondence Bracaglia was ordained to the priesthood. There are more letters between the two which may be treated in a future article. As far as I know the letters from Bracaglia have not survived.

Gaspar took the request to be Bracaglia's spiritual director as perfectly natural, noting that Ignatius directed Xavier from a distance. Apparently as a way of preserving confidentiality should the letters be seen by others, Gaspar asks Bracaglia to write about himself in the third person: "...you should always use such expressions as: 'the soul you know about...'" Gaspar used this circumlocution in some but not all the letters and in some he simply speaks to Bracaglia in the second person.

Gaspar further advises him to read the letters and then burn them unless there is good reason to keep them. Apparently Bracaglia thought they were worth saving and that is fortunate for us.

A Simple Approach

From the very first letter I was struck by Gaspar's very matter of fact approach to Bracaglia's spiritual life. In that letter (March 1827) Gaspar presumes that the Orazio is familiar with the "rules for mental prayer." In case he is not, however, he urges Bracaglia to "read the ones that are suggested by Rodriguez" with the permission of the "President" (house superior) at Sonnino. After inquiring about how long it had been since his last general confession and his practice in receiving communion, Gaspar suggests something that many of us would find familiar, a journal: "...jot down for me the thoughts that God communicates to you in your prayers."

Apparently our student responded quickly, since Gaspar writes to him less than a month later. He assures him of his prayers and asks that Bracaglia do the same for him. Alluding to Samuel and Eli, Gaspar urges the use of a brief prayer: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." He suggests that Orazio speak with one of the priests and "have recourse to him just as Samuel did with Eli." Apparently Gaspar found nothing unusual about his directee opening his heart to another member the community as well.

Dealing with problems

Bracaglia was having problems with his mind wandering in prayer. Gaspar allays his anxieties, assuring him that these are to be expected and that undue anxiety over them is the work of the Devil confounding the work of God. (April 1827) In a subsequent letter he refers to temptations as "tantrums of the Devil" who is angry to see a soul which loves God. (November 1827) Gaspar is very gentle and reassuring as he speaks to his directee about making progress. Using the image of a person who is crippled and has difficulty walking, he suggests that even though our human nature wants to make rapid progress, "...we have to say to ourselves, 'I just do not have the legs for doing it... I shall move along slowly'." When a person fails, Gaspar suggests that one follow the lead of St. Francis de Sales and say, "Lord, I am infirm, I am weak, help me..." In another letter he writes: "...be courageous, for *qui coepit opus ipse perficiet, consolidabitque*. ('He who began the work in you will perfect and consolidate it.')

This, however, is not a matter of just a day or so, but rather of our whole lifetime which must be dedicated to divine service."

What emerges from these passages is the image of a gentle and down-to-earth observer of human nature and spiritual growth. Gaspar encourages young Orazio and helps him to avoid becoming bogged down in anxieties over progress in the spiritual life. He reassures his young charge that growth may be slow and is in any case a lifelong task.

Bracaglia's temptations seem to be the kind which are common to sensitive souls in community life: pride, resentment, lack of charity, and anger. Gaspar's counsel to Bracaglia is simple and practical. With regard to pride, Gaspar urges him not to always give voice to his opinion but, when asked, to couch a response in tentative, open-ended phrases like "it seems to me" or "if I am not mistaken." Thoughts of pride are like "flies in the summertime:" annoying but not a source of major concern. Acts of humility are the antidote to pride.

Community Life and Religious Vocation

Living in community inevitably raises issues like hurts, resentment, and anger. Gaspar is again very understanding and matter of fact about such concerns. He reminds his charge: "Indeed, what more do we seek if not the wellbeing of our neighbors and good order?" He urges humility, as he states in what might seem hyperbole: "[We should have] a fraternal compassion toward our own people which causes us to become humble and to utter: 'O my God, what wretches we are!'" In a similar vein he suggests that Bracaglia try an act of humility, saying "O Lord, behold my miseries...O Lord, give me holy humility...O Lord, what an abyss of misery I am."

With regard to his vocation, Gaspar is quite reassuring and direct with this student: "...in your case it is very clear that you have a vocation and nothing more need be said." Besides, he adds, there is a great need for workers in this world and it would be a shame to forfeit the beginnings God has given him. Gaspar was certainly direct in assuring Bracaglia that he was indeed called by God to the Society.

Parenthetically, in this same letter quoted in the previous paragraph Gaspar urges Bracaglia not to return to his home town. He believes that this will lead to a "deterioration in perfection." It is not clear from Gaspar's letter for how long or for what purpose the student would return to his hometown. At the same time Gaspar is quick to add: "I do not in the least intend to accuse anyone who has left our ranks...I respect all of them." Gaspar could be quite

directive when necessary, but at the same time his response is compassionate and not at all judgmental of those who have left the community. Possibly Bracaglia was struggling with that very issue.

Gaspar Trusts Bracaglia

Toward the end of the correspondence we have been considering Gaspar notes that it has been "quite awhile" since he has seen a letter from his Bracaglia. I found it significant that he does not find this at all a cause for concern. He simply presumes that Bracaglia had selected another director who might be better able to give him what he needs. Gaspar was certainly not possessive or paternalistic in his relationship with this student! He not only trusted in Bracaglia's good judgment but also believed that someone else might provide better spiritual direction.

Obviously Gaspar was a man who was very much in touch with his own journey of spiritual growth, a person of deep and genuine humility which enabled him to offer direction without any kind of possessiveness or paternalism. He trusted that Orazio Bracaglia had basic good will, common sense, and a desire to grow in holiness. Gaspar demonstrated extraordinary compassion, trust, and detachment in carrying out the delicate task of spiritual direction. His example remains for us not only an inspiration for those who carry out the ministry of spiritual direction, but for all of us in our relationships with one another.

(This article originally appeared in the newsletter of the Province of the Pacific, *Pacific Press*, March-April 1999, pp. 12-13)