



**SPIRITUAL
DIRECTION**

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SPIRITUAL DIRECTION is not exactly a household term in late 20th Century America. Nor is it that familiar among Catholics, even now a quarter of a century after the second Vatican Council made the "universal call to holiness" a keystone of its teaching.

Pope John Paul II in his recent Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, points out that this call to holiness is not just a "moral exhortation" but a "requirement." Spiritual direction can help us live up to this "requirement"—and teach us how to become better Christians.

Perhaps the best analogy to spiritual direction is found in the world of sports—coaching. And the kind of coaching done in a sport like tennis or

golf is closer to the idea than coaching a team. A beginner might get a lot out of an instruction class, but if you are really into a sport, individual coaching is a lot more important, even if you're not training for the Olympics.

In the spiritual life it's the same. As children we may have studied religion in a parochial school or in a released time program. In homilies at Mass we are also taught how to improve our spiritual life. The trouble is that, by its nature, this kind of teaching has to be rather general. If it fits the case of a person who very rarely prays, though he may fulfill the basic precept of attending Mass on Sunday, it probably won't fill the needs of someone who wants to do more, to come closer to Christ. And, by the same token, if it is aimed at people with a more developed spiritual life, it may be discouraging or confusing to a beginner.

This is why individualized coaching is so important for our growth as Christians, just as it would be if we wanted to improve our golf or tennis, or any other skill. No two people are exactly alike. Each has his or her own defects that have to be overcome and his or her own strengths that can be improved and built upon. No two people live in exactly the same family, professional, or social circumstances. Each has par-

ticular problems that a spiritual advisor or "coach" can help him to overcome.

The saints are people who have been notably successful in their efforts to lead a fully Christian life. They know what they are talking about when it comes to developing spiritual life, and those among them who have written "how to do it" advice have almost always recommended spiritual direction.

In the following pages, Father Javier de Pedro, a priest of Opus Dei who was previously an industrial engineer, gives some answers to questions that might arise in the mind of someone interested in receiving spiritual direction.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION has been defined as the art of leading souls from the very beginning of their spiritual life to the fulfillment of Christian life. It's a way of providing help in our daily struggle to fulfill the will of God.

The definition actually looks at it from the point of view of the one who guides—the spiritual director. But since the objective of this booklet is to encourage the reader to seek spiritual direction, it seems more fitting to deal with the subject from the point of view of the "directee"—the person who wishes to

receive it, and thus live his or her faith to its fullest.

Those who really want to improve in their living of the teachings of Christ will receive God's grace, and the clear light that comes from a good spiritual director is a great help. But spiritual direction is a two-way street. The person receiving direction must be willing, generous and docile or "teachable" (from the Latin word *docere*—to teach).

If you are a parent, you most likely have already given a lot of spiritual direction without realizing it: when you talked to your children about God, when you helped them to distinguish between good and evil, when you taught them how to pray, when you taught them how to work and love one another. And the young reader has also given spiritual direction to his friends, any time that he gave them sincere, Christian advice.

This is a rough idea of what spiritual direction is. It is having access to Christian wisdom through a person who, through prayer, study and the practice of virtues, is qualified to guide a soul towards sanctity. It is getting to learn the true objectives of life, the hidden obstacles towards the attainment of those ends. It is being encouraged in difficult times, learning to use the means needed to live the kind of Christian life that God expects from each of us.

Why we need direction

It's always hard to be objective when one's own interests are involved.

That's why we need consultants and experts to guide and advise us: we go to a mechanic when our car gives us problems, we hire business consultants when management problems arise, and we go to the doctor when something ails us. In much the same way, for our spiritual health, we get a spiritual director.

If you have a personal interest in a matter, it is difficult not to be biased. That's why relatives of the plaintiff and defendant are not chosen for juries, and as the Indian poet Tagore said: "You do not see yourself as you really are: what you see is a mere shadow."

Pride, that disordered love of oneself, moves us to justify our mistakes, to seek the easy way out instead of the right way. Pride makes us lenient with our own defects but stern towards those of others. The heart, then, becomes an accomplice of the mind, and blinds our eyes. But even if our heart were humble and our vision clear, we would still need the help of an adviser because we often don't know which path we should follow. As St. Teresa of Avila used to say: "Souls need to open their hearts to someone; every soul needs an outlet."

The Bible is filled with stories of men and women helping one another in their journey towards God: the friendship between St. Raphael and Tobias; those intense conversations of Jesus with his disciples; Nicodemus meeting with Christ to ask his advice; St. Paul, fallen from his horse, being told by our Lord to seek instructions from Ananias.

Having a spiritual director is like having a faithful friend. He reminds us of what we know we should do whenever we begin to dialogue with temptation. He gives us back the smile we lose when our heart is tormented by anguish. With his prayers and upright soul, he strengthens our resolve to fight. God has always wanted it like this. Scripture tells us: "A brother who is helped by his brother is like a fortified city" (Prov. 18:19); and sadly reminds us: "Woe to the person who is alone!"

Getting started; Choosing a director

A good adviser of souls should have three qualifications. He should be prudent, pious and knowledgeable in the doctrine of the faith.

•A *prudent director*: The prudent person lives fully in the present, learning from the past and looking forward to the future.

A good director knows how to listen. He asks questions and thinks things over. At times he won't immediately try to suggest a solution to your problem; he will need time to study the matter or to get to know you better.

A tendency to compromise is not the same as prudence. Some people tend to find evil in good things and some good in what is evil. But this may simply be an attempt to find an impossible balance between God's will and our own sinful inclinations.

Prudence is not just a matter of moderation either. Moderation should always accompany the moral virtues, but not the theological ones. Faith, hope and charity, the three theological virtues, come from God and have him as their object; moderation does not have a place in these virtues. We can never know God too well, trust in him too fully, or love him excessively.

So, a really prudent spiritual director will be demanding in the pursuit of sanctity. While respecting our freedom in matters of opinion, and maintaining a balanced prudence in moral judgments, he will be a person who will strongly demand that we root out whatever could possibly offend God. He or she would gently insist that we be generous in corresponding to God's infinite generosity.

•*A pious person*: A spiritual director has to be close to God if he is going to be able to truly guide souls. He is a person who prays. To be a good instrument of God, he has to be very united with him. He stands out, without wanting to, because of his frequent prayer before the tabernacle. If he is a priest, his love for the sacrament of penance is shown by the time he spends in the confessional. We see his loving care in prayers and the liturgy. His piety may be manifested simply by the devout way he makes the sign of the cross. And since "out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks," the supernatural tone of his conversation is always a good indication of his love for God.

There are men who talk about God, but do not talk to him as much as they should. A spiritual director who does not talk to God sufficiently, or at all, will tend to talk about ideologies, motivations, neuroses, group tendencies, etc. He will thus only be discussing human topics, noble perhaps, but still merely human. Such a person would not make a good director.

This is not to say that human topics must be avoided. But spiritual direction can't be limited to this. It would then be just small talk with a friend, but not with a real director of our soul. He would not be the "good shepherd" who makes the sheep recognize the voice of God.

• *A person with good doctrine:* To effectively carry out his task, the director has to be securely anchored in the teachings of the Magisterium of the Church. He need not be brilliant, but he must be a man who knows well and with certainty the doctrine of our Christian faith and morals. Nothing is as bad here as a "blind man leading another blind man;" both will fall into the pit.

• *One who respects your freedom:* Spiritual direction is a task which is both human and divine. It should always be given with the greatest respect for the personal freedom of the person being guided. God is the sole owner of the soul, and he has created man with a free will. A director can overdo his task of guiding souls by being coercive, threatening, elitist, and all-knowing, going into areas "which God has left to the free discussion of men" (Msgr. Escriva). Spiritual direction should always be exercised in an atmosphere of true freedom.

Dispositions: What we bring to spiritual direction

Msgr. Escriva would often warn us of the danger of going to spiritual direction with the aim of learning something novel, instead of wanting to improve in our interior life. From his teachings, I have selected some qualities that will help a person to benefit from spiritual

direction and make progress in his life as a Christian.

• *Sincerity:* His great love for personal freedom and the responsibilities that go with it, moved Msgr. Escriva to always insist on the great need for sincerity.

Without sincerity, spiritual direction (and even our ordinary daily lives) can't be fruitful. When we go to spiritual direction, we should beware of that human tendency to dress the truth up whenever we fear or dislike it. We should always be alert to fight the temptation to create our own truth. Total openness is necessary for fruitful spiritual direction. Without this, the director will be doing his task blindly. If we truly want to do the will of God, we should not be afraid of revealing our weaknesses.

Spiritual direction is of course different from confession. In the latter, we accuse ourselves of our sins. In the former, we talk about everything: our good works, the joys shared with others; we talk about temptations we have met, our weaknesses, our failures and successes in our struggles. We talk about our fear of really opening up. We reveal the inner recesses of our soul to the director—seeking light, prayer, advice and fortitude in return.

• *Docility*: In recent years "docility" has had a very bad press. It denotes passivity or failure to stand up for one's rights and seems far from anything like a virtue.

But "docility" comes from the Latin verb, *docere*, which means "to teach".

Thus "doctor" means "teacher" and a "docile" person is one who is teachable. Docility then is in no way passive since the act of teaching should be an active one on the parts of both teacher and learner. Docility to the Holy Spirit in supernatural things is necessary for any progress in the interior life, and it's also important to be docile to the magisterium of the Church and to one's spiritual director who can serve an important role as God's instrument for our growth in sanctity.

"A great spirit of obedience to a director and a great readiness to correspond to grace are required. For if you don't allow God's grace and your director to do their work, the sculptured image of Christ, into which the saintly man is shaped, will never appear." (The Way, #56.)

• *Humility*: To be docile, we first need to be convinced of the need to be taught and guided. Guidance is possible only if we are humble. Sincerity, as stated earlier, can grow only in a climate of true humility. The man who re-

fuses to be taught, formed and corrected—the proud man—would avoid all types of direction, and even the mere appearance of being directed.

Getting started

As with all beginners, doubts and second thought make their appearance. "I don't have the time," is typical. Then there is laziness which makes you delay or forego the seeking of spiritual advice. As Msgr. Escriva writes: "Turn your back on the Deceiver when he whispers in your ear, 'Why complicate your life?'" (The Way, #6).

So, if you are convinced of the value and need to receive spiritual counsel, but feel paralyzed in pushing through with it, listen to these encouraging words of our Lord: "Do not be afraid." Spiritual direction is the door that will lead you to a new world that comes from God. "Do not fear. It is I."

Spiritual direction may complicate one's life. That's because it wrenches us out of our complacency, laziness and egoism. However, it brings us down to basics because it gives us a true unity of life. It makes us happy and generous. It moves us to love our Father God more and more each day, and it brings us towards a genuine affection and understanding for all.

The first session with your spiritual director may feel a bit awkward. "What

do I talk about?" The simplest approach is just to be sincere about this uncertainty and he will surely be able to help you. In time, topics taken up in one talk will give rise to others which will open up new horizons. As long as you are sincere and try to put into practice what you learn in your talks with your director, you'll never run out of topics to talk about.

Just about anything that happens to us can be a topic in our talks: our interior life, temptations, our struggle to be better, our victories and defeats, our aspirations, our joys and sorrows, our work our family and social life, our apostolate. These can all be brought up in spiritual direction, not in their secular context, but insofar as they relate to our interior life and apostolate.

Don't be afraid of being misunderstood. Those public sinners, friends of Christ—Zacchaeus, the adulteress, the Samaritan woman—had within them the spark of a desire for God. In the same way, your hunger and thirst for God, when given a chance, will help you open your heart sincerely. "Courage! You can! Don't you see what God's grace did to sleepy, cowardly Peter, who denied him...and to fierce, relentless Paul, who persecuted him?" (*The Way*, #483).

The practice of spiritual direction

The following ideas are part of the legacy which Msgr. Escriva has left us through his constant and practical teaching on this subject.

•*How frequent?* It's not easy to make a general rule. It depends on the circumstances of both the director and the one seeking guidance. But if it's going to be effective, the conversations with one's director should be frequent and regular. Frequency may be anywhere from weekly to monthly, depending on the particular needs of the one receiving direction.

Regularity is obviously important. Sporadic talks may give some help, but really important objectives would be hard to achieve. Common experience shows that there is little progress without some kind of regularity. Just as our bodies need regular meals and medical check-ups, so our soul needs to be nourished and checked on a regular basis.

•*Preparation:* An experienced spiritual director once said: "In general, the actual duration of one's session with his director is inversely proportional to the time spent in preparation for that session."

When we come well-prepared for our chat with our spiritual director, it is

usually much more fruitful, brief and supernaturally effective. We can go straight to the point, asking for prayer and advice that we can apply to our life.

• *Resolutions:* Today's business schools recommend "managing by objectives." Similarly, in spiritual direction it's necessary to frequently review our past resolutions (objectives). These were the steps we had proposed to ourselves to take in order to attain the goals we are aiming at. Therefore, we should always discuss our resolutions with our director, how they were translated into practice and action. There may have been obstacles and failures, but as long as there has been a real struggle to fulfill one's resolutions, spiritual direction will help, if only to get us back on the right track. Without this honest effort to fulfill one's resolutions, spiritual direction is no more than a waste of time.

• *And, sometimes, discouragement:* At times, difficulties may discourage us; sadness may fill us with self-pity, and temptations may trouble us. This is why God provides us with a spiritual director with whom we can speak openly and confidently—to calm our spirit and fill it with peace. These conversations restore our supernatural outlook, reorienting our life when necessary, leading it once again towards God.

A plan of interior life

Teachers of the interior life sometimes use the expression "plan of life." This term includes all the means and practices which one uses to maintain, restore, and develop one's supernatural spirit. Among these means are the sacraments, especially Holy Eucharist and penance: spiritual reading, daily examinations of conscience, the holy rosary and other Marian acts of love. These, among others, constitute the framework that supports and keeps our spiritual life on-course, and which should never be absent from the everyday life of a Christian who is trying to live his faith better.

The aim of a plan of life is sanctity.

With the help of our spiritual adviser, we can gradually include these acts of love and piety into the routine of our daily life. Our faithfulness in adhering to this plan of life, especially personal prayer and Holy Mass, often described by Msgr. Escriva as "the center and root of our interior life," will be a constant source of energy for us.

One consequence of spiritual direction is that we are usually led to paths of self-giving. We become conscious of the demands of Christian charity embodied in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, which are in themselves a summary of Christian apostolate.

Additional considerations

• *Sincerity*: This is more than just not telling lies; there are many ways of not telling the truth. Sincerity means not concealing important information from one who needs to know it; it means not dressing reality up in such a way that evil is hidden behind the flowers. It means not avoiding an embarrassing topic, nor mentioning in an offhanded way something which is actually important. Answering vaguely when a straightforward response is called for is another way of shunting sincerity aside.

The devil has an old trick: He makes you talk to your spiritual director only after you've solved a problem by yourself. You are made to feel that your director has nothing new to tell you because, after all, you know your own problems better than anybody else.

• *Determination*: The determination to be faithful and to persevere in the practice of spiritual direction has been, for many troubled souls, an inexhaustible source of God's grace.

• *Freedom*: Our director is only God's instrument, not the owner of our soul. His guidance should scrupulously respect our personal freedom and personality. If he ever has to strongly command or forbid something, he has to point out that it is not a personal opinion

but something commanded or forbidden by our Mother, the Church.

• *The Holy Spirit*: A spiritual advisor's role is to back up the three-fold mission of the Holy Spirit in teaching, sanctifying and directing us. Thus he has to be a spritual doctor, who heals our wounds with divine medicine, a teacher who helps us to know God better, and a good shepherd who shows us the right path to follow.

We will never be able to thank God enough for providing us with this wonderful means to grow and progress in our journey towards our total identification with Christ. Through spiritual direction we learn to live as sons and daughters of God; we learn to sanctify the realities of everyday life; and we imbue all our actions with a genuine spirit of service. We learn to be happy always, here on earth and finally in heaven.