

Another condition for spiritual direction to be fruitful is *docility*. Those lepers whom Jesus ordered to show themselves to the priests as if they were already cured were docile. So too are the Apostles when Our Lord has them tell the people to sit down and give them to eat, in spite of the fact that they themselves have already done their calculations and are aware of the scarcity of their provisions. Peter was docile when he let down the net, even though he was well aware that there were no fish in that part of the lake, nor was it the right time of day. Saint Paul allows himself to be guided; his strong personality, evident in so many ways on many occasions, now enables him to be docile. First of all his companions lead him to Damascus, then Ananias returns him his sight, and he then becomes ready to do battle for his Lord.

That person cannot be docile who is determined to be stubborn, obstinate, incapable of assimilating an idea different from the one he already has or which contradicts his own experience. The proud person is incapable of being docile, because in order to learn and to allow oneself to be guided, it is necessary to be convinced of one's own insignificance and neediness in all the affairs of the soul. Let us have recourse to the Blessed Virgin Mary in order to be constant in the work of our soul's direction, and to be sincere, opening our heart completely, and docile, like *clay in the potter's hand*.

[1] St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Maxims*, 177-178, in *The Living Flame of Love*

[2] F. Suarez, *Mary of Nazareth*, pg 74

In CONVERSATION with God

Daily Meditations, Volume 4: Ordinary Time: Weeks 13-23

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DOCILITY IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

76.1 We need someone to guide our soul on its journey towards God.

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, (2 Thess 1:1-3) writes Saint Paul to the Christians of Thessalonica. *We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren, as is fitting, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing (Matt 23:23-26).* Thanks to the Holy Spirit's help, the first Christians benefited from the self-sacrificed vigilance of their pastors. The Pharisees, by contrast, were unable to guide the Chosen People effectively because, through their own fault, they remained in darkness, and laid upon the children of Israel a hard and heavy burden, one which moreover didn't lead them to God. In the Gospel of today's Mass Our Lord calls them *blind guides*, incapable of showing others the right path to follow.

One of the greatest graces we can get is to have someone to guide us along the pathways of the interior life; and if we haven't yet found someone to teach us and advise us, in God's name, in the construction of our spiritual edifice, then let us ask God for it now: *every one who asks, receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.* (Matt 7:8) He will not fail to give us this great gift.

In spiritual direction God provides us with a person who knows the way well, to whom we open our heart and who acts as a teacher, a doctor, a friend, a good shepherd in the things that relate to God. That person points out to us the possible obstacles, and invites us to strive higher in our interior life and to fight on specific points more effectively. Thanks to the director's help we are continually encouraged to keep going, we discover new horizons and our soul is roused to a hunger and thirst for God which lukewarmness, always lurking nearby, would like to quench. From earliest times the Church always recommended the practice of spiritual direction as a very effective means of making progress in the interior life.

It is very difficult for one to be his or her own guide in the interior life. It can happen very often that the impulses of our nature, the lack of objectivity with which we see ourselves, our self-love, the tendency to be drawn to what we like most or what we find easiest to do, can all tend to obscure the path to God—even though at the beginning it was perhaps very clear—and when that happens we begin to get bogged down, to get discouraged and lukewarm. *A soul without a director is like a kindled coal, which, left by itself, cools instead of burning.*

He who insists on being left to himself, without a director to guide him, is like an unowned tree by the wayside; however fruitful it may be, the travelers pick its fruit, and none of it ripens.[1]

It is a very special grace from God to have a person who can help us effectively in our sanctification and in whom we can confide in a very human and at the same time a supernatural way. What a joy it is to be able to communicate our deepest feelings, so as to direct them to God, to someone who understands us, who encourages us, who opens new horizons for us, who prays for us and has a special grace to help us!

In spiritual direction we encounter Christ himself, who listens to us attentively, who understands us, and who gives us new energies and insights to help us keep going.

76.2 Supernatural outlook in spiritual direction.

In spiritual direction one needs a lot of common sense and a great supernatural outlook. For this reason *one does not confide in just anyone, but in someone who deserves trust either because of what he is or because of the position in which God has placed him in relation to us.*[2] For Saint Paul the person chosen by God was Ananias, who strengthened him during his conversion; for Tobias it was the Archangel Raphael, in human form, who was entrusted by God to guide him and counsel him in his long journey.

Spiritual direction needs to have a supernatural environment if it is to be effective: it is God's voice that we are listening for. In order to get advice on something minor or to share the everyday concerns of life, it is enough for us to go to someone discreet and prudent who is able to understand us. But in matters that have to do with the soul we have to identify in prayer the person who for us can be the *good shepherd*, because *if we consider the matter from merely human motives we run the risk of not being understood; and then our joy becomes bitterness, and the bitterness becomes misunderstanding. Then we feel uneasy; we feel uncomfortable because we have talked too much to the wrong person about the wrong matter. We shouldn't choose blind guides who, rather than helping us, cause us to stumble and fall.*

We need to have a supernatural attitude in spiritual direction if we are to avoid looking around for the sort of advice that fits in with our own whims, advice that would drown out with its apparent authority the voice of our soul. Especially to be avoided is the tendency to keep changing advisers until we find the most *benevolent* one. This is a temptation that can occur especially in more sensitive areas: whenever sacrifice is called for, in things that perhaps we are not prepared to change, in the attempt to adapt God's Will to our own will: for example, on discovering a vocation that calls for a greater degree of self-giving; or having to abandon an undesirable friendship; or, in the case of married people, being ready to have many children.

Let us ask God to make us persons of upright conscience, who seek his Will and who are not carried along by human considerations: men and women who really want to please Him, and not seekers after a false 'tranquility' or who want to be well thought of. In the same way, it would be a lack of supernatural outlook to be excessively attached to what people think, or what they might think, of us. Supernatural outlook leads to sincerity and to simplicity.

The interior life requires time in order to mature, and things cannot be improvised overnight. We will surely have defeats, which will help us to be more humble, as well as victories, which display the power of grace at work in us. We need to begin and begin again, many times, not giving way to discouragement and not looking for immediate results, although at times they may come: it may be that Our Lord doesn't want to give them to us now, in order to give us something better later.

76.3 Constancy, sincerity, docility.

Behind a cheerful ascetical struggle there has to be spiritual direction. It cannot be sporadic or erratic, because it is meant to follow step by step the ups and downs of our effort. There also has to be *constancy* when the going gets more difficult: because we are short of time, or because of pressure at work, or exams: God rewards that effort with new insights and graces. On other occasions the difficulties are internal: laziness, pride, discouragement because things are going badly, because we haven't managed to get anything done of what we had planned. This is when we have more need of the fraternal chat, or of Confession, from which we always come away more hopeful and cheerful, and with a new determination to keep fighting. Just as a picture is painted stroke by stroke, and a stout hawser is woven from many strands, so too in the continuity of spiritual direction, week after week, the soul is forged; and little by little, with defeats and victories, the Holy Spirit constructs the edifice of our holiness.

As well as constancy, *sincerity* is absolutely necessary: we always begin by speaking about the most important thing, which perhaps also happens to be the thing we find most difficult to say. This approach is essential, not only at the beginning but also later on. At times fruits can be slow in coming because of not having given from the beginning a clear picture of what we are really like, or becoming distracted by incidental background and not getting to the root. Sincerity has to be just that: no dissimulation, exaggerations or half-truths; spelling things out, in detail, though with refinement, and when necessary calling things by their name. We need to reveal our errors and mistakes, our character defects, without trying to disguise them with false justifications or arguments more or less in vogue at the moment. Why? How? When? These are the circumstances which make more personal, more revealing, the state of our soul.