

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION:

- I. The term Spiritual Direction refers to: a process of transformation whereby the Directee is conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others and the Glory of God;
 - A. The stress has always been on the relationship of mutual seeking between the Director and the Directee;
 - B. The Director and the Directee are part of a current of spirituality, a spiritual *direction* set in motion by God;
 - C. The spiritual life is a *focused* life, a life that in all of its parts is increasingly directed toward God;

- II. The work of spiritual direction presupposes progress:
 - A. The belief in spiritual progress is implicit in the Biblical revelation, which is concerned with the spiritual process of a people;
 - B. This progress is marked by:
 1. Sin and repentance;
 2. Wilderness and Exile;
 3. Conflict and Struggle;
 4. It is a progress which has included:
 - a. Spiritual illumination;
 - b. Prophetic vision;
 - c. A culmination in the Incarnation;
 - C. The Christian life cannot be conceived apart from the ideal of spiritual progress;
 1. It is putting one's hand to the plow and not looking back [Lk. 9:62];
 2. There is a call to perfection i.e., wholeness--being set apart for God's use;
 3. There is a clear call to fullness of life in Christ i.e., "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free [Jn. 8:32]";
 4. There is also the call to prepare oneself for a race or a conflict [I Cor. 9:24-27];
 5. The call is to perfection/wholeness, and this is the purpose of Spiritual Direction i.e., Phil. 3:12-16; I Cor. 9:24-27; Heb. 12:1-4; Mk. 8:34-38;

- D. Spiritual Direction is a call to *asceticism i.e., askein*—to prepare by work, to make oneself fit through exercises; to train;
 - 1. Asceticism is spiritual training—taking up the cross and following Christ;
 - 2. The purpose of such training is:
 - a. The redirection of the ego from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness;
 - b. Increased cooperation with the Holy Spirit;
- E. It is with the mystery of the renewal of human souls that all Spiritual Direction is concerned;

III. The evolution of Spiritual Direction;

- A. The broad view of the development of Christian Spiritual Direction reveals three divergent paths from a common origin;
 - 1. Orthodox;
 - a. This tradition, largely influenced by the Desert Fathers and Mothers, highlighted the role of a spiritual father/mother;
 - b. Spiritual guides were usually, but not always, monks/nuns who had a reputation for sanctity who, being knowledgeable in the way of the heart, introduced the disciple to the practice of unceasing prayer [I Thess. 5:17]
 - 2. Roman Catholic;
 - a. Within the Catholic tradition it was for centuries strongly directive and associated with the role of confessor;
 - b. It was strongly suggested that one's confessor and Spiritual Director be the same person, and therefore a priest;
 - c. Spiritual Direction was closely affiliated in practice with the various religious orders i.e., the Benedictines, Carthusians, Dominicans, Jesuits and Carmelites, et al.
 - 3. Protestant;
 - a. The Protestant tradition developed and gave legitimacy to the role of "Pastoral Counselor" in the congregation;
 - b. Often they are non-ordained lay person trained in therapeutic techniques as a way of helping the counselee identify concrete problems in his or her life;
 - c. Often this becomes an advice-giving role and—helpful as it may be--is not spiritual direction as such

- B. Moving forward: “While the pastoral counselor is not a spiritual director, his or her use of modern psychology in a recognized church ministry paved the way for its eventual integration into Spiritual Direction and other helping relationships; ~*Maurice J. Nutt*

IV. The beginnings of Spiritual Direction—the Desert Fathers/Mothers of the Eastern Church;

- A. After the wholesale adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century, a sizeable number of the faithful fled into the Palestinian and Egyptian deserts to practice their faith through ascetic practice;
- B. These desert saints attracted disciples who looked to them more for holiness and purity of heart than for their theological teaching’;
 - 1. They also looked to them for *discernment [Diakrisis]* of spirits;
 - 2. This gift, from the time of **St. Anthony** onward, has been seen as an essential attribute of an authentic spiritual director;
- C. The spiritual director came to be seen as a spiritual mother/father who shaped the life of her/his spiritual children through prayer, concern, and pastoral care;
- D. One clearly sees the function of these fathers/mothers [abbas/ammās] in The Sayings of the Desert Saints, a work which contains answers to practical problems and difficulties associated with the way of perfection/wholeness:
 - 1. One saying, attributed to **St. Anthony**, says: “*I know of monks who fell after much toil and lapsed into madness, because they trusted in their own work*”;
 - 2. Another confessed to an elder: “*In my cell I do all that one is counseled to do there, and I find no consolation from God.*’ The elder said, ‘*This happens to you because you want your own will to be fulfilled.*’ The brother said, ‘*What do you order me to do, father?*’ The elder said, ‘*Go, attach yourself to a man who fears God, humble yourself before him and you will receive consolation from God.*” [Abba Poeman]

3. Another example: *“Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said, ‘Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayer, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts; now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said, ‘Why not be totally changed into fire?’” –Desert Fathers LXXII*

4. Here is another, attributed to **Macarius of Egypt**: *“A brother came to see Abba Macarius and said to him, ‘Abba, give me a word, that I may be saved.’ So the old man said, ‘Go to the cemetery and abuse the dead.’ The brother went there, abused them and threw stones at them; then he returned and told the old man about it. The latter said to him, ‘Didn’t they say anything to you?’ He replied, ‘No.’ The old man said, ‘Go back tomorrow and praise them.’ So the brother went away and praised them, calling them apostles, saints, and righteous men. He returned to the old man and said to him, ‘I have complimented them.’ And the old man said, “‘Did they answer you?’ The brother said, ‘No.’ The old man said to him, ‘You know how you insulted them and they did not reply, and how you praised them and they did not speak; so you too, if you wish to be saved, must do the same and become a dead man. Like the dead, take no account of either the scorn of men or their praises, and you can be saved.”*

5. These Eastern monks emphasized the dangers of traveling without a guide, but there is no notion of *blind* obedience or domination;

6. They taught by example first, and only secondarily by word;

- E. **John Cassian [360-435]** lived for a few years in a monastery at Bethlehem, and then left for the Egyptian desert;
1. In his Conferences, we read of Abba Moses who, because of his practice of virtue and contemplative prayer, attracted many followers;
 2. They went to him to *“give us words which would help us in our spiritual progress. We had heard of his inflexible rule never to give instruction in the spiritual life except to persons who sought it in faith and heartfelt contrition”*;
 3. **Cassian** stressed the importance of disclosing thoughts to one’s elder and receiving direction from him;

V. The Spiritual Father of the Eastern Orthodox tradition:

- A. **St. Isaac the Syrian [Late 6th Century]**: *“Confide your thoughts to a man who, though he lack learning, has studied the work in practice. Therefore, follow the advice of a man who has experienced all, and knows how to judge patiently what needs discrimination in your case, and you can point out what is truly useful to you.”*
1. **Isaac** revealed what he called “the formula of contemplation,” which in fact consisted of the constant use of “O God, make speed to save me; O Lord, make haste to help me” [Ps. 70:1];
 2. Already we see the origins of “spiritual exercises” which were to play a central part in spiritual direction from that time onward;
- B. **St. John Climacus [7th Century]** insisted that beginners who wished to leave Egypt for the Promised Land must find another Moses [Lawgiver] as guide, while the advanced must deliver the care of their souls to a man who is the [grace-filled] representative of the Master;
- C. **St. Simeon the New Theologian [11th Century]** urged obedience to a spiritual father: *“To put everything in the hands of your spiritual father, as in the hand of God, is an act of perfect faith. A man who had acquired active faith in his father in God, when seeing him thinks he sees Christ himself... [Such a spiritual father should be] an experienced teacher with knowledge of the passions [and] ...a saintly instructor free from passions...”*

- D. **St. Gregory of Sinai [14th Century]** held the view that *“it is impossible for anyone to learn by himself the art of virtue”* and so he urged that those seeking growth in prayer should listen to those with experience;
- E. By the 7th Century, the Jesus Prayer [“O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner”] had become established on Mt. Sinai, and by the 8th Century, Mt. Athos had incorporated the Sinai type of spirituality into its own;
1. By the 15th Century, spiritual direction and the Jesus Prayer had spread to Russia;
 2. In the use of the Jesus Prayer, spiritual direction was very strongly emphasized, inasmuch as the unaided practice of the prayer may leave one wallowing in his/her sins, on the one hand, or in giddiness on the other;
- F. **Theophan the Recluse [1815-1833]**, writing of silent prayer, warned, *“How important it is to have experienced instruction here, and how very harmful it can be to guide and direct oneself.”*
1. **Theophan** warned of the danger of self-deception through the sensation of an inner warmth;
 2. He recognized that: *“it is precisely during this period of practicing inner prayer that people who lack a skillful hand to guide them are mostly liable to go astray..”*
- G. In Russia, the great spiritual guides were the *startsy*;
1. *Staretz/Staritza [Pl. Startsy]* is simply Russian for “old man/ old woman”;
 2. To become a Staretz/Staritza is seen as the culmination of a long life of simplicity and humility—a life devoted to acquiring the Holy Spirit;

H. **St. Seraphim of Sarov [1759-1833]**—is certainly the most legendary of Russian directors, who saw the aim of the Christian life as acquiring the Holy Spirit;

1. For **Seraphim**, spiritual direction was a lifetime relationship shared in the Spirit—a sharing in glory—as one of the saint’s disciples, Motovilov, relates: *“We are both together, son in the Spirit of God! Why lookest not at me?” The disciple answered. ‘I cannot look, Father, because lightning flashes from your eyes. Your face is brighter than the sun and my eyes ache in pain!’ Father Seraphim said, ‘Fear not, my son, you too have become as bright as I. You too are now in the fullness of God’s spirit: otherwise you would not be able to look on me as I am...”*
2. Motovilov asks his readers to imagine: *“..in the center of the sun, in the most dazzling brilliance of its noontime rays, the face of a man talking to you. You see the movement of his lips, the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel that someone is holding his hands on your shoulders. Yet you do not see his hands or his body, but only a blinding light spreading around for several yards, illumining with its brilliant sheen both the bank of snow covering the glade and the snowflakes that fall on me and the great stares...”*

I. **Amvrosy, or Alexander Mikhailovich Grenkov [1812-91]**—Spiritual Director of the Optimo Monastery:

1. Dostoyevski visited Amvrosy, and he became the model for Fr. Zosima in The Brothers Karamazov;
2. A staretz, wrote Dostoyevski, *“.is one who takes your soul and your will into his soul and his will.”*
3. D. puts these words in the mouth of Zosima: *“There is only one way of salvation, and that is to make yourself responsible for all men’s sins, to make yourself responsible in all sincerity for everything and for everyone...”*
4. But the most memorable statement he puts into the mouth of Zosima may be this: *“At some ideas you stand perplexed, especially at the sight of men’s sin, uncertain whether to combat it by force or by humble love. Always decide, ‘I will combat it by humble love.’ If you make up your mind about that once and for all, your can conquer the whole world. Loving humbly is a terrible force; it is the strongest of all things and there is nothing like it.”*

5. Leo Tolstoy visited Amvrosy in 1877 and later in 1881, and noted that, *‘when one talks to such a man one feels the nearness of God.’*

J. The spiritual father/mother in Orthodoxy has three principal features:

1. S/he is a person of insight and discernment, who can see into the heart of another;
2. S/he has the ability to love others and to make their sufferings his/her own;
3. S/he has the power to transform the cosmos with the intensity of his/her love;

VI. Pre-Reformation developments in the West:

A. The Celtic tradition:

1. During the 6th Century, Celtic Ireland, nurtured by **Sts. Patrick, Kieran, Columba** and others, was poised to export its version of monasticism to the continent;
2. By the 8th Century, as Thomas Cahill puts it, the Irish had “saved” Western civilization;
3. In the Celtic tradition, we encounter the figure of the *anamchara*, or soul friend;
 - a. Even in pre-Christian times it was seen as necessary for everyone to possess a soul friend, and the saying, *“Anyone without a soul friend is a body without a head”* was an established proverb;
 - b. Every Celtic chieftan had his Druid, or soul friend at his court, whose role included incantations, fortunetelling and spells;
 - c. The Celtic saints inherited many of the functions of these old Druids;
 - d. Indeed, the cleric supplanted the druid as the king’s chief advisor, under the title *anamchara*;
 - e. *Anamchara* has also been rendered “spiritual guide” or “spiritual director”;
4. There is a definite connection between Celtic spirituality and the Eastern Desert movement;

B. St. Benedict and his Rule [6th Century Italy];

1. **Benedict** proposed for all his monks an apprenticeship to a spiritual master, since most who entered monasteries were illiterate;
2. He instructed those who offend to manifest their guilt to the Abbot or *“the spiritual seniors who know how to deal with their own wounds and not to disclose or publish those of others...”*
3. In Chapter Seven of the Rule, we find a “scale of perfection” concerning the degrees of humility Benedict prescribed for his monks:
 - a. Keep the fear of God before your eyes and beware of ever forgetting it;
 - b. Love not your own will and take no pleasure in satisfying its desires, but model your actions on the saying of the Lord, *“I have come not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me”*;
 - c. For the love of God, submit yourself to your superior in all obedience—even unto death;
 - d. Hold fast with patience in the midst of injustice;
 - e. Humbly confess to your abbot all evil thoughts and sins committed in secret;
 - f. Be content with the poorest and worst in everything;
 - g. Consider yourself lower and of less account than anyone else;
 - h. Do nothing except what is commended by the common rule of the monastery and the example of the elders;
 - i. Retain your tongue and keep silence, not speaking until you are questioned;
 - j. Be not ready or quick to laugh;
 - k. Speak gently and without laughter, humbly and seriously, and in a few sensible words;
 - l. Make your humility manifest to all who see you;

C. **Bernard of Clairvaux** and his degrees of perfection [11th-12th Centuries]:

1. First degree—a man first loves himself for his own sake; he is flesh, and so incapable of knowing anything apart from himself;
2. Second degree—he loves God, but for his own sake and not for God’s sake;
3. Third Degree—he loves God, no longer for his own sake but for God’s sake—the result of cooperation with grace and ascetical exercise:
“When he has begun, prompted by his own needs, to worship God and frequently to seek his presence by meditation, by reading, by prayer, by obedience, God becomes known to him and in due season sweet to him; and thus having tasted how sweet the Lord is [Ps. 33:9] he passes to the third degree. Verily in this degree he long remains....”
4. He loves himself *solely* for the sake of God;

D. **Julian of Norwich [1342-1416?]** Her anchorhold was a small room attached to the outside wall of a church, which enabled her to see the altar through one opening, and the townspeople through another; from this spot she struggled with the seeming inconsistency between the Church’s teaching about judgment and her own experience of unconditional love:

1. We may take note of another’s sins, she observes, but our own judgmental attitude will do them much harm;
2. God does not blame people for their sins—only pain blames and punishes;
3. We must make a brief act of contrition and not look-back in self-recrimination;
4. God does not bind us, but we bind ourselves through our lack of faith in God’s promises;

VII. Western Roman Catholic tradition in the West after the Reformation and Council of Trent:

A. After the Council of Trent [1549], spiritual direction became both more widespread and more limited;

1. It became more widespread insofar as the practice spread to include many laity, both inside and outside the monasteries;

2. But there was also a narrowing of perspective:
 - a. Spiritual direction became concerned with scrupulosity, and with decisions about religious vocations;
 - b. The provision of a “safe” method became a major concern of many spiritual guides who saw direction to involve the avoidance of heresy and dubious forms of mysticism;
 - c. So the spiritual director became not only the teacher of a method, but also the guardian of Orthodoxy;
 - d. Don’t forget the Inquisition!

B. Nevertheless, the Western Catholic tradition after Trent, did produce **Ignatius Loyola [1495-1556]**, one of the most outstanding spiritual directors of all time;

1. His Spiritual Exercises, [1548] contains variety of types of meditation and prayer;
2. The role of the spiritual director is:
 - a. To stay in the background;
 - b. To watch and encourage the retreatant to allow God to work;
3. In the “Exercises”, the discernment of spirits is seen as a crucial part of spiritual direction;
 - a. One set of rules deals with temptations and desolations;
 - b. Another deals with distinguishing God-inspired thoughts and movements from the deceptions of the Devil;
4. The qualities of a good director are as follows:
 - a. S/he should be “well-versed in spiritual things, and especially in the “Exercises”;
 - b. S/he should be “prudent and discreet, cautious and reserved...gentle” and preferably “personally acceptable to the exercitant...”
 - c. S/he should “preserve the position and character of a master, as in truth s/he is..”
 - d. S/he should “not attribute anything to his/her own effort or skill,” but rather “put great trust in God..”
 - e. S/he should “be very careful not to add anything merely of his/her own, “ and so “let him/her endeavor only that the exercitant may know how to seek the will of God”;
 - f. S/he should “take note of the exercitant” so that s/he can help him/her best:’

5. Perhaps the most significant insight of **Ignatius** for spiritual directors generally is his categorization of two kinds of feelings i.e., consolation and desolation;
 - a. Consolation—any feeling of peace, joy, contentment, or serenity—a sense of well-being, or all-rightness;
 - b. Desolation—any feeling of anger, depression, discouragement, or inner turmoil, malaise or discomfort;
 - c. Only as we face-up to our joys and sorrows can we come to grips with our responsibilities and make mature decisions and choices;
 - d. But we must *never* make a decision—nor encourage another to do so—in the midst of desolation;
 - i. Never resign from an organization when you are angry or afraid;
 - ii. In such times, we are not emotionally in a state where we can choose well;
 - iii. Do not discontinue a program of study, or abandon a time set-aside for prayer because of an inner disquiet;
 - e. Desolation, in its various expressions, is never from God;
 - f. God may permit it [as he did with Job, Jeremiah and others], but God never causes it;

C. Teresa of Avila [1515-82] and John of the Cross –1543-91];

1. In the teaching of these great Carmelites, the spiritual director assumes a central role;
2. The director of contemplatives must have an experiential knowledge of contemplative prayer, for it is better to have no director at all than a bad one at this stage;
3. Both **Teresa** and **John of the Cross** devote a good deal of attention to the subject of incompetent directors;
 - a. **John** in particular laments the fact that many souls set-out on a spiritual path but make no progress because
 - b. they “*understand not themselves and lack competent and alert directors who will guide them to the summit*”;
 - c. These directors are “*barriers and obstacles at the gate of heaven [who] hinder from entering those that ask counsel of them*”;
4. More generally, both **A&J** advise against over-rigid direction, insisting that “*All do not travel by the same road [and] God leads each one by a different way.*”

5. **Teresa** is critical of those directors who forbid, or disapprove of, reading during the life of prayer, and says that she herself found it impossible for eighteen years to pray without the help of a book;
 - a. She also laments that she looked in vain for a director for over twenty years;
 - b. Despite her criticisms, she says: *“My opinion has always been and always will be that every Christian should try to consult some learned person if he can, and the more learned the person the better. Those who walk in the way of prayer have a greater need of learning; and the more spiritual they are, the greater their need.”*
6. The aim of direction, for both **A&J**, is that the three powers of the soul i.e., the intellect, memory and will, will be transformed into faith, hope and love;
7. Both **A&J** in their writings, endeavored to provide a detailed accounting of the stages of spiritual progress, at the center of which is John’s “The Dark Night of the Soul,” and “The Living Flame of Love.”
 - a. There is, he says, *“a dark night through which the soul passes in order to attain to the Divine Light of the perfect union of the love of God. In this night, God will lead the soul by as most lofty path of dark contemplation and aridity wherein it seems to be lost.*
 - b. However, the dark night is not a spiritual phase, but symbolic of the entire movement of the soul towards God.
8. There are, according to John, three signs by which the individual may know whether or not he or she is being led from the early stages of prayer to some kind of contemplation, at which point he or she can set aside discursive meditation;
 - a. He or she begins to realize that reasoning with the imagination is no longer productive;
 - b. He or she begins to discover that the soul has no desire to fix its attention on particular objects, interior or exterior;
 - c. He or she takes pleasure in solitude and waits with loving attention upon God without any particular understanding;
9. The Spiritual Director must remember that although the soul is being led into the wilderness in order to “taste the sweet manna of freedom, what actually tends to happen is quite different: *“For wherever God is anointing the soul with some most delicate unction of loving knowledge—serene, peaceful, lonely, and very far from sense and from all that has to do with thought—and when the soul cannot meditate or find pleasure in thought, whether in higher things or in lower, or in any knowledge, since God is keeping it full of that lonely unction and*

inclined to solitude and rest, there will come some director who has no knowledge save of hammering and pounding like a blacksmith.” ~The Living Flame of Love, 3:29

D. **Augustine Baker [1575-1641]**—the English Benedictine, whose description of spiritual direction can be summarized under four functions:

1. Evaluation—of the person’s prayer potential, and guidance in finding the right forms of prayer;
2. Assessment—of the person’s progress and to help in evolving new ways of prayer;
3. Enabling—the person to become more open to God and less dependent on the human director;
4. Identification—of aids and obstacles in the person’s spiritual life;

E. **Jean Grou [1731-1803]:**

1. This last of the great Jesuit writers on spiritual direction before the 18th and 19th Centuries, saw the spiritual director as *“the voice of God, the instrument of divine grace, the co-operator with the work of the Holy Spirit..”*
2. Three considerations:
 - a. The spiritual director must be a person of prayer, considering only the glory of God and the good of souls;
 - b. Although directors are very rare, the greatest mistake of all is to wish to guide ourselves;
 - c. There are no exceptions, if we would take the path of perfection: *“We must take a director, that is, guide, to whom we can give account of everything, and whom we obey as if he were God himself.”*
3. **Grou’s** five rules for direction:
 - a. Do not meet except from necessity and then to speak only of the things of God;
 - b. Practice mutual respect, courtesy and gravity;
 - c. Never conceal anything from your director;
 - d. Practice “measureless obedience”;
 - e. Look beyond the director, and only see God in him/her— attached to him/her only for God’s sake, and willing to give him/her up if God requires it;

VIII. Recent Roman Catholic thinking on Spiritual Direction:

- A. **Joseph de Guibert [d. 1942]** in The Theology of the Spiritual Life, 1956:
1. The spiritual director has no authority which *requires* obedience;
 2. But the Director/Directee relationship is not that of equal to equal, or friend to friend;
 - a. Rather, the director is an educator and teacher, and this involves submission;
 - b. But it is a submission which derives from humility;
 3. The office of spiritual director is not limited to priests;
- B. **Friedrich Wulf** on the main tasks of the spiritual director:
1. To help the individual to self knowledge;
 2. To help him/her to self-acceptance;
 3. To help him/her to ego-detachment;
 4. To help him/her discern the actual will of God;

IX. Conclusion: the marks of a spiritual director:

- A. The director appears as a person possessed by the Spirit;
 - 1. The role is not hierarchical, but is sanctioned only by the director's personal holiness;
 - 2. The Russian startsy—for example—help their disciples not so much by what they say as by their radiation of sanctity and inner peace;
- B. The spiritual director is one who has struggled with the realities of prayer and life:
 - 1. There is no substitute for experience;
 - 2. A guide who has not encountered the passions, inner conflicts, and who does not truly know darkness and light, will be of no value to another's spiritual journey
- C. The spiritual director is learned i.e., informed about the tradition, but learning without spirituality is dangerous;
- D. The spiritual director is one who has discernment i.e., *diakrisis*, and who can read the signs of the times, and the writing on the walls of the soul;
- E. The spiritual director is one who gives way to the Holy Spirit—so it can move freely, drawing the director and directee alike into closer union with God and greater freedom as the children of God.

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