

What Is Spiritual Direction?
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How is your spiritual life? Is your prayer stuck in some desert experience? How many times have you wished there was someone you could talk to? Have you ever wanted guidance in your walk with the Lord? Perhaps you've heard others speaking about spiritual direction and have wondered what it is, and how to get a director.

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?

Spiritual direction is the gift to be sensitive, present and supportive to the spiritual journey of another. The spiritual director is one who assists you (the directee) to identify the particular path on which the Lord is leading you, and encourages you to faithfully follow that path. The director helps you focus your life so that it can be more Christ-centered.

A good director bounces back to you what he or she hears you saying and then relates what he or she believes the Lord may be saying. The director not only gives you direction in your spiritual life along each stage of the journey, but also becomes a soul-friend, a companion on the way.

The director does not deprive you of spiritual liberty or make up your mind for you but gives solid pointers along the way. The director gives spiritual advice based on the Word of God and the wisdom of the Church, calling you into Christian growth and maturity. The history of the Church is filled with many great spiritual masters.

A spiritual director helps you model your life in the image and likeness of Jesus the Christ, the great Spiritual Master. A spiritual director fosters in you the ongoing process of being born again, of putting "on a new self which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its Creator." (Colossians 3:10).

WHY DO I NEED A DIRECTOR?

The monastic saints of the desert had a proverb: The one who has himself as a guide, has a fool. Indeed, the whole book of Proverbs gives spiritual direction. The Scriptures flatly say, "Put no faith in your own perception" (Proverbs 3:5). Or again, "Plans are matured by consultation; take wise advice when waging war." (Proverbs 20:18).

A spiritual director is invaluable in the midst of spiritual warfare. A good director will honestly confront you in love when you are falling into a trap, and will support you when you are down. “Two are better than one...If one falls down, the one friend can help the other up. But pity the one who falls and has no one to help them up! Where one alone would be overcome, two will put up resistance.” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12). The spiritual director becomes a true spiritual companion, committed to who you are in Christ.

A spiritual director will aid you in your imitation of Christ, showing you how you can deepen your prayer life. He or she helps you improve your relationship with the Lord. This in turn will allow you to abound in grace and be of greater service for the glory of God. Likewise, the director assists you in the discernment process so that you may know the will of God and embrace it wholeheartedly.

St. Teresa of Avila (+1528), a great caretaker of souls, commented: “In order to know ourselves, it helps a great deal to speak with someone who already knows the spiritual world for what it is.” Spiritual discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:10) and is critical to mature spirituality. The apostle Paul exhorts us, “Do not model your behavior on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and mature.” (Romans 12:2). Elsewhere he says, “Do not continue in ignorance, but try to discern the will of the Lord.” (Ephesians 5:17). The spiritual director does not discern for you, but helps you discern both God’s activity and will in your life.

HOW DO I FIND A DIRECTOR?

Unfortunately, spiritual directors do not grow on trees! I would recommend that you first contact your local pastor and discuss your desire to have a spiritual director. Your pastor may be able to make some recommendations which you can pursue. The director doesn’t have to be an ordained minister. God has called many well-qualified and trained people to this ministry. You may also consider contacting a monastery, convent, or retreat center. If you can’t find anyone gifted and trained for this service, seek someone whom you highly respect as a Christian of good standing and spiritual wisdom, someone who possesses the qualities spoken of by Paul to Titus: “...hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined...who holds firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught.... One who encourages others by sound doctrine...”

(Titus 1:8-9).

WHO SHOULD BE MY DIRECTOR?

The director should be grounded in the Scriptures and sustained by a deep prayer life. Likewise, the director should be acquainted with the great spiritual masters of Christianity, such as Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Ignatius Loyola, etc. Familiarity with human behavior and some fundamentals of Christian psychology are most helpful. The director's life should reflect mature Christian living. The director himself should have a director.

Keep in mind that there is no such thing as the perfect spiritual director. In the long run (and in the short run), you must rely upon your own discernment and free will. Each person is accountable for him or herself. "After all, is there anyone who knows the qualities of anyone except their own spirit within them?" (1 Corinthians 2:11). Humility and a sincere desire to seek the Lord are important qualities which should be fostered in both the director and directee.

John of the Ladder (+649), an abbot filled with brilliant psychological insights into the dynamics of the Christian life, has this advice to give: "We should analyze the nature of our passions, so as to choose our director accordingly." In other words, we don't go to a dentist because we're having eye problems. Quite often we are helped most by those who have struggled with the same problems we face in our spiritual journey. John of the Ladder speaks of the director as a physician who is guided by the hands of the Divine Physician. He stresses, "We must have someone quite skilled, a doctor, for our specific wounds." At the same time we must humbly (and yet consciously) submit to the advice given us. "The one who sometimes heeds the spiritual director and sometimes not, resembles the person who first puts medicine into his eyes and then burning acid." In the final analysis, we are all wounded healers on the road of salvation. Be mindful that your director can never be your Savior. But the director can be a good companion and guide on the spiritual journey.

WHAT DO I TELL MY DIRECTOR?

There is no hard and fast rule as to what should be dealt with in direction. Because each person's spiritual journey is unique, the directee's needs will vary from person to person, and from time to time. Primary is our personal relationship with the Lord.

Whatever is blocking growth in this area, whatever is causing us to lose our first love, this should be brought to the director for reflection. Always keep in mind Jesus' words, "...the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21). So often we fail to realize the radical nature of Jesus' declaration! The Lord desires a personal, intimate relationship with each of us. What goes on deep down within us is therefore important to the Lord. He truly loves us, every part of us. He comes to heal us so that He can live in every area of our life, imparting to us the power demonstrated in His resurrection.

The Holy Spirit is the Lord and Giver of Life. It is the Holy Spirit who created the dry land and brought forth stability and new creation out of the chaos. The life-creating Spirit continues this same work in our lives through the process of sanctification. Writing to followers of Jesus Christ, Paul says, "We should wash ourselves clean of everything that pollutes either body or spirit, bringing our sanctification to completion in the fear of God." (2 Corinthians 7:1). Spiritual direction helps us make progress in this process.

We should readily bring to the director our relationship with God as well as any matter which affects our living out the Gospel. Since Jesus is Lord of our lives, every aspect of our life must be converted. If family issues, work-related problems, relational difficulties, personal matters (such as: anger, sexual issues, fears, compulsions, preoccupations, emotional wounds, dreams, fantasies, etc.) prove to be a difficulty in our following Jesus, we should take these to our spiritual director. In whatever pertains to who we are as a person, Jesus wants to heal us, sanctify us, and make us whole.

WHEN IS A GOOD TIME TO START?

"Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!" (2 Corinthians 6:2). What is most important to God is our desire and willingness to follow God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind." (Luke 10:27). My experience has been that my spiritual director has greatly aided me in my walk with the Lord, pointing out areas in which I'm blind and helping me better understand what the Lord is doing in my life. My spiritual director has helped me bring healing to my family relationships as well as my relationships in community. Likewise, my director has been a great support and guide during times of trial and spiritual testing.

Pray with expectant faith for a spiritual director, and God will provide. Jesus Christ has placed us in His Body. "Just as each of us has various parts in one body, the parts do not

all have the same function.” (Romans 12:4). From apostolic times to the present, spiritual direction has always been an integral part in the life of the Body of Christ.

We need directors to aid us in our spiritual journey. There is no such thing as solo Christian spirituality. We cannot go it alone. The Scriptures offer us this encouragement, “...let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” (Hebrews 10:24). The wisdom of the Church, as embodied in the great Christian spiritual masters, warns us to not embark on the spiritual journey alone. Summing up the experience of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, John of the Ladder notes, “For those sailing the tides of spirituality know only too well that the spiritual life can be a harbor of salvation or a haven of destruction.” Sometimes we grow lukewarm in our faith and need someone to spur us on. Thus it is inadvisable and potentially dangerous to travel on our inner journey without the aid of a spiritual director.

May the Lord Jesus truly become your Way and fill you with Truth and Life as you journey to the Father of all mercies, in the power of the Holy Spirit.