

The Importance of Spiritual Direction

in the Life of the Believer



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A Definition

In the technical sense of the term, spiritual direction is that function of the sacred ministry by which the Church guides the faithful to the attainment of eternal happiness. It is part of the missionary mandate given to the Church by Christ himself: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt. 28:19-20). The Church exercises this function both in her public teaching, and in the private guidance of souls, according to their individual needs; but it is the private guidance that is generally understood by the term ‘spiritual direction.’

One may well argue that the Church requires all her adult members to submit to such private direction, namely, in the Sacrament of Penance. For the confessor becomes in part also the director of conscience. Spiritual direction required in the lives of Christians who aim at the attainment of perfection whether, priest, religious or laity. Striving after Christian perfection means the cultivation of certain virtues and watchfulness against faults and spiritual dangers. The knowledge of this constitutes the science of asceticism. The spiritual director must be well versed in this difficult science, as his advice is very necessary for such souls.

Aim and Purpose and the Congruence with Church Teaching

Spiritual direction seeks primarily to enable the seeker to attain an ever deepening intimate relationship with God, so as to live a life of freedom, individuality, and love. A mutually related aspect of the seekers search is also the fostering the practice of prayer, self discovery, and the will of God in one’s life.

Spiritual direction must be in harmony with the teaching of the Church on matters concerning faith and morals, because the infallibility of the guidance of the Magisterium of the Church, particularly in these two disciplines. The Magisterium of the Church has been divinely appointed to guard and faithfully transmit the deposit of faith. The Holy Spirit, who breathes where he will and whose voice the believers faithful hear, though not knowing where he comes from, and where he goes (cf. Jn. 3:8), has often chosen priests or religious, and even simple laymen and women, and filled them with supernatural wisdom in order to provide for the spiritual direction of others. Spiritual direction is not the exclusive domain of priests and religious because lay persons too, share in the common priesthood of Christ and our heir to the gifts of the Holy Spirit who has been poured out on all flesh (cf. Acts 2:17). That being said, we note that the spiritual director will find the principal means of progress towards perfection to consist in the exercise of

prayer and mortification. Upon the special processes of these two means, spiritual guides have been led by the Holy Spirit in various directions. Different is the type for the solitary in the desert, the cenobite in the community, for a St. Louis or a Blanche of Castile in a palace, St. Frances of Rome in her family, or a St. Zita in her kitchen, for contemplative and for active religious orders and congregations.

Another marked difference in the direction of souls arises from the presence or absence of the mystical element in the life of the person to be directed. Mysticism involves peculiar modes of action by which the Holy Spirit illumines a soul in ways which transcend the normal use of the reasoning powers. The spiritual director who has such persons in charge needs sensitivity and prudence in equal measure in guiding such souls.

Internal Forum and External Forum

An important document of Leo XIII bearing specifically on the direction of religious souls is the decree "Quemadmodum" of 1890. It forbids all religious superiors who are not priests 'the practice of thoroughly inquiring into the state of their subjects' consciences, which is a thing reserved to the Sacrament of Penance.' It also forbids them to refuse to their subjects an extraordinary confessor, especially in cases where the conscience of the persons so refused stands greatly in need of this privilege. The pope abrogated all constitutions, usages, and customs so far as they tended to the contrary; and absolutely forbade such superiors from inducing in any way their subjects to make to them any such manifestations of conscience. For this reason, the Church carefully distinguishes between the internal forum and external forum. In canon law the word 'forum' denotes the context, arena or ambience of living to which an action or condition belongs, or in which it comes into being. For instance, a secret marriage (cf. Can. 1130-1133), or secret ordination is an act of the external forum. Even the sacrament of reconciliation (penance), which is most confidential, is an action of the external forum because it involves liturgical words and actions can be observed. The internal forum consists of the arena or ambience of interior life, which can be manifested externally and still not belong to the external forum. One's thoughts and feelings, one's virtues and sins belong to the internal forum, unless they are manifested in such a way that it impinges upon the societal order or things. This means such actions of the internal forum cannot be the legitimate concern of the external forum and thus, attended to by Superiors. Sadly, it has been my experience in the course of spiritual direction, to be informed that some Superiors have inquired from their subjects about the content of the discussion in spiritual and the reason for the need of such discussion. This is a gross violation of the sanctity of the internal forum, and sinful in the degree that it impedes the spiritual growth of the individual who may as a result of such intrusive behaviour of Superiors, prefer to avoid spiritual direction. We believe that if such allegations are substantiated, they constitute valid grounds for initiating proceedings for removal from office.

Spiritual direction, the sacrament of reconciliation, and confidential disclosures about oneself are all committed secrets, even strictly professional secrets. They always belong to the internal forum and belong there. Their only legitimate purpose is one's betterment.

Disclosure to others by a person who has received such confidences or their use in governance is prohibited.

Good spiritual direction is frequently bilateral, and it is common that the spiritual director also shares personal experiences as a means of affirming or encouraging the personal experience of the client. This self disclosure of the spiritual director is a natural secret, and in fairness, should not be betrayed to others. Also, the person in spiritual direction whom we have referred to as the client, cannot refer to the guidance or counsel of the spiritual director in order to obtain from the Superior what has been earlier refused on legitimate grounds. Neither has the spiritual director the right to impede upon the external forum of governance by championing the cause of the client. Sadly, this phenomenon too, is not entirely unknown. In as much as Superiors are precluded from inquiring about the subject from their spiritual directors, so also, the Superior has every right to refuse to listen to the persuasion of the spiritual director of the subject.

The Three Dimensions

While the relationship between seeker and God is primary in spiritual direction, two other relationships also affect the effectiveness of the seeker's search. First, the spiritual director must be a person of discernment in communion with God, respectful of the teachings of the Church, having attained maturity through self discovery. Second, there must be a secure, mutually un-exploitative and therefore, enriching spiritual friendship between the spiritual director and seeker.

(i) The seeker must be sincere in the quest for God, the attainment of self knowledge, perseverance in prayer and obedience to the teachings of the Church.

(ii) The spiritual director must also be a seeker in communion with God, who has attained an acceptable degree of self knowledge that ensures emotional maturity, in communion with God through prayer and convinced of the teachings of the Church. It is imperative that the spiritual director be so grounded in God that the Holy Spirit speaks to the seeker at crucial moments of the seeker's life. Openness to the Holy Spirit will inspire the spiritual director assume different roles in the course of direction: to be a stern task master at one session, while being a loving and supportive person in another. A close relationship with God is also necessary, if the spiritual director is to serve as a model for the seeker. Ideally, in looking at the spiritual director, the seeker understands what it is to live the spiritual life more fully. One of the main functions of the spiritual director is to be an 'intercessor in the night' in praying for the seeker in quiet moments and while performing acts of mortification. The spiritual director cannot be involved in the ploys and emotional turmoil of the seeker. This demands self knowledge and emotional and spiritual maturity. The spiritual director functions as a mirror to the seeker. The spiritual director must empower the seeker to make room in the life to experience and recognize God's presence and intervention.

(iii) The relationship between the spiritual director and the seeker: (a) mutual respect, (b) trust, (c) openness, (d) friendliness, (e) concern.