

Practical Helps for Better Spiritual Direction

Spiritual Direction:

Saint Ignatius of Loyola recognized the importance of letting Sacred Scripture, the Church, and one's vocation be the primary spiritual directors in one's life. Adrian Van Kaam, in his book, Spirituality and the Gentle Life, further elaborates on this, stating:

Each of us is inclined to make ego fulfillment the ultimate guide of thought and action.... We are usually not aware of our ego-centeredness and hence are overcome before we know it. The Holy Spirit, in and through the Church, the life situation, and the incidental guides we may meet, tries to illumine us about the prison of self-centeredness in which we are living.... If we have at some moment in our life a personal spiritual director, this is to be seen as an incidental event. We should be gentle about the lack of personal direction too. If we begin to desire or search inordinately for a personal spiritual guide, we fail already in the gentleness the Holy Spirit asks from us. We decide in advance the way in which *we* think our lives should be guided by Him.

-pg 55, 58

There may be periods of time in our lives when we do not have a personal spiritual director. During these times, we must be patient with ourselves and with God, as Van Kaam suggests. If we do happen to have a personal spiritual director, it is important for us to know what such a relationship is; spiritual direction has been defined in many different ways by many different people. William Barry and William Connolly, in their book, The Practice of Spiritual Direction, define it in this way:

We define Christian spiritual direction, then, as help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship. The *focus* of this type of spiritual direction is on experience, not ideas.

-Barry and Connolly¹, pg. 8

When we *do* have a personal spiritual director, the following suggestions might help us to more fully allow the Holy Spirit to work in, with, and through us and our director.

¹ William Barry and William Connolly, The Practice of Spiritual Direction, HarperCollins.

Suggestions Pertaining to the Directee:

- ✚ Reviewing your prayer journal² is a great way to prepare for spiritual direction!
- ✚ Build a vocabulary of feeling words and use it to better describe your spiritual experience.
- ✚ Begin direction by very briefly recapping your previous spiritual direction session and the grace that you were praying for. If your director is a priest and he heard your confession, it is also helpful to remind him of the penance he gave you. These provide a frame of reference for starting the direction session and help to see how God has been leading.
- ✚ The "topic" for spiritual direction should usually be directly related to one's prayer time.

Religious experience is to spiritual direction what foodstuff is to cooking. Without foodstuff there can be no cooking. Without religious experience there can be no spiritual direction.

-Barry and Connolly, pg. 8

- It is best to avoid telling lengthy stories during direction.
 - Focus instead on the "movements" of your heart. What has been the greatest consolation or desolation since your last direction session?
- ✚ Be careful of using your director as a "crutch," calling or emailing him or her between sessions for "mini-sessions" or advice. Instead, take it to Jesus in prayer.
 - ✚ **“Resistance”** is a technical term in spiritual direction that refers to a directee or director’s reluctance to address an important movement of his or her heart. When one or more of the following signs of resistance are regularly occurring in prayer or direction, it means something important is not being addressed:³
 - Being self-preoccupied.
 - Having a “constantly cheery, emotionally unnuanced experience of prayer.”
 - Saying the same thing, over and over, session after session.
 - Frequently falling asleep in prayer or spiritual direction.
 - Avoiding prayer.
 - Regularly missing appointments or rescheduling them.
 - Repeatedly being late to spiritual direction.
 - Avoiding talking about prayer experiences with the director.
 - Desires of quitting spiritual direction.
 - Regularly switching spiritual directors.
 - Fear of losing God and/or one’s self.
 - A distorted image of God.
 - Being routinely analytical during spiritual direction.
 - Turning the "spotlight" onto the director by asking things like, "How would you handle my situation?" or "Can you tell me more about your prayer?"
 - Routinely reading from one’s prayer journal during direction.

² See attached article on journaling for more information.

³ These are taken primarily from Barry and Connolly.

✚ Some questions to ask yourself in preparation for direction might include:

- Has there been a predominant theme to my prayer or journaling?
- What is one particular religious experience that stands out as important since my last direction session?
- What has been the "grace" I've been asking God for the most?
- What has been the strongest desire of my heart since my last direction session?

Suggestions Pertaining to the Director:

- ✚ Ideally, your director would be trained in Spiritual Direction.
- ✚ Ideally, your director is in supervision, which helps to ensure that he or she is keeping up with the skills of spiritual direction.
- ✚ The spiritual director should not try to turn spiritual direction into a problem solving session where the director is routinely telling stories of his or her own experience or giving advice. This is probably the most obvious sign that a director does not have adequate training or supervision. If this seems to be happening during a particular session, simply shift the focus back to "things of the heart, by talking about the "foodstuff" (i.e. your religious experience) that you've brought to direction.
- ✚ If your director is talking more than you during a session, there is a problem.
- ✚ If your director is "working harder" than you during the session, there's a problem.
- ✚ If you are having a hard time "connecting" with your spiritual director, don't hesitate tell him or her what you feel has not been helpful. Also, changing directors is an option, but discern this WITH your director to ensure that it's not a form of resistance (*see above*).
- ✚ A good director should be gentle, not a know-it-all.

A popular question among directees is, "When is spiritual direction finished for good?" Thomas Green, in his book, The Friend of the Bridegroom, explains that, "Since spiritual direction is growth-centered, and since growth is a life-long process, it does make good sense to have a spiritual director for life," however, "as we mature... direction can become much less frequent; for mature pray-ers... two or three times a year should suffice" (pg. 38 & 77).