

SPIRITUAL COMPANIONING: A MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH

Precis: The current experience of spiritual companioning in the Church forms a special ministry. It has become useful because of cultural changes and fresh pastoral needs. The truest spiritual companion is Christ working through His Spirit. The experience of companioning brings both parties to assimilate Christ, and is therefore an activity in faith and not in human counsel. Spiritual companioning—presence and listening-of itself is the Church acting. It is a charism, signaling the activity of the Spirit in the Church. Spiritual companioning enacts the communion of the saints.

Current experience in the Church

The experience in the Church's current ministry of Spiritual Companioning gives evidence of a good deal of seeking in all the varied situations where the ministry is practiced—or better, where it is beginning to be offered. People discuss it often today, and write about it a good deal. The ecumenical magazine, *Spiritual Directors International*, started a few years ago in the United States, would have been unthinkable thirty years ago. And the same can be said of the conclusions of the Synod of the Church of Santiago de Chile (1997). For in its chapter on the Spiritu-

ality of the Christian Life, the synod stated: "Promoting spirituality necessarily means *forming spiritual companions*, that is, persons who have the matured ability to help others move along in their spiritual growth. For this reason, our archdiocese officially recognizes the pastoral service with the title of "Spiritual Companion." For this is an important service at this state of the Church's life. To meet the challenge of this service, the church must encourage a sound formation not only of candidates for priesthood but just as much of candidates for the permanent diaconate, of religious women and men, of contemplatives, and of any lay ministers who show a disposition to the service. Every agency of formation in the archdiocese is to figure out what programs are necessary for the proper formation of spiritual companions, and to set them up as soon as feasible" (no. 98).

There is currently a time of great enthusiasm for both spirituality and spiritual companioning. Every indication points to companioning growing in importance in the near future. In recent years, everyone in ministry has felt an urgent plea for companioning, not only as a prerogative in movements restricted to the middle class, but even in the parishes and in Basic Ecclesial Communities. The companioning turns out to be a need felt by individuals, groups, and the entire environment. Unhappily, many diocesan priests (in their seminary training) and even a lot of religious men and women have been poorly prepared for the work.

Three realities in our times explain the phenomenon of the extraordinary demand for spiritual companions in the Church's various sectors, and for those who can form spiritual guides.

a) The characteristic pressures of the emergent culture, which demand a more personal way of believing and call for discernment. The swift cultural changes, the relativising of values that weakens any environmental support for living the life of the Kingdom, the greater sense of personal freedom in the face of options and the vastly diverse situations into which the Christian life must be inserted—all of these demand an enlightened and sound interior life, which in its turn demands greater objectivity and dis-

cernment. In this context, spiritual companioning must take on an expanded role and significance.

b) Post-Vatican II pastoral approach. The participative praxis—in catechetics, in the liturgy, with the bible—has drawn many individual believers and many communities to real growth. This in turn has roused new expectations of spiritual maturity and fresh demands for personal integration. A notable part of this development was the rediscovery of spiritual companioning (for priests, religious, and laity) in the movement of renewal in *Spiritual Exercises* and in various other kinds of retreats and spiritual traditions. Personally directed Exercises and other kinds of retreats have played a central role.

c) The renewal of religious life, particularly in women's congregations. They have been recovering an early tradition of spiritual accompaniment distinct from the role of the superior.

God in the Old Testament: accompanying The People

In the Old Testament, God is the companion of His people. No other God was like the God of Israel. By day the "cloud" and by night "the fire" kept declaring the active parental presence of Yahweh. He is the God who accompanies the pilgrim people—in times of infidelity, still there; in times of triumph, rejoicing in His temple in Jerusalem; and in the Exile. The Psalms faithfully record the People's spiritual experience; they feel keenly the liveliness of the Spirit of a God who guides and accompanies.

"Sun cannot strike you down by day, nor moon at night," in the prayer of the psalm (Ps. 121:6). "When Israel was a child, I loved him... I myself taught Ephraim to walk ... I led them with reins of kindness, with leading-strings of love" (Hosea 11:1-4). Never before had a God who chose a people determined to accompany them in this way in their lifelong wandering.

Jesus Christ: God-with-us on the way

In Christ Jesus, God accompanies us from within our own life. He is Emmanuel, God-with-us, inserting Himself into our world and into our

history, our companion in sorrow and even in death—and our companion in joy and even in resurrection. He made himself like us is everything except sin. And then more: from the heart of God where he takes us in his glorified humanity, he companions us—Christ pleading and acting through his Spirit. This companioning of the Lord suffuses our entire life, and finally transforms our deepest identity. The one who makes feasible spiritual companioning in its deepest sense is this same Jesus Christ. He, himself, brings us to uncover what it is to be human, and the call to be human. He, himself, reconciling us with God through his redemptive life, has oriented us again toward God. He, himself, has clothed us in the gift of the Spirit; and by reorienting all of creation to God, he has made possible a human life that is more complete and more fraternal (Rom.8:20-25). And finally, Jesus Christ—who has the full light and unction of the Spirit and who lives completely guided by the Spirit—Jesus Christ himself guides us by his life and his teaching and companions us to the Father.

Furthering conformity with Christ

The whole thrust of this ministry of spiritual companioning, consequently, is facilitating the continually deepening personal development of the new creation in Christ, facilitating growth into the "spiritual person" (Rom.8:5). Each Christian takes guidance and direction from the Spirit, for "anyone who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him" (1 Cor.6:17). The person united to Christ through the spirit will grow according to the same interior orientation as Christ. In the final analysis, therefore, the real spiritual director of the Christian is the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who orients us to grow in the image of Christ (2 Cor.3:18). All the forms of spiritual companioning in the Church, then, are nothing but instruments in the hands of the Holy Spirit to make us "true images of the Son" (Rom.8:29), "until Christ is formed in you" (Gal.4:19).

The greater the shared awareness of the Holy Spirit's real and lively action in both the companion and the one accompanied, the more will their relation be real spiritual direction. The less their awareness of the Spirit's vivifying presence, on either part, the less realistically can the relationship be called real spiritual direction.

Spiritual Companionship as a Church ministry

The Holy Spirit is not given in a singular action to every single person. The Gift to each is given in the context of the Gift to the whole community. "What do you ask of the Church?", the minister of baptism asks the parents and godparents. So the Gift of the Spirit comes to us in the Church and through the Church. And this same Church, the sacrament on earth of the union of humankind among ourselves and of humanity with God, accompanies humankind in its history. The Spirit of God dwells in the Church as in a temple, and in the heart of each believer as well (Lumen Gentium, 7).

The person being accompanied communicates with the companion, both living members of the Church. The companion is a faithful witness of what goes on in the life of the person being directed, and at the same time is guarantor of the Christian life in its totality, according to the light of the faith and the tradition of the Church. The one coming for spiritual companionship is not isolating his or her interior life and relationship with God from the People of God, of whom they form part; they are confiding that life and relationship to the People in the person of the companion. The spiritual companion offers to the one who has come for direction the opportunity to discern the spirits moving in their life with the help of the community. The guide offers objectivity and community, which guarantees that all things will be seen from the perspective of the faith—a viewpoint that is universal, "catholic." Even if the companion says nothing but is simply present, the mere fact of listening to the other makes it possible for that other to share his or her experience of God with the Christian community, and prevents them from closing in on themselves. As a guide, I offer my voice, my mind, my whole grasp of the mystery of Christ—to the Church. I do not act on my own; I do not hold a personal franchise. As a ministry, spiritual companionship is mediated by and discerned in the Church. The companion always fills the function of mediator, and is perceived to do so even by people far from the Church Who come for help.

And finally, this can be added: The more a spiritual companion knows the living reality of the Christian community and also of the secular surround, the more he or she will be able to give good help to those who come for guidance. In the last analysis, the moral authority of the spiritual companion derives from living and sharing the life of faith in the Church. The dialogical, non-hierarchical structure of two persons conversing in the fraternal atmosphere of the baptized in Christ never stops being an experience of Church.

The ministry of accompaniment: charism from the Spirit

Like every other charism, spiritual companioning is rooted first in a call from God and then in our response to that call. Again like every other charism, companioning is not the upshot of a discernment centered on self and only referring to self; it is a charism lived out for the sake of others and for a better fulfillment of one's own mission in the world.

Spiritual companioning is a charism, a gift from the Spirit of Christ given in some special way to a particular person, a gift given through baptism for the good of the whole body. It is the gift, as experienced in the Oriental tradition, of *diakrisis*. Currently, many Christians—priests, religious, laity—feel themselves called to this ministry of service to their brothers and sisters. Well and good. But along with the call of the Lord and their response to that call, the baptized receive a confirmation of their gift by ordinary human means within the Church. It comes when others recognize the gift and come seeking help. So it happens that those who have this gift of companioning ordinarily find that others seek them out to tell their story; and others value the companion's counsel and support in their struggle to live the Christian faith more fully.

At issue here, then, is not some title or official designation granted one way or another. At issue here is a charism and a call specifically to this ministry, and the recognition of this call by the Christian community. This last completely contradicts the bureaucratic model of an official who can fulfill this function correctly merely by being properly appointed.

It is useful to note here that spiritual companioning is not a hierarchical ministry in the Church. The traditional terms *spiritual father* and *spiritual mother* (*abbas*, *ammas*), never referred to priesthood. Rather, they referred to someone who embodied for others the fatherhood-motherhood of God.

Accompaniment that is Christian and not otherwise

Spiritual Companioning is not just one more kind of help added to social work, educational counseling, psychological therapy. Clearly, certain common attitudes are basic to all: acceptance, not manipulating, reverencing the other and the other's history, and so on. Nonetheless, companioning speaks to the relationship of the Spirit at work in us, bringing life to us, both the companion and the one accompanied. And more: this is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, living and revealed in Jesus. A brother or sister helps another brother or sister be more beloved in the Beloved.

Spiritual companioning is a gift which, ever since Pentecost, the Spirit has been giving to some members of the Christian community. The ministry has always continued, in one form or another, in the community of believers. It is a help given and received for the sake of living baptism more fully. It is spiritual because it speaks to a relationship with the Spirit, as Source and as active Presence. It is Christian because it is rooted in a personal God who is Triune. It does not aim at just any kind of relationship or just any kind of transcendence. Concretely, companioning facilitates and encourages our growth, modeled on the life and mission of Jesus who died and rose *again*. It is a help which one offers to another so that the other might grow in faith and come to be their true self in acting the will of God. As St Ignatius says at the end of his letters, "so that we might always know the will of God and fulfill it completely in everything" (letter to his brother Martin, June 1532, and various others).

Spiritual companioning does not set out to further our relation with God and to further nothing else, as though it were possible to isolate our relationship with God from the rest of our life, relations, and commitments. The God of Christ moves toward its completion the Kingdom of God which Jesus preached and established (the Pauline *pleroma*). Like everything in Christian life, companioning must be structured into the building of the coming Kingdom of God in Christ. It has nothing to do with any kind of nirvana. It endures neither an escape from reality nor a self-absorption in contented formal prayer. All Christian spiritual companioning—for persons in both active and contemplative vocations—must bring the believer being accompanied to feel responsible for the building of the Kingdom. Any companioning that does not incorporate this is doubtful and is threatened with pitfalls.

Conclusion: the Communion of Saints

Sharing with another in spiritual companioning our own deep spiritual experiences, in an established climate of simplicity and fellow-feeling, and in the search to find the way beyond individualism and self-sufficiency—this constitutes a genuine expression of the Church as the Communion of Saints. It is a disclosure of the Lord who, through his Spirit, accompanies us and guides us as a good pastor. Spiritual companioning is a genuine Church ministry. Today, it comprises pastorally a sign of the times, a true need of adult Christians and of their communities.

These days, one cannot be a full Christian without being a mystic, as Karl Rahner once said. To be a mystic is to live in the middle of life and history as one "inserted into the mystery of Christ" (Eph.3:5). One apprehends the truth of this from the Church in the Church, particularly in the practice of the sacraments. One lives the truth more fruitfully, authentically, and steadily with the privileged help of spiritual companioning.