

CONTINUING FORMATION IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION. HOW TO CONTINUE GROWING AS A SPIRITUAL GUIDE?

The following words are remarks regarding some of the areas of *continuing formation* which we consider important for those who wish to continue growing in the ministry of spiritual direction. This is a holistic and integrated formation that takes into account three related and interconnected dimensions: the spiritual, the psychological and the historic.

91

Beginning this church ministry of spiritual direction implies commitment for continuing formation. Within all professions and ministries of the helping relationship (medical, social service, teaching, catechism, community animator, etc.) it is difficult to imagine a high quality of service without a continual or ongoing formation. The possibility of renewed formation is also, eventually, an opportunity of continual renewed growth! In fact, without an ongoing formation, we have no right to continue spiritually accompanying others in their journeys of following

Christ more closely.

Embracing the Experience of Being Directed

Having had and continuing to have quality spiritual direction is fundamental, for these experiences will always serve as important and valid points of reference. Whether helpful or not, as points of reference, our experiences (attitudes, judgments, advise, conduct, etc.) later form part of our accumulated inner wisdom. Those persons who have guided me well in my life and have helped me to grow, plus those who have intended to be good spiritual directors to me but were not—including some who have even harmed me— all remain engraved in my memory. They are there in my most basic of emotions, such as fright, pain, anger, shame, happiness, my attitudes and values, and truly influence the way and quality in which I relate to others. These experiences may also play a role in how I help other people.

*before all approaches and
techniques, no matter
how valid they are, lies
the awareness of one's
own experience*

The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. Praying with the exercises for eight days or more in a *personalized* manner is very beneficial, and if possible the 30 day retreat or the 19th annotation retreat over several months is even better. These retreat experiences encompass process, the relation between director—directee, personalized treatment, help in making deci-

sions, learning discernment, prayer and living one's salvation history through the Word face to face with daily life. The month long retreat as spelled out by St. Ignatius, in content and in experience, ends up becoming a paradigm of life. The meditations and the prayer periods of the Spiritual Exercises bring to life the different internal experiences of each retreatant. I know little other pedagogy more effective in the formation of spiritual directors.

In a word, the best training of a spiritual director—the deepest and lasting—is his or her own experience of being directed by experienced

people of God. Before all approaches and techniques, no matter how valid they are, lies the awareness of one's own experience. Discovering it, learning to articulate it to self and to others, and to discern in the Lord. This is how one goes about discovering and forming a personalized style and charisma in the ministry of accompanying others.

**Having the Human Stratum (Subiectum)
and *Charisma* in Spiritual Accompaniment**

Spiritual direction is not simply a learned task; good will and pure intentions do not suffice.

One must be mature both in the human and spiritual senses. It is maturity which allows and makes possible the other's holistic growth in the ways of the Lord. If this is the case, a spiritual director is then able to listen – even with intuition, deeply empathizes, understands emotions and recognizes spiritual movements of the one sharing his or her story.

Discretion, common sense, balance, grounded in daily reality, optimistic and hopeful trust in the Spirit of God that is alive and acts in the world and in persons, are all part of the *human stratum and approach* of the person who accompanies others. *These are just some of the skills that begin to unfold over time through contemplation and not without faith.*

Charisma is a gift, a Christian quality that one shares with the other members of his or her community. It is a special grace from God manifested in someone as a service to be shared within a community. As such, the charisma to be able to accompany others in their spiritual journey is recognized, then, by those who ask for help and seek direction, orientation and support. In a way, it is through others that we discover our gifts as spiritual guides: fellow believers with a desire to grow in the Lord and to commit themselves in service to others are the ones who approach us and ask for help and guidance.

This recognition by our brothers and sisters in faith then invites, encourages and confirms the gifts of spiritual direction in another. At the

same time, the one who is graced with the charisma to accompany others in their journey experiences the desire, joy and psychological-spiritual integration as experienced in the same Christian commitment.

Knowing One's Self Intimately

It is fundamental that the professional serving in the helping relationships knows him or herself well. Self knowledge is even crucial for giving good spiritual direction. The importance of good personal awareness and self knowledge can never be under estimated in regarding one's own personality, deepest desires, strengths, and one's own potential qualities. Good self knowledge is not only necessary at the personality level, but it is also essential in understanding one's own salvation history and personal relationship with God. All of the mystics, from John of the Cross to Teresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola, insist upon this, and with reason. The desert fathers, masters in spirituality from the first centuries, also emphasize this, to pay attention to the behavior and tendencies, including temptations, of each individual. We must all learn, as spiritual guides, how to develop and integrate this approach. In doing so, it is then possible to get at the roots of the obstacles for growth in the spirit.

no personality type is independent from the quality and the way in which we relate to others and to God

In the spiritual life a more personalized self-knowledge helps us to avoid self deception and allows us to be transformed by God – and not by our own efforts – toward a more genuine image of ourselves and our relationship with God, to not project and to better discern that which is or is not from God.

This is even more necessary in spiritual direction when third parties play a part and when the interpersonal relationships must be clearer in order to center one's self in another and in what the Lord may be asking – and not in one's own self and in the possible benefits in the relationship of director – directee. Any hint of co-dependency, competition, emotional transference, or the desire to satisfy unmet needs, must be

recognized and taken into account as best as possible. A shallow self-awareness or even a vague knowledge of the true self simply does not suffice, no matter how healthy a person is. Rather, we need the help of others, and through adequate measures we are able to deepen our self-awareness, thus illuminating those dark corners, discovering the typical pit-falls, and empowering our own strong points. In fact, all the dynamics in a helping relationship are present in spiritual direction. If what we aim at is spiritual accompaniment – that which is done in the Spirit of the Lord and nothing else – awareness and self knowledge become a needy ascetical attitude, fruit of deep respect towards the helped person and the desire to accompany the best we can without interfering God's active presence.

Growing in awareness of “how one is” and of “how one functions in relationship (with God, with others, and with self)”, is a constant process that always requires prayerful attention, on the lines of the daily Ignatian Examen (SpEx 43). God's working through us not only takes into account our personal history and way of being, it naturally involves them. The experience of age through the different stages in life and our own human and spiritual growth really determine the guidelines for a fuller self knowledge and personal integration.

Managing Basic Psychological Factors

The social sciences, psychology in particular, have a lot to contribute to spiritual direction. Even more, a spiritual director working on being more sensitive and taking seriously anyone who may ask for guidance should not take for granted some of the basic elements of psychology – which in our day is more accessible and easier to understand.

Without a doubt, a clearer knowledge of the *psychological development* of the human being is a necessary tool towards a better understanding of those whom we help. Grace works through nature and the religious – psychological development that occurs throughout the life of a human being becomes clearer and builds itself upon the biological, psychological and social stages we experience in life. It is very different to spiritually guide an 18 year old person than a 35 year old or a 50 year old, for whatever may seem as common sense should be informed by the

psychological studies available to us today as useful and indispensable tools for our ministry.

In addition, another important area of study is the *psychology of personality*. How do I perceive myself? How do I relate to others? To God? What are the predominant tendencies in my behavior? How do I make decisions? How do I handle frustration? How do I love and let myself be loved? *To live in the Spirit is to live life – and all the facets of life – in God.* No personality type is independent from the quality and the way in which we relate to others and to God. The psychology of personality, far from limiting or labeling our directees, allows for growth and openness no matter who the individual is; it helps getting down to earth what the Holy Spirit inspires throughout life and dismisses that which tends to threaten and squelch the ways God speaks to us.

Also, we can build upon and round out our on-going formation by incorporating *communication psychology* and the *psychology of religion*. Spiritual direction should not be reduced to counseling or, even more, a psychological therapy. Nevertheless, these areas of psychology can contribute immensely to our ministry of direction. And central to guiding someone in the spiritual life is being able to distinguish between the different approaches and professions involved in serving others so as to do justice to each different ministry and to be able to fully assume the specific task of spiritual guidance. Given this, however, we must not take for granted how much insight human psychology offers us today. Being able to integrate the different theoretical elements, attitudes and psychological tools without merely psychologizing, and at the same time doing spiritual direction without merely spiritualizing, is and in of itself an art, a gift from God.

Being in Touch with Social Reality and Cultural Trends

Neither those who seek guidance nor those who are spiritual directors live in an isolated, ahistorical context. Wanting to well situate a directee in his or her own social context requires us to be in touch with the world around us and the social and cultural realities of our time. Spiritual direction that is disconnected from and not rooted in reality is dangerous because it does not seriously consider the context of someone's life,

including the Incarnation of the Lord.

Faith, spiritual growth and apostolic commitment occur within a specific historical context and in a determined culture. Thus, it is not only important but imperative that someone being trained in spiritual direction to individuals, couples and families, be very aware of new social trends that form the values and judgments of today – like doing a sort of social analysis.

Even more, growing in the ability to identify with Christ as a goal in spiritual direction opens the believer to a richer and more committed faith life: embracing the preferential option of Jesus Christ for the little ones, the poor and sinners. More closely following Christ naturally leads to a fuller commitment to justice and a compassion for the poor and the marginalized of the world. It is the gospel criteria for determining the fruits of a Christian lifestyle. Walking in the footsteps of Christ and his options require the spiritual director to be in touch with the social and cultural reality of our world. The historic dimension together with the Christian commitment it implies is an essential element to good spiritual direction.

Developing Themes of Spiritual Theology

Spiritual theology is a vast reserve of wisdom for those who give spiritual direction. This is an area rich in theological reflection: biblical theology, sacramental theology, moral theology, Christology, ecclesiology, etc...

The spiritual life and following Christ become enriched by these areas of reflection upon: the true experience of God in our world today, the ways in which God is or is not manifested in our emerging culture and the different experiences we have in a society ever more pluralistic and diversified.

The one who guides others should seek to articulate as clearly as possible today's Christian and Catholic spirituality, such as the specific elements of Christian lifestyle, grace and how grace is manifested, and how following Christ is the central focus of all spiritual growth and commitment.

One important realm of spiritual theology includes everything under the umbrella of *Christian prayer*: what it is or is not, its parameters, the

different ways of praying, the Word of God, etc.

The Sacraments, channels of communication with God and experiences of grace, in particular the Eucharist, as a source of Christian life, is another chapter of spiritual theology that requires familiarity on behalf of the spiritual companion. Knowing how to distinguish between spiritual direction and the sacrament of Reconciliation and relating the two together can be a tremendous help for those being directed.

Good formation in spiritual direction also emphasizes how important it is to be familiar with the “spiritual maps” of believers. All people have

*following Christ naturally
leads to a fuller commitment
to justice and a compassion
for the poor and the
marginalized of the world.*

*It is the gospel criteria for
determining the fruits
of a Christian lifestyle*

their unique calling and path in life, but similar spiritual movements can be seen in different people – creating a sort of pedagogical paradigm. Knowing the annotations and rules for discerning the Spirit from the *Spiritual Exercises* (1-20, 314-346) of St. Ignatius helps immensely in being able to perceive the different movements of the Spirit – and thus, discern them. Subtlety is a gift of the Spirit that both enriches and empowers clear and more genuine discernment. Spiritual theology,

then, broadens our spiritual direction by giving us more tools to work with – in addition to security and confidence.

Similarly, being able to understand and articulate the different spiritualities that have contributed to the Church as incarnate in the lives of men and women saints widens our perspective and allows for better discernment of how God speaks to specific individuals.

We must also remember, finally, the *mystical experience* in a well developed spirituality, both mature and healthy, with its own criteria.

If it's true that in spiritual direction nothing can replace the personal experience, a relationship in service of helping another must be sufficiently informed by at least the basics of spiritual theology – so as to not do harm! Even the true great mystics such as Teresa of Avila sought out advice from men and women of God but who were also wise and

learned people.

Participating in Workshops for Continuing Formation

One would think that after a personal experience of being directed, after reading about and studying theology and the social sciences – such as psychology, the only missing piece in becoming active in this ministry, then, would be requests from others for spiritual direction. This is true, but not the whole truth. Effectively, in practice this ministry requires that everything learned be processed and personalized at more depth by participating in classes and specialized workshops. Good theology is not enough to be a good spiritual director. This apostolic ministry is a unique service to others that requires apprenticeship and a lot of feed back from other good spiritual directors. This is an important point for both beginners at spiritual guidance as well as for those already with some experience.

For those beginning, a program of apprenticeship and a directed process of growth is a good approach. A few suggestions for those preceding down a path of spiritual direction as an apostolic ministry:

- ~ The profile of a spiritual director in the light of Jesus; human and spiritual maturity of the spiritual guide.
- ~ Decision making ; complex psychological-spiritual situations; spiritual discernment
- ~ Discover, create and polish a personal style; be present to pain, read the “spiritual map” and the spiritual history of the one seeking guidance

In addition, workshops on scripture and psychological-spiritual integration tend to nicely compliment the first few years of ministry.

On the other hand, experienced directors would do well by looking for an ongoing formation along the lines of “supervision” by sharing with others. These meetings can range from reading and discussing new material for good exchanges in ideas to letting one be challenged by others’ experiences. In these types of “supervised meetings” the focus is the spiritual director himself/herself. Case studies, sharing experiences,

recognition or different styles and approaches of directors, support and new challenges, mutual feedback, etc., all serve as the purpose for these types of theoretical-practical workshops.

My Formation as a Spiritual Director
Personal Log

| Focus | Achievements in this area | Goals in this area |
|--|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1) Experience having spiritual direction | | |
| 2) Human stratum and charisma in directing | | |
| 3) Good self knowledge and awareness | | |
| 4) Able to articulate the basics of psychology | | |
| 5) Know the culture/social analysis | | |
| 6) Study areas and themes of spiritual theology | | |
| 7) Spiritual direction workshops for beginners and veterans in the field | | |

EDWARD MERCIECA, S.J. Director of The Secretariat of Ignatian Spirituality (SSI) and Editor of The Review of Ignatian Spirituality – CIS. Rome, Italy.

Translated by D. Scott Hendrickson, S.J.