

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: AN INTRODUCTION

Spirituality has been described as a way of “looking underneath” - searching and finding God, as Ignatius puts it, in the “deep down tastes and feelings” of our everyday lives.

In the group experience, we journey together, learning gradually to recognise and respond to God’s voice of love. Spiritual direction is a similar journey, only on a one-to-one basis. It may take place in a retreat, according to the Spiritual Exercises, or it may be a regular, ongoing meeting, during the course of everyday life. John Wright SJ describes spiritual direction as:

“ An inter-personal situation in which one person assists another to develop and come to maturity in the life of the Spirit, that is, the life of faith, hope and love.” So there is a relationship between the director and the directee, with the Holy Spirit as the essential third party! Each one listens - and learns from the conversation! ”

Whereas, in the past, the spiritual director was an authority figure, he/she is now a facilitator - a co-discerner, an interpreter and a companion. The emphasis is on discernment.

Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewess, who died in Auschwitz and became known as a modern mystic wrote the following in her diary: ***“But somewhere inside me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed, just as profusely and delicately as it ever did. And it spreads its scent round the House in which You dwell, Oh God. You can see, I look after You, I bring you not only my tears and my forebodings ... I bring you scented jasmine...”*** In direction, two “companions” are trying to find the jasmine, following the scent and bringing it, together with tears and forebodings, as a gift to the “indwelling” God. This search for the jasmine is a sacred task. It takes courage, trust, and deep love but is infinitely worthwhile.

What S/Direction is NOT:

Although similar, It is not pastoral counselling i.e. it is not directly problem centred where a mixture of psychology and spirituality is called for. Although psychological insights are necessary for good direction, if a person needs direct counselling, it

is advisable to refer them to a counsellor or therapist. Thomas Green mentions a book called “We Neurotics”, by Bernard Basset SJ, who says that he advises his students that if their lives are manageable, in spite of their neuroses, then they are “normal”! They need professional help if the neurosis interferes with normal functioning.

Although information may be exchanged, spiritual direction is **not primarily information giving** ie not mainly about knowledge. As Ignatius observes: “For it is not much knowledge that satisfies the soul but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth. “

Teresa of Avila in the Fourth Mansion of her *Interior Castle* talks about praying as loving - that the important thing is “not to think much but to love much”. Spiritual direction seeks to facilitate contemplative prayer in order to release love.

CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING A DIRECTOR:

“As rare as hen’s teeth” was someone’s comment about finding a good director! Nevertheless, trying to choose the right director is important and it is wise to meet and get ‘a feel’ for the director before starting the process. Similarly, there is a place, after patient effort and prayer, for ‘walking away’ if the direction does not really work. If the time is not right or there appears to be no suitable director available, it is best to wait and share with a trusted friend, learning together to listen and wait for the Lord to provide the director in His time. Thomas Green suggests the following criteria for choosing a director:

1. COMPATABILITY. The relationship is a friendly one so the two people concerned should be comfortable with each other. It shouldn’t be a highly charged, emotionally nerve wracking relationship! Similarly, although a perfect mix of class/culture is rare, there should be good understanding on both sides.
2. SHARED VISION. Again, allowing for basic differences, the visions of director and directee should not be in opposition. There must be a mutual understanding of the basic goals and boundaries. It is important to establish these from the outset.
3. OBJECTIVITY. There should be freedom in the relationship so that the director can “step back” and help the directee discern for

herself. If there is too much familiarity, possessiveness, or attempts to control, then the situation can become unhealthy.

4. GOOD LISTENER. The director must have learnt to listen. She must have developed “antennae” and a certain sixth sense to really hear the person - what is being said and what is not being said - and to try to hear what God is saying.

5. CONFIDENTIALITY. The task of listening to and being able to keep secret the deeply personal, often painful stories which emerge from locked ‘cupboards’, is a sacred duty. It means that the director has to choose to “watch and pray” - and this requires discipline and, sometimes, loneliness.

6. AHEAD ON THE JOURNEY. Although not always essential, this is desirable. A ‘blind guide’ can be dangerous. The director should be experienced and mature in spiritual life and in her own prayer journey. She needs to have faced most of her own shadows and found healing, though humbly recognising her own ongoing need for greater healing and deeper love. She also needs to have some supervision. Essentially, the director should be confident enough to wash the feet of another, because she, herself, has experienced and continues to experience the on-going loving touch of ‘foot-washing’ in spiritual direction. Due to her deep respect for direction as a ‘work of the Holy Spirit’, she can take a back seat as the least important person in this holy threesome! Then, the Spirit can work across age, experience and cultures.

John of the Cross and Ignatius see Spiritual Direction as helpful at every stage of the journey. The goal is to respond to the call of Jesus to “set my people free”. Free from themselves where they are bound by fears and unhealthy attachments, free from dependence on the director; free from anything that blocks their relationship to God - free to recognize and offer back the gifts of ‘inner jasmine.’

WHEN, HOW, WHERE?

Practicalities need to be worked out carefully at the start. These will vary according to individual needs but, if possible, there should be some regularity and consistency e.g. meeting once a week or fortnight in a certain place at a certain time. Some directors charge a small fee to pay their way. This should be clear, if required. Also, from time to time the needs etc should be reviewed.

The relationship is an organic one and should never be rigid but it is important to establish a few ground rules and boundaries.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

How is my inner 'house'? The cupboards? The jasmine?

What are the deep desires of my heart? Do I need someone to accompany me in discerning these?

References:

Thomas H. Green S.J. "The Friend and the Bridegroom" Ava Maria Press

William A Barry S.J. "God's passionate Desire and our Response" Ava Maria Press

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