

Spiritual Direction: Wisdom, Depth, and Freedom

Fr. Anthony of the Transfiguration, July 1, 2020

Why seek spiritual direction? Will I receive something different from what I get out of “discipleship,” “mentoring,” or small-group faith-sharing? Does it replace these? How can I find the right director? What should I expect? What shouldn’t I expect? How can I get the most out of each meeting?

Maybe discipleship has helped launch your spiritual life. A campus minister, a missionary, or an older student invite you to walk with them and learn from them in a Bible Study or one-on-one meetings. As you mature in prayer and in Christian life, spiritual direction is a specific and proven way to go to the next level. Three reasons for this are the following: to root our personal walk within the Body of Christ; to be guided by the wisdom of the Church deeper into the mystery of God; to widen our space of personal freedom in our discernment, relationships, and commitments.

A Step of Maturity in the Body of Christ

First, we need spiritual direction because we are members of the Body of Christ. We desire to trust, to follow, to be guided by the Head. Christ is the Head, through whom we have access to the Father and openness to the Spirit. As disciples, we learn this trust through prayer and sacramental life, but also through relationships with those who inspire and guide us.

The faith I received through my family, catechesis, and parochial school blossomed in a new way when I committed to a Bible Study group. For five years, we walked together as friends, mentored by the two leaders who were a few grades ahead of us. Sharing the faith with friends and leaning on elder brothers brought me deeper into Christ’s Body. The leaders transmitted to us the way they related to God. They coached and challenged us and kept us accountable.

After this experience of shared discipleship, I had questions and aspirations that were beyond the grasp of our college-age mentors--I wanted to explore Catholic life and mystical life beyond my own culture, and I wanted to discern the priesthood! I was ready to take initiative, to seek and solidify my personal spiritual identity, and to submit my path in a deeper way to the wisdom and authority of Christ. At 18 years old, I asked our assistant pastor to be my spiritual director.

The directee, not the director, is the protagonist. He or she must choose a director freely and subsequently consider whether or not to continue with them, try meeting with someone else, or discontinue. The directee must be the one to set up and prepare for each meeting.

The directee should seek a director who helps them find and affirms their unique spiritual path. A good director helps them ask questions, reflect on experiences, listen to and

articulate their heart, and above all, listen to the Word of God and the whisper of the Holy Spirit. It is not so much the place of the director, however, to interpret the experience of the directee. The director might suggest writings, practices, and spiritual paths, but they should be careful not to give “directions” on what path the directee should take.

Ordained ministers are spiritual directors who provide the solid presence of Christ the Head. Religious brothers or sisters, or even trained lay ministers, are also formed and guided by the authority and tradition of the Church. Good directors have a wide vision of the abundance of spiritualities, practices, benefits, as well as pitfalls that are possible in Christian prayer and life. They are good listeners and offer encouragement and advice, as well as the challenges of the Word of God, always keeping the conversation in the light of the Holy Spirit.

A Guide into the Depths of God and the Mystery of the Person

Second, we need spiritual direction when we have entered into the unknown. We need help understanding God's mysterious ways and the mysterious depths of our own hearts. Even if one is well-catechized, God is always greater, and our experiences are unique. The consolations and emotions we're used to may fade at times. What does this mean? Are we changing? Is God giving us the silent treatment? But as we travel farther into Him, we feel deeper peace and joys—and often deeper hurts, too, that we may need encouragement through.

Deeper knowledge of God and our personal paths come more smoothly when we can articulate what is happening. Most do this best with someone who has experience and knowledge about spiritual paths, in a relationship that is in confidence, unbiased, and focused on this goal.

If you don't feel such a need for spiritual direction, you might ask myself how you can better engage life in the Spirit, and let the Lord get involved in your life. How can you go deeper? How can you let God be the wild, mysterious, Incarnate God that He is? How can you let yourself feel and witness deeper realms of your heart, memory, and desires? How can you journal about this or reflect on it so that you might have something to bring to a time of spiritual direction?

Spiritual direction itself can be an experience of God and a celebration of his mystery. Even though your director might not emanate the odor of holiness, go into the meeting with an openness to the Holy Spirit, ready to hear the Word, to let Him hear your self-revelation, and to feel his Presence.

A Space of Freedom

Third, we need freedom as we face delicate matters in life. Spiritual direction is crucial to discern our vocation, a change in ministry, or other life-changing decisions. It can also preserve our freedom amidst the ongoing challenges of religious life, ministry, marriage, community, and a serious prayer life. We need a confidential space where we can

articulate our thoughts, feelings, and spiritual movements. Spiritual direction offers a relationship with someone who is unbiased and, at the same time, who can understand and take an interest in our situation.

The need for freedom moves us to often bring to spiritual direction many things that may seem simply *human* and not so much an experience of God. We can share our moral struggles, our battle for virtue, and our paths of healing from wounds. We can share about our relationships full of conflicts, jealousies, and experiences of love.

When I fall in love with Jane, but she's not in love with me, or she's five years younger, or she's married, or she's my parishioner, or she's a nun, I need to cope with my feelings and bring them before the Lord, and it helps to do so with someone. When I bring to spiritual direction cares and questions that seem less spiritual, the director will usually be happy to take time to listen and to help me discern whether and when I should share the matter with another person concerned, with an authority figure, with a counselor or psychologist, or rather to bring the matter to the Sacrament of Confession, to a prayer for healing, etc.

As we move on in life, and especially in ministry, there begins to be more things that we can't be totally frank about with friends, a mentor, a significant other, even a counselor. We often need to express our hearts, sometimes look for advice, without crossing lines of professionalism or with authority, without divulging our every thought and feeling to our friends, team and family.

I once met with the head pastor of a large Protestant church that had many ministries and many other pastors. He had come to realize the need for spiritual direction. He said that he knew of certain people in his Protestant circles whom he thought capable of offering him the direction he needed. However, the few he knew of either lived on the other side of the country, or they were too close to his circle of ministry to be sufficiently detached. Moreover, he explained, the Catholic Church has a firm tradition and custom of confidentiality that most Protestant forms of mentorship cannot assure. This pastor of a church that had a history of being anti-Catholic then asked me if I knew of any priests nearby whom I could recommend to him for spiritual direction!

This conversation with a non-Catholic left me in awe at the depth and gift of spiritual direction. For the last 23 years of seminary and mission, I have had about 10 moves across the sea. Without fail, I have always found a director. Spiritual direction is a treasure of our tradition that can keep us on a life-long path of communion, depth, and freedom.