

# **Counselling, Spiritual Direction and Confession: Common Elements and Differences**

**Joe Mannath SDB**

## **Five Cases:**

Kevin is a very sincere seminarian. He meets his spiritual director regularly, as expected by seminary rules, that is, once in three or four weeks. He does not hide his difficulties or dreams. In fact, in their latest meeting, he spoke of his strong sexual feelings and fantasies, his doubts about his call to be celibate, and the confusion he feels deep within. Sexual desires and fantasies take up so much attention that he wonders if he is normal, or whether there is something wrong with him. He has no idea how others his age feel, or face their sexuality.

Patricia, a married woman with grown-up sons and daughters, tells me: "I feel very blessed. I was away from the Church for several years, but, when I came back, it really was a home-coming. My faith means so much to me now. My husband and I have a very good relationship. What I want above all at this stage is to deepen my relationship with God; I want to get closer to the Lord."

Josephine, a young sister in temporary vows, spoke to the retreat preacher about her anger towards her father. There were several reasons for this anger—partiality towards another sibling, humiliating comments in front of others, drunken outbursts. Josephine realizes vaguely, too, that anger towards her father has affected her relationships to superiors in general. She feels guilty about talking about her father's drinking and angry outbursts ("How can I speak ill of my own father?"), but feels the need of working through her hurt feelings and confusion.

Jason spoke to me about his shyness and his feelings of discomfort in front of strangers. He fears the future. He does not feel he will amount to anything. He finds it hard to see something really precious in himself. He imagines other laugh him and look down on him. He realizes there are many fears in his mind, fears that often cripple him emotionally, and prevent him from reaching out to others, and from trying out things he dreams of accomplishing. In fact, he waited months before deciding to speak to me.

Bernard completed his high school in a Salesian school in Chennai, and joined Loyola College. He asked to see me. He wanted to meet with me regularly. I asked him why. "I want to deepen my relationship with Jesus," was Bernard's reply.

## **Counselling and Spiritual Direction: Common Elements**

Which of these situations would you describe as counselling? Which of them would you call spiritual direction? Or, do you think all of them are both? Have you approached someone for the kinds of conversation described above? If so, which?

What goes on in our seminaries and religious formation houses or during retreats under the name of spiritual direction is mostly counselling. In the examples given above, Kevin, Josephine and Jason are in counselling situations. Patricia and Bernard are really seeking spiritual direction. When you are under distress, and want to get help, and talk to someone about it, this is what is called counselling. It has much in common with spiritual direction, but they are not the same.

What about the Sacrament of Reconciliation, commonly called "confession"? Is it the same as counselling or spiritual direction? If not, how does it differ from them?

In this article, I would like to point out the elements common to counselling and spiritual direction, and then come to the main differences. After that, we will have a look at what confession is, and how it both overlaps these two ministries, and yet remains distinct.

What are the common elements?

There are five elements common to counselling and spiritual direction.

(1) *Exploring the inner world*: In both counselling and in spiritual direction, the focus is on our "inner world"—what is happening with me, e.g., my desires, dreams, fears, ideals, responses

to persons and events. Thus, if a student comes to the superior to complain about a teacher, or to discuss a problem in studies, this does not amount to either counselling or spiritual direction. But talking on matters like emotions or life choices (Am I happy? Do I want to be a priest? How to handle my sexual feelings? Why do I lose my temper so frequently?) belong to these types of confidential conversation.

- (2) *Clarifying what one wants:* If I ask you: What do you like to do after tea? I am asking you a superficial question. No special help is needed for answering this question. But if the question is about what I want to do with my life (Marry or be celibate? Become a priest or be lay person? Teach in college as my provincial wants or volunteer for the missions, as the major superiors are encouraging us to do?) I need to reflect, pray, consult someone in depth. This is where counselling and spiritual direction can play a very helpful role.
- (3) *Understanding one's deep desires:* All of us have many superficial desires and a few deep desires. Superficial desires come and go, and do not affect our happiness or the direction our life takes. Thus, I may prefer coffee to tea, or the colour blue to red. My favourite game may be basketball, not cricket, and I may like a particular type of music. These are not life-and-death matters. I can be happy even if I do not play football or get favourite type of food or music. Other desires are deeper. Thus, one may have had a deep desire to join religious life, or dedicate oneself to the service of the poor, or offer oneself for the missions. When Meera, a very gifted and active college student, seen as a natural leader by her companions, decided to join a contemplative order, her friends were shocked. They could not figure out why a talented young woman would "throw it all away and go and hide in a convent." Such decisions are not to be taken lightly. They affect our whole life orientation. A person needs to discuss the issue seriously, sincerely and in depth with a competent person. This is what we do in counselling or spiritual direction.
- (4) *Detecting unhealthy tendencies.* Let us suppose that Roger, a third year seminarian, is seeing more and clearly that he is not meant for the priesthood. He really like to leave, and do something else. But he is afraid of his parents' reaction; after all, they had always dreamt of his becoming a priest. So, too, his villages call him "brother," and treat him with special deference. Roger fears that they will talk ill of him if he leaves the seminary. So, he stays in, unhappy and confused. He needs help. Someone must help him overcome his fears and make a good decision. Or else, he may go ahead without a vocation, and find himself miserable in the priesthood—or be a bad priest.
- (5) *Respecting the person's right to decide:* In both counselling and spiritual direction, the helping person should not impose one's own views on the counsellee or directee. Thus, it would be wrong for a spiritual direction to say, "Clarence, you should become a priest," or "Mary, you have a religious vocation; you should join the convent," just as it would be unethical for a counsellor to tell someone whom they should marry or which subject they should specialize in. Such decisions should not be imposed on people. Thus, persons who are power-hungry and like to control others, telling them what to do, would not make good counsellors or spiritual directors.

#### **Differences:**

But there are significant differences as well.

*The main difference lies in the very purpose of the two ministries:* In counselling, the focus is on one's personal growth; I want to be rid of my fears, or hurts, depression, or learn to relate better, or to cope with my problems more effectively. In spiritual direction, the main focus is my relationship with God. You need not have any "problem" or be under stress, to want spiritual direction.

This is the main difference between these two forms of ministry. That one difference colours everything else, and must be understood correctly.

A person seeks counselling to overcome distress. The distress may be minor, like overcoming nervousness during interviews, or major, like depression prompting a person to suicidal thoughts. It is like going to the doctor when I am sick, or getting my leg treated after an accident. My goal is to return to a “normal” life and function well.

The central point of spiritual direction is remarkably different. I seek out a spiritual director to talk about my religious experiences, and to deepen my relationship with God. That is why, in the cases I have quoted at the beginning, Marguerite and Bernard are looking for spiritual direction (whether they use the word or not), while the others are in need of counselling. Barry and Connolly, authors of the most quoted book on spiritual direction in English,<sup>1</sup> would say that religious experience is to spiritual direction what ingredients for preparing food are to cooking. You cannot cook unless you have edible materials—vegetables and salt, meat or fish, rice or flour—for preparing food. There is no point in going for spiritual direction, unless the seeker is interested in deepening one’s relationship with God, or clarifying one’s religious experience or aspirations.

A number of persons, particularly in church circles, use the word “spiritual direction” for what really is counselling. Someone wants help with a personal or family problem, and calls the session spiritual direction. If the person is helped to overcome the problem, it is certainly a very good thing; but this is not spiritual direction.

Other differences flow from this basic distinction. Here they are, in a nutshell:

- (1) A counsellee seeks emotional well-being (e.g., to overcome fear or depression), whereas a person seeks spiritual direction wants to deepen one’s relationship with God. This implies getting to know God’s will better in one’s life, and understanding how one’s relationship with God affects—and is affected by—all the areas of one’s life. Thus, how one handles anger or does business can be a topic in spiritual direction, but this is discussed in connection with one’s relationship with God.
- (2) In counselling, I seek to meet my needs and develop autonomy, or, in more colloquial terms, to stand on my own feet. Thus, if I am shy or carry deep hurts, and counselling helps me to overcome these blocks, I can face life more confidently. I need not lean on others, or feel weak. In spiritual direction, too, there is the search for freedom, but it is a quest for the inner freedom to surrender myself to God in love. My ultimate spiritual aim is not autonomy but loving surrender. God’s will matters more than my likes and dislikes.
- (3) Counselling can help me to improve my relationships with people, by helping me see how I react to persons and events, how I am blocking myself through negative fantasies, etc. It can teach me better relationship skills, such as listening, communication, confrontation, etc. In spiritual direction, my relationships with people do come under scrutiny, but in so far they reflect and influence my relationship with God.
- (4) In counselling, a person’s thoughts and feelings are explored (e.g., anger, jealousy, thoughts of being inadequate or inferior, etc.). In spiritual direction, the focus is more on one’s feeling responses in prayer. Thus, if I feel bored during community prayer, but feel God’s presence in nature or in my ministry, that is worth exploring in spiritual direction.
- (5) The main “tool” for bringing about change in counselling is the counsellor’s person, together with his/her training. In spiritual direction, the most crucial element is the directee’s religious experience, and one’s openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The real director is the Spirit, not the human being I come to talk to. This is why, unlike in counselling, there

---

<sup>1</sup> William A. Barry SJ & William J. Connolly SJ. *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Rev. Ed. New York: HarperOne. 2009.

are three relationships involved in spiritual direction. You can imagine them as three sets of arrows. In counselling, there is only one set of arrows: counsellee to counsellor and vice-versa. In spiritual direction, instead, there are: the relationship between the directee and God (which is the main thing; all the rest is in service of that); the relationship between the directee and the director (which should help and support the first); the relationship between the director and God (without which the director would not understand another's search for God). In spiritual direction, the relationship between directee and director does matter a lot; but it is in the service of a more important relationship, namely, that with God. Both the director and the directee need to cultivate that all-important relationship assiduously. I seek spiritual direction, not to do what my director wants me to do, but to see more clearly what God wants me to do with my life. A spiritual "director" does not "direct," or tell me what to do. He/she helps me to find more clearly what my personal "direction" is on my unique way to God. In this sense, it is spiritual companionship, rather than being "directed." (This is why in some religious congregations, where what matters most is obedience to the superior, there is very little space for discernment or spiritual direction. Religious life or fidelity is reduced simplistically to saying "yes" to the superior. I am the superior; I want you to do this job. You have to obey. I am not concerned about your happiness or your journey with God. If this is how I act, I am forgetting the essential core of religious life—a search for God and sharing God's love with others—and reducing it to a mechanism for getting some work done.)

- (6) Because of the faith dimension, there is also this practical difference between the two. Counselling is an approach to helping people in distress that was developed in secular settings. It makes no reference to a person's faith (unless the person brings it up). In spiritual direction, instead, the central issue is religious. Thus, unlike a counsellor, a spiritual director would see it fit and important to pray for one's directees. This does not mean that the spiritual direction session should start with a prayer, but it does mean that the spiritual director would do well to seek God's guidance to help the person coming for spiritual direction.
- (7) This is why I can get counselling (or psychotherapy) from any human being. That person's religious views do not matter. Thus, in our training centres in Bangalore and elsewhere, we have had counsellors and trainers who belonged to other religions or churches. What mattered was the person's maturity and competence. In spiritual direction, instead, the meeting is between two Christians. Thus, to give an example, a Hindu psychiatrist or Moslem counsellor can help me get over depression or phobias, but I cannot discuss my religious vocation with them. I need to talk vocational matters over with someone who understands and lives the Catholic faith. Celibacy, for instance, does not make sense for persons of some religions.
- (8) Because of these reasons, we can summarize counselling as the process of moving from "abnormal" (a broken or dysfunctional state) to "normal" (that is, healthy, confident, able to function well). Does that mean that spiritual direction is a move from normal to abnormal? Though that may sound like a joke, there is some truth in it. Just as those who exercise regularly and keep really fit are the exception rather than the norm, so are those seeking to deepen their journey with God. It does not interest the majority of persons, just as most people would rather watch TV than go to the gym. In this sense, spiritual direction is a help for moving from "normal" (in the sense of average or mediocre) to "abnormal" (in the sense of high-performing or outstanding). Don Bosco, for instance, did not aim at simply giving his destitute boys food and education; he proposed to them ideals of holiness. His educational

method created saints. This is a far cry from aiming at mediocre results. Yes, spiritual direction is for training champions; it is not needed for those satisfied with mediocrity.

What Kevin, Josephine, Patricia, Bernard and Jason are seeking, and doing, is all meaningful. When someone approaches us for help, saying, "Can I have a word with you?" we need not split hairs,, trying to sort out whether they are seeking counselling or spiritual direction. It is good (part of professional ethics) to find out what they want, and whether we can offer that. But we need not exclude all counselling from spiritual direction. All of us need both, for none of us is fully mature, nor free of emotional blocks and blind spots. It is better to get help than go through life emotionally weak or crippled, or make others suffer because of our immaturity. All of us can also be helped to improve and deepen our relationship with God, and learn to discern more clearly that one Voice that speaks to us in all the other voices we hear.

#### **Qualities Needed in a Counsellor:**

Research has shown beyond doubt one comforting and, at the same time, challenging finding: The main factor in helping a person to change is not the techniques used or the theory followed, but the person of the helper. This came through, for instance, in an American study of counselling groups. The main factor that made the difference was not which theoretical framework or approach was used, but the person of the group leader.

If so, it is important to ask:

What kind of a person will help another to grow up, or get healed?

Since both counselling and spiritual direction contain the same type of process (being approachable, listening, responding, etc.), very similar qualities are needed for both ministries.

Here are the qualities needed in a good counsellor:

- (1) *Warmth*: This means being a person who communicates love, who can be approached and trusted, who inspires confidence.
- (2) *Genuineness*: People in need will trust us only if they find that we are true to your word, that we do not smile at someone and then stab him in the back, that what we say is what we mean. We cannot just pretend to listen or to care.
- (3) *Empathy*: Empathy means the ability to put oneself in the other's frame of mind. Thus, after the Tsunami, many persons who had lost their family members, lost the will to live or to work. How do we understand their feelings? It is not enough to say, "Yes, I know how you feel." I have never been in their situation. Do I make a sincere effort to put myself in their frame of mind?
- (4) *Respect*: People tell the counsellor things they feel ashamed of, or weaknesses which they would rather not reveal. They will then look at the counsellor to see how that person looks at them now. Do I see people with genuine respect, whatever they may tell me? Or do I despise or condemn them in my heart once I know they did something I do not approve of?
- (5) *Confidentiality*: What is shared in confidence must remain confidential. The only exceptions allowed refer to murder, suicide or sexual abuse. [Confession has no exceptions whatsoever.] Sadly, in a number of settings (including religious houses), people in need do not open up, since they are not sure of confidentiality, or because they have known of violations of trust. Anyone doing this type of ministry must know the ethics involved, and the serious obligation of confidentiality. Thus, for instance, a superior cannot ask a spiritual director what a candidate has revealed, nor what the spiritual director thinks of the candidate.

- (6) *Listening*: One of the most difficult things in life is to find good listeners! Listening sounds easy, but it is rare and difficult. Once, during our training in counselling, we were asked to listen to someone for sixty seconds, and say back everything that the person had said. We felt confident we would do it without a flaw. It was instructive to learn that we can be distracted and miss things even during sixty seconds. To listen means to give full, loving attention to another human being, and understand not just the spoken words and ideas, but the feeling behind the words. Our minds easily wander, and our attention frequently shift back to our own lives and interests.
- (7) *Acceptance*: Whether I agree with what someone has done or not, am I willing to take him/her as s/he is now, and listen and give my time? Am I willing to listen to what that person wants to talk about, whether I find the topic interesting or not?
- (8) *Affirmation*: When people are troubled, or have been put down, they do not see much good in themselves. Or they think of themselves as failures or feel ashamed of themselves. It is important to point out to them what they are doing well.
- (9) *Ability to confront*: This means mostly pointing out inconsistencies in behavior. It should never be rude or angry or humiliating.
- (10) *Interpersonal Communication*: This means to communicate well at a one-to-one level, through posture, gestures, facial expression, words, etc., and to be attentive to all this in the counsellee. Some good counsellors are very good for picking up a person's feelings from facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. with very few words.

#### **Qualities Needed in a Spiritual Director:**

It will come as no surprise when I say that *the same ten qualities are also what a good spiritual director needs*. I have said something about this in my chapter on spiritual direction. It would be a mistake to appoint someone as spiritual director just because he is a priest, or because someone is old, and perceived as "spiritual," that is spending more time in prayer. The main quality needed is the "surplus of warmth" that Barry and Connolly speak of—a caring, compassionate interest in human beings, and the readiness to deal with them as they are, without expecting them to be perfect or charming.

In addition to the ten qualities a counsellor needs, a spiritual director should be marked by three other qualities, too. Here they are:

- 
- (1) *Personal Prayer*: The reason is simple. The core matter of spiritual direction is a person's relationship with God. A person comes for spiritual direction to clarify what God wants and to respond to that generously. To understand that quest, the director must cultivate one's own relationship with God. Or else, it would like to listening to a foreign language with which one is not familiar. Without it, there is also the danger that the director would tend to impose one's own views and preferences on the directee, or to reduce the encounter to merely to the psychological level.
  - (2) *Familiarity with the Word of God*: A good spiritual director need not be a Scripture scholar, but must be someone who is familiar with the word of God through personal prayer and reflective reading. Then, when someone is struggling, let us say, with a discernment issue, or suffering from a sense of God's absence, the right Bible passages will come to the director's mind to suggest to the directee, since the director has prayed with them, and found them nourishing. I am not saying that we should impose on our directees our own spiritual practices. No, we should not; we should try to find out what helps them. But a person nourished on the Word of God will know better than others how to break this bread with the hungry. One of the accusations of Catholics who have left the Church and joined Pentecostal groups is this: That in the Catholic church, they were exposed to all types of

devotions to Mary and the saints, but not given a taste for the Word of God. The Word of God has all the answers we need. We lost much if we are not used to accessing this very powerful source of peace and strength.

- (3) *Some knowledge of theology and spirituality*: While, once again, a spiritual director need not be a theologian, nor is his role in spiritual direction to lecture on theoretical issues, one must be familiar with the essential doctrines of the church. Thus, a novice mistress must know what the church teaches on vocation and religious life. A seminary formator must know the meaning of the ministerial priesthood. As for spirituality, we need to help directees to avoid extreme views on spirituality cut off from life. Thus, one seminarian or young sister may need to be told to spend more time in silence and reflection, while another may need to mix more with people. Christian morality and spirituality are relational, and not simply reduced to religious functions.
- 

### **The Sacrament of Reconciliation**

What about the Sacrament of Reconciliation (confession)?

It has several elements common to counselling and spiritual direction, but is different from both.

It is the celebration of Christ's forgiving love by two sinners (the priest and the penitent), and reconciliation of the penitent to God and to the community.

It has in addition the grace of the sacrament.

A number of persons seek confession rather than counselling and spiritual direction—especially when facing painful or shameful problems—because of the absolute confidentiality that the sacrament guarantees, and (in several cases) because of the anonymity it offers.

For confession to be effective, it needs to be prepared carefully, celebrated meaningfully, followed by a relevant penance (not simply an automatic three Hail Mary's) and the desire for change.

Priests can—and must—do more to make this sacrament meaningful and appealing to people, especially to younger Catholics. Many have questions and misgivings about it. I have found, in retreats to college students, that once we explain this sacrament meaningfully, including taking up the five or six frequent questions people raise about it, so many youngsters come for confession. They take their time, prefer to sit opposite the confessor rather than hide behind a screen, and speak very frankly. A number of them weep.

For several people, e.g., women religious in certain settings, the only way to get some counselling and spiritual direction is in confession. The sacrament is by no means the ideal setting for counselling or spiritual direction (to begin with, both need much more time than what confession provides), but if there are no other opportunities, it is better people get helped, rather than wait for ideal conditions. Some feel freer to speak in the anonymity of the confessional than in facing a counsellor or spiritual director. This seems to be case especially when someone wants to seek help with embarrassing problems, such as sexual failures, or when one prefers not to be recognized.

### **Conclusion:**

Counselling, spiritual direction and confession are three valid and very helpful means for personal healing and growth. They are similar, yet distinct; different, yet overlapping.

If someone is troubled by emotional or relational issues, and wants to find a way out, counselling or psychotherapy is the path to take.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I have not mentioned psychiatry, because that does not normally come under the ministries done by church personnel or in church settings. It is a specialization within medicine, not within psychology. If a person's problem has organic grounds (e.g., depression or mood swings caused by chemical imbalance in the brain), psychiatric help

If you are looking for a deeper relationship with God, or to clarify your religious experience or what God wants from you, what you seek is spiritual direction.

If you need to put your life in order, change or give up sinful acts or habits, approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and celebrate it meaningfully.

Whatever terms we use, may we take our inner journey seriously, and keep growing up, not merely growing older—growing up both emotionally and towards a closer resemblance to Christ. For this growth, the Church—formation houses in particular—need to provide all three types of help. And we “helpers” need to know what each type of help can or cannot do, or how to use them effectively, whether separately or in a wise combination.

---

---

is indicated. If the problems are emotional or relational, then counselling would help. Medication helps in the first instance, and being understood by a counsellor is the better help in the second. It demands some experience and wisdom to sort out when a person needs psychiatric help, when psychological support is better indicated, and when the matter is clearly one for spiritual direction.