

Spiritual Direction: A Look at the Basics

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Think of a moment in your life (or an experience) during which you felt truly and deeply alive. When was it? What happened? What did you experience? Will you be happy to talk about it? With whom?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you had someone whom you trust deeply with whom you could share your highs and lows, your dreams and doubts, your most thrilling experiences as well as the most painful ones?

If that person is someone wise and loving whom you look up to, someone who seems to have mastered the art of living happily and well, all the better. You would really be blessed to have such a loving companion, a soul-friend, whose care and availability you can count on, whose warmth and genuineness make you trust him or her, whose listening puts you at ease, whose frank feedback helps you understand yourself better, whose encouragement and loving challenge helps you grow up. Someone ready to accompany you in this loving, steady, non-threatening way, is one of life's greatest blessings. We can truly say about them: I am a better person for having shared my journey with so-and-so. I could look into myself without fear, understand myself much more clearly, and look at the good and bad sides of me without hiding. Our conversations have really helped me to become the person God wants me to be.

This kind of loving relationship is what we mean by the term, "spiritual direction." Its essentials are explained below, under seven questions.

Q1: I have heard people talk of spiritual direction as a wonderful help for a happy and meaningful life. What exactly is spiritual direction? What is its practical use?

Spiritual "direction" is not what its name may suggest. It is not a relationship in which person A "directs" person B, that is, tells him/her what to do and how to live. It is more an "accompaniment" or a "spiritual friendship." In fact, some groups prefer to avoid the term, "spiritual direction." To quote one example, the L'Arche communities—founded by Jean Vanier and serving the mentally handicapped—normally use the word, "accompaniment." Each staff member is expected to find a person who "accompanies" them. Many others, too, prefer this term¹ to the older term, "spiritual direction," which, however, continues to be very much in use. Whatever the differences in terminology, let us see what the reality is.

Here is a part of my own story, in case it helps the reader.

During my years of formation, particularly during my study of theology, I found it hard to decide whether I should become a priest, or leave and marry. I was a Salesian from the age of eighteen, and started experiencing deep and disturbing questions about life, my vocation and my future from the end of my regency and the start of theology. I had faced the intellectual questions about faith and life (Freud and Marx, atheism, secularization, the weakness of the proofs for the existence of God, etc.) during our stimulating philosophy years in Rome. Before and during theology, my own life-choices and the individual path I had to decide on, became troubling issues for me.

One of the greatest blessings in this period of my life was the chances I got to meet good and helpful persons to whom I could open up, pour out my doubts and fears, my dreams and questions. For one thing, I felt happier and freer after I spoke. Some of them helped me to see how normal and even healthy my doubts and questions were (I had feared there was something wrong with me for having these doubts.) Others helped me to explore without fear what I really wanted, what my fears were, and the pros and cons I saw on each path. Some asked me questions

¹ The on-going seminars on the spiritual accompaniment of the young, organized by the Department of Youth Ministry, Salesian Generalate Rome, use the term "accompaniment" in preference to "direction."

about areas I had not thought of. Fr Peter Brocardo SDB, my rector in Rome during my philosophy studies, had helped me to see my lack of inner freedom when I took my first vows, and told me how we do not *have* to do anything particular to please God. Fr Tony De Mello SJ, in his typical unconventional way, challenged me: “Joe, do you really want to love, or are you afraid of it?” I could share my questions and doubts in the area of celibacy with Fr Matthias Altrichter SJ, our spiritual director in Papal Seminary, Pune. A retired Jesuit Father, Fr Joseph Koelman, shared with me how he had gone ahead, remembering the story of the widow of Zarephath. In that story, God always provided for the day for the widow, her son and the visiting prophet. Fr Koelman went on to tell me, “In my life, too, God always provided for the day. I have never lost a night of sleep from worry.” Sharing with these men, and listening to other men and women in counselling and therapy groups, I became more aware of myself, of my strengths and weaknesses. Living in an open context with persons diocesan seminarians as well as religious from different congregations, I also came to see my more clearly the strengths and weaknesses of my religious congregation, and what it provided and did not provide me in personal accompaniment. Today, I hear the Salesian superior general, Fr Pascual Chavez Villanueva, speaking of our evident strengths and undeniable weaknesses in the same area.

What is this whole area about?

We are put on this earth by a loving and wise God for a purpose. That purpose is not just to eat and sleep, have some pleasure, make money, grow older, procreate others like ourselves, and die. Then, how would our life be different from that of animals? No, we were called into being by a loving and all-powerful God for a divine purpose—to love Him and live according to His wise and loving plans, thus finding peace and enthusiasm, and build the kind of world that God wants for humankind. For this, we need the wisdom to see right, the right desires to follow what is true and good, the inner strength to do what we see as God’s will. All this is not automatic or instinctual. Like learning a language, or playing a musical instrument, we need from those who know better, individual attention, and much personal effort.

The great benefactors of the human race did what they did, not by following what is easier or more comfortable, but by chasing a vision that gave them purpose, and a letting themselves be guided by an Inner Voice that knows better than we do what our deepest needs are, and what we are called to do for others.

Spiritual direction is the help a person seeks and receives to attain that kind of clarity, this type of energy and fire, so that we do not waste our life on trivialities, but really do something beautiful and meaningful with our lives. For this we need a relationship with a person who takes us seriously, who listens to our heart with deep care and wisdom, who has our best interests in mind, and who accompanies us through our search, struggles, decisions, confusion, achievements and failures, respecting our uniqueness, and never imposing his/her own pet plans. That kind of wise friend is a treasure beyond words. We really grow into persons we did not even know we are capable of becoming. Each of us carries extraordinary potential—for good and for evil. When we open to the right kind of person, s/he helps us to spot our gifts, cultivate them with care, and take responsibility for our life and our happiness. This person also challenges us to face our failures and inconsistencies, warns us against the dangers on our path, and corrects us lovingly and firmly when we need it.

This type of deep, loving, trusting relationship what “spiritual direction” or “spiritual accompaniment” is all about.

If we believe that God has a plan for each of us, and that God acts in our personal history, then, the most important task in life is to find out what God wants from us and to follow it. But God does not whisper in our ear what He wants, nor does God interpret the meaning of events to us miraculously. We need to do our part to find it. In this search, we can be helped by other persons, provided that the other person or persons have the suitable qualities for helping me on my individual journey with God. The spiritual director has a humble role: to accompany me in my relationship with God. He or she has no right to impose favourite values or life styles on me,

or to make decisions for me. My central relationship is not with my spiritual director, but with God.

Experienced trainers of would-be spiritual directors would insist that what vegetables and other food items are to cooking, religious experience is to spiritual direction.² I enter spiritual direction to explore, deepen, clarify and grow through my religious experience. Mind you, everyone has “spiritual experience.” Most people are shy to speak about it, but many more persons—including children and persons who do not belong officially to religious organizations—have remarkable personal experiences beyond the realm of ordinary experience. The research published by the Alister Hardy Research Unit of Oxford, for instance, bears witness to this.³

What spiritual direction should offer is neither well-intentioned advice, nor a set of mini-sermons, but a wise and loving listening ear. The “director” or friend needs to listen in depth to the directee’s experiences, rather than impose one’s own schemes on them. The assumption is not: “This person who comes to me does not know who to relate to God; I will teach him/her.” The much wiser and more realistic assumption is: Everyone has God-experiences, whether they know it or not. God acts in everybody’s life. Our task is to identify how God is working in your life, and to see more clearly the unique spiritual path you are meant to walk on.

It is about respecting everyone unique way of relating God; it is far from a set of mini-sermons we give to everyone who comes.

The “director” or friend accompanies and helps. This ministry of accompaniment is not as easy as it may sound. Preaching or giving advice would be much easier. This accompaniment presupposes some special qualities.

Q2: What qualities?

A good spiritual director needs almost the same qualities as a good counsellor, plus some more.⁴ Experienced spiritual directors would agree with the following “list” found in the writings of the famous guides of the past and psychologically trained specialists of today.

The most necessary quality in a spiritual director is (try three guesses, if you like!)...*love*. Barry and Connolly, with years of experience in the practice and teaching of spiritual direction, talk of a “surplus of warmth,” or love for people as they are. This love or warmth is not to be understood as something temperamental or just a question of feelings. It is rather an active love that shows itself as *commitment* to the good of the other, a genuine *effort to understand* the person in all his/her uniqueness, and *spontaneity*, that is being oneself. This love also makes the director willing to really *listen* to the other, *be patient* with the directee and to *pray* earnestly for his/her welfare.

It would thus be a mistake to appoint as spiritual director someone who is perceived as more prayerful (spending many hours in the chapel, for instance), or is older, or ordained, but who does not communicate love. So, too, just the fact of being a superior does not make a person a spiritual director, nor will people open up to the authority figure who demands, “I am your superior; you must have confidence in me.”

² William A. Barry SJ & William J. Connolly SJ. *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. 2nd Rev. Ed. New York: HarperOne. 2009. This is probably the most quoted book on spiritual direction in the recent decades.

³ See Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), which describes the surveys the centre did on people’s spiritual experiences, and gives striking excerpts from the accounts collected. For the spiritual experience of children, see: Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990).

⁴ See my chapter on “Counselling, Spiritual Direction and Confession.”

The other qualities needed in a spiritual director are: *discernment* (the ability to understand the heart and judge rightly)⁵, *honesty* in what one says or does, *respect for the person* and for his/her unique path, which can be very different from the director's. Without a genuine respect, the director will tend to impose one's own favourite ideas and practices on the persons coming for spiritual direction.

To understand and help another on the journey to God, the spiritual director needs to *cultivate personal prayer*. Much of the matter of spiritual direction is one's relationship with God, and what one experiences in prayer. Only a person with the habit of personal prayer can understand such language. I do not imply by any means that the main, or only, topic of conversation in spiritual direction is prayer or one's "spiritual" life. No; I can profitably talk over any of my experiences, longings, frustrations or relationships. But I discuss them as they affect, and are affected by, my relationship with God. (This is one of the differences between spiritual direction and counselling.)⁶

Thus, Clarence, a well-to-do professional, came to consult me about a family problem. He and wife differed sharply on how much to give in charity, and how far to "fight" for a larger share of the ancestral property. She was much more concerned about the financial security of the family, while his main struggle was about living the Gospel generously. Doing charity was a core value for Clarence and for his son; security and family prestige were more pressing concerns for her. Such issues do come up in spiritual direction.

What about *knowledge or learning*? The spiritual director need not be academically learned; nor is such competence sufficient. In fact, there are persons who know theology at a theoretical level, but are incapable of understanding people or helping them on their inner journey. The learning the spiritual director needs is the following: *sufficient familiarity with Scripture, at least basic knowledge of theology (including something about spiritual traditions) and some knowledge of psychology*.

Listing these qualities does not mean that we should look around for the perfect spiritual director; nor does it mean that someone less learned or less saintly than the directee cannot be of help.⁷

Q3: What happens in spiritual direction?

Lots or little, depending on the directee and the director.

First of all, there is respectful *listening*. The director's sincere and deep listening helps me to start listening more intently to how God works in my life. I become more attentive to God's ways of talking to me. I understand myself and my unique path more and more clearly, more and more deeply.

When we examine transcripts of spiritual direction sessions, one thing that is immediately evident is this: The talking (as in counselling) is done mostly by the directee. If the director tends

⁵ On discernment, the following recent books can be recommended: Rose Mary Dougherty. *Discernment: A Path to Spiritual Awakening*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009; Pierre Wolff. *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well. Based on Ignatian Spirituality*. Liguori, MI: Liguori/Triumph. 2003; Elizabeth Liebert. *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making*. Westminster John Knox, 2008.

⁶ Counselling and spiritual direction overlap very much, but need to be distinguished. Their goals and basic assumptions are different. For a clear and useful comparison among psychotherapy, pastoral counselling and spiritual direction, see: Gary Moon, David Benner, Joyce Huggett. *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices*. 256 pp. Eagle. 2005.

⁷ For other recent, well-informed insights into the practice of spiritual direction, see: Janet Ruffing. *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*. Paulist. 2000; and Henri J. M. Nouwen, with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca Laird. *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006.

to talk much, or to monopolize the conversation, or turn the spiritual direction meeting into a private conference or sermon, then, this is really not spiritual direction, but advice-giving or preaching.

Learning to listen to oneself, and to how God is speaking to us, may lead to surprising discoveries of challenges. Thus, Liza, a nurse working in a maternity ward, found that the strongest and most beautiful God-experiences for her were the Eucharist and childbirth. “In both,” she said, “I see God’s incredible power and wisdom. They help me to come closer to God.”

Martin, an astronomer, asked a priest, “Father, does your profession to come closer to God? Mine does. I study the stars. I am reminded of God’s greatness every day.”

Secondly, *affirmation*. The director helps me to see my unique gifts and worth. In the process of growing up, all of us have been hurt and let down. This often prevents us from seeing God’s loving hand in our life. Through the director’s genuine concern and response, I see myself more and more as loved, gifted and lovable. Most people need help to see their gifts, and to feel confident in using them. People are, as a rule, more insecure than they look. Pointing out the gifts and potential of the person who comes for help, is an essential part of a good listener’s role. Thus, a director may tell a person, “You are saying that you are not effective in ministry. But, from what you told me, you seem to have done very well in such-and-such role,” or, “From what you told me, your teaching and personal interest seem to have helped a lot of weak students.” As you can see, this whole process is not at all the same as superficial advice-giving or exhortations like, “Pray more, and you will be OK,” or “Try to imitate saint so-and-so’s humility.”

Thirdly, *caring confrontation*. All love includes confrontation, or the challenge to grow, and to give up masks, pretenses and defensive ways that block me on my journey. Confrontation is not shouting or calling names, or losing our temper. It consists, in most cases, in pointing out to the person the inconsistencies in his or her behaviour. We do this firmly, but kindly. Confrontation is done calmly, not in anger. Thus, for instance, a director may tell a person: “In our recent three meetings, you told me you planned to get up early and spend some time praying. You do not seem to have done this. What happened?”

Fourth, a good spiritual director helps me by *clarifying or providing insight* into my experiences. He or she can help me to see the “mountains” and “deserts” on my path for what they are; not to give in to despair if I feel I am making no progress, or to be unduly elated by my high moods. Very often, we do not know whether our experiences and problems are normal for a person in our situation,⁸ or whether we are out of touch with ourselves and with life. That is why a good spiritual director needs a certain amount of life-experience. A very young person, or someone who has lived a very sheltered life, is unlikely to be a helpful spiritual director.

Please note that these points are not steps to be followed rigidly, but indicators of what happens in a genuine relationship such as spiritual direction.⁹ Note also that the spiritual director does not give me ready-made answers, nor solves my problems for me. He/she listens, respects, helps, clarifies, waits,...but does not impose. Spiritual direction is not about being directed by

⁸ This happens in some areas of life more frequently than in others. One crucial area where this type of doubt can assail a person easily is sexuality. Very often, a person does not know whether what he/she experiences in the sexual area is normal or not, e.g., whether one’s sexual longings are simply a normal phenomenon at one’s age, or constitute a counter-indication for a life of celibacy. So, too, dryness in prayer can come from many reasons. It can be the sign of a superficial or worldly life, or a trial sent by God to test a person’s fidelity.

⁹ Saint Francis de Sales, a highly acclaimed spiritual director, would insist that there really is no rigid or universally valid method in spiritual direction. For a discussion of his own “method,” see: Devassia Manalel MSFS, *Spiritual Direction: A Methodology*. Bangalore: SFS Publications, 2005. For a more recent study of issues affecting spiritual direction according to Francis de Sales, see: Eunan McDonnell, *The Concept of Freedom in the Writings of St. Francis de Sales* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2009).

someone else; it is about finding my genuine direction in life—that unique path that is best suited to me.

“Direction” is hence meant as helping a person to find one’s unique direction in life. It should be not taken to mean that one tells another person what to do, or takes charge of another’s life. In all spiritual direction, the underlying assumption is that the real Director is the Holy Spirit. Both persons involved in the process (whether we call them director and directee, or soul-friends, or whatever) need to listen to what God seems to telling the person concerned. If someone comes to me for spiritual direction, it is because he or she thinks that talking with me may help them clarify their religious experience and inner journey, and help them get closer to God. It is God’s guidance they need to clarify and follow; they are not here to follow me, or become my disciples. We accompany; we do not direct. This must always be kept in mind. (Or, if you think the term spiritual direction makes people, especially priests, religious or superiors, act as if they are in charge of someone else’s spiritual journey, it will be safer and clearer to use the word “accompaniment.”)

Q4: This sounds to me a lot like counselling. Is spiritual direction the same as counselling?

There is much overlap between the two fields. In fact, some retreat centres use the word “counselling” loosely to indicate the helps given to retreatants on their spiritual journey. Others (as in seminaries and religious formation houses) often use the term “spiritual direction” to cover any confidential chat between a particular staff member and the young person in training. Much of the matter is the trainee’s psycho-social development.

If we take the term “counselling” in its secular, psychological meaning, it is a relationship of trust between two persons, one of whom is under some form of distress and seeks help. Though there are many approaches and theories in counselling (psychoanalytic, behaviorist, client-centred, cognitive, etc.), most of them propose the following “steps” as useful for helping a person in distress: establishing a trusting relationship, listening that leads to empathic understanding (seeing the problem from the other’s perspective), affirmation, caring confrontation, communication of respect and understanding, clarifying issues, coming to a decision. In what ways and how actively the counsellor intervenes, will depend on the model of counselling he/she follows, and by the counsellor’s personality. Whatever the orientation followed, the main resource in counselling is the counsellor’s personal maturity and professional training.

Most of this is valid in spiritual direction as well. In fact, training in counselling is very useful for spiritual directors. But there are basic differences that must not be overlooked. The main difference lies in this: Unlike secular counselling, spiritual direction is a relationship between two believers, both of whom believe in (and are committed to) God’s action in the individual. The main relationship is not the one between the spiritual director and me; it is my relationship with God. There are, so to say, three persons in the process: the directee, the director and the Holy Spirit. The goal is not just emotional adjustment or easing a distressful situation. In fact, spiritual direction is not problem-centred; its central concern is my relationship with my God, including, of course, how I live this out in my day-to-day life.¹⁰

Through spiritual direction, a person seeks to become more open to the guidance of the Spirit. That is why spiritual direction does not make sense without a serious practice of personal prayer (by the director and the directee). Hence we talk of the *three aspects or faces of spiritual direction*—the relationship between the directee and God (which is the main thing), the directee-director relationship (which is meant to promote the first), and the director’s relationship with God (without which the director would not understand the directee’s inner journey). This is why

¹⁰ For a more details examination of the similarities and differences between counselling and spiritual direction, see my chapter, “Counselling, Spiritual Direction and Confession.”

spiritual direction, unlike counselling, is a Christian ministry where both are practising Christians.¹¹

Q5: Who needs spiritual direction?

Anyone who takes the inner journey seriously. In any field of activity that we want to be good at, we seek helpers and guides or “coaches.” The coach cannot play the game for me, but can help me to play better by analyzing my strengths and my weakness, by supporting me and helping me to find the unique style of playing best suited to my abilities.¹² The spiritual director is that sort of respectful friend who accompanies me with love and patience. If the way he/she plays the game (of life) is an inspiration to me, all the better. I have been personally edified and helped by the way the late Father Melchior Balaguer SJ (who was my spiritual director during a crucial period of my life) interpreted whatever happened to him in the light of “What is God telling me through this?” The serenity and inner strength that came from his God-centred vision has inspired me a great deal. So, too, I really felt that he loved me like a son. This combination of inspiring example (of a joyful, simple God-centred life), wisdom and warm affection are what makes a person a good spiritual director.

There are special times and seasons when we need spiritual direction more than at other times. These include: times of decision-making, times of inner trial and distress, significant passages or events, and the assumption of special responsibilities.¹³ At such times, good spiritual accompaniment can make our vision clearer, our inner strength deeper, our sense of God sharper. And we will be able to understand and help others better. We will seek to do for them whatever the Lord wants, rather than control or use them according to our power games or preferences.

Q6: How do I go about getting spiritual direction?

Here are a few practical suggestions.

- (1) *Pray over your situation.* Ask the Lord to show you a wise and suitable spiritual guide. Prayer helps you to be open to your real needs rather than follow your prejudices and fears.
- (2) If you do not know any good spiritual director in your vicinity, *ask around.* Know that, to be a good spiritual “director” or companion, one does not have to be a priest, or hold any special office.
- (3) Once you find someone who inspires confidence, *tell him/her what you are looking for.* What is the main thing you are seeking at this moment? What would you like the spiritual director to do for you?
- (4) *Agree on the frequency of your meetings.* Twice a month seems to be a good periodicity, especially at the beginning. Later, perhaps, you will change it to once a month. During my post-doctoral studies in the US—by which time I had been a seminary formator for several years—I approached a well-known spiritual director who was also head of a

¹¹ For details and very useful material on different aspects of spiritual direction, see: Fleming, *The Christian Ministry of Spiritual Direction*. It is a reprint of some of the articles published in *Review for Religious*.

¹² The coach-player simile is valid here in another sense, too. Just as you need to have been a player (and a good one at that) before becoming a coach, you cannot be a spiritual director unless you have received spiritual direction for a considerable period of time. One handicap many formators and superiors face is that they are expected to give spiritual direction without having received it for a sufficient amount of time, nor been given any training in spiritual direction.

¹³ Here is one such example. The month-long course Don Bosco Renewal Centre, Bangalore, conducts for young Salesians preparing for final vows includes twelve days of input on various aspects of their life, a week of therapy and psychological help to get over emotional blocks and a guided retreat during which they receive spiritual direction every day. The participants have evaluated this course very enthusiastically.

centre for training spiritual directors, to find out whether I could meet him once a month for spiritual direction. His answer surprised and edified me, “Joe, if we meet only once a month, I do not think I will get to know you well enough. I suggest we meet twice a month.” I found the meetings, as well as the frequency he had proposed, very useful.

Once you establish a relationship of mutual respect and trust, you and the director will know how to proceed. There are no techniques or tricks or set patterns to follow. What matters is whether you are becoming more and more open to the Spirit, more responsible and loving in your setting, more in touch with your real feelings and dreams rather than under pressure to please others or go along with the crowd. You will experience greater inner freedom and strength, as well as greater courage to take tough decisions.

Spiritual direction, rightly understood and used, will not make you withdraw from people and from life, or shirk your personal and social obligations. You will become a more committed member of the different communities you belong to—your family, church, ministry, neighbourhood, political organizations. In each setting, your growing concern will be to listen to the voice of the Spirit as it speaks to you through people and events, and to respond with generosity and with love.

Spiritual direction, as you can see, is not an escapist activity of withdrawing into one’s private world and endlessly dwelling on one’s moods and desires or the details of one’s religious practices. One checks out on one’s inner world to know it better and to learn to discern God’s voice among the many “voices” one hears. Once heard, that voice becomes one’s guiding light, whether it calls us to more prayer, or greater social commitment or more tender expressions of love in one’s close relationships, or whole-hearted forgiveness. The term “spiritual” should not make us think of something cut off from life, or artificial, or dealing merely with religious activities. Spirituality is whatever makes us most alive, and produces the best possible version of ourselves. Its opposite is not secular engagement, but deadness or withdrawal from life.

The ancient, well-tried and powerful practice of spiritual direction—probably better understood if called “accompaniment”—is not a sleeping tablet, nor a form of childish dependence on someone else for our decisions. Just the contrary! It is a means and a mark of assuming greater responsibility for my life, for my unique path, and for the persons and events around me that somehow depend on my choices. Life takes on quite a different colour when our regular and central concern is not what we find easier but what the Lord wants from us.

This last phrase (“what the Lord wants from us”) can easily be misunderstood. It does not mean putting on an external code of behaviour that robs us of our spontaneity, humour and independent thinking. Such a distortion would be like putting on an armour that stifles all free movement. Spiritual direction really is aimed at getting in touch with our truer self, our deeper desires, our real needs. These are often very different from our superficial wants or fleeting preferences. The real conflict is not between “doing God’s will” and “doing what I want.” The clash is between a superficial, unexamined life under the control of each passing event or mood, and a meaningful life lived with passion and purpose. The contrast, in other words, is between our many superficial desires and the really deep desires of our heart. Spiritual direction helps us to sort out this difference—and to pursue our real good.

Q7: Apart from seeking spiritual direction, can we ordinary people (parents, teachers, religious, priests,...) help others as some sort of spiritual directors or soul friends?

You need not feel shy to ask that question. Spiritual direction is not a role reserved to persons with advanced degrees in spirituality, or to the clergy, monks and nuns, or to old people, or to holy-holy types who are different from the norm. Today, more and more women religious and lay persons are getting trained in it.

Some years ago, when I participated in a workshop in Boston for experienced spiritual directors, I found (to my surprise, I must confess) that I was the only priest in the group—as well as the only male. All the rest were women—both celibate and married women, every one of whom had rich and varied experiences as spiritual directors.

In India, where we have a very large number of women religious, many of whom well-educated and experienced, this would be a great ministry for more sisters to go into. There is no reason why retreat preachers or leaders of prayer groups or spiritual directors or counsellors have to be priests. It is high time more women religious and lay persons entered these forms of ministry. In fact, that seems to be happening more and more.

Do you have what it takes to make a good spiritual director? Here is a simple guideline. The surest way to know whether you are suitable for this ministry is to ask yourself:

Do people approach me for it?

If the people you normally deal with and live with tend to confide in you and seek your help with their inner life or personal problems; if you have a genuine love for people (real love for people, not just liking for some whom you find attractive) and the desire to help them on their personal journey; if seeking God's will and trying to do what God wants are your central concerns (rather than power games or manipulation); if personal prayer is one of your essential and convinced activities; if you are honest in your dealings with people, and ready to listen with your full attention; if you keep confidential matters strictly confidential; if those who know you well consider you a person of sound judgement—then, you have the stuff to help others as a spiritual director. Of the conditions mentioned just now, the simplest indicator for checking whether you are suitable for this ministry is this: whether others come to you for such personal chats.

In case you are involved in this ministry on a regular basis, please get supervision. Check with an experienced spiritual director whether your way of offering spiritual direction is helpful, ethical and effective. We have much to learn, even if we think we know what we are doing. So, too, unhelpful ways of “helping” people can do harm. There can also be ethical issues we ignore, e.g., confidentiality and boundary issues.

Reading, training and getting spiritual direction yourself will help you to sharpen your skills and make you a more effective helper. But training or lectures cannot produce the essentials—genuineness and love, good judgement, closeness to God, and respect for each person's uniqueness. These basic qualities speak of the kind of person you are, not of the theory or techniques you may have picked up. In spiritual direction, as in all that touches the core issues of life, what we are and what we know from experience are a far more decisive qualification than the words we use or the official titles we carry—or conventional religious jargon that may sound “spiritual,” but does not give life.

In one word, if you are a person who sees the inner journey (your own and that of others) as real, fascinating and worth your best attention, and have yourself opened your heart to a spiritual director and experienced growth through it, you will probably help others in what matters most in life—with or without such labels as “spiritual director” or guide or guru. In fact, I am convinced that many of us receive (and give) much valid spiritual direction without calling it by that name. It is more than likely that, for a good number of us, our first spiritual director was our mother or father.

Some Misunderstandings and Clarifications:

1. *Spiritual direction is not a ministry necessarily tied to ordination.* Any Christian can be a spiritual director, that is, any believer can accompany another on the journey of faith. In India, we are used to associating the term “spiritual director” with priests, especially with senior priests. As I mentioned above, my experience in the US was an eye-opener in this

- regard. So many ministries which in India are generally done only or mostly by priests, can be done by women religious or lay persons. Such ministries include: preaching, giving retreats, spiritual guidance and counselling, parish administration, etc.
2. *Spiritual direction is not about “directing,” that is, about telling another what to do, or taking decisions for them.* Some religious superiors claim something for which they have no right—namely, to expect the “subjects” to accept whatever comes from the superior as God’s will, and the superior’s opinion and advice as spiritual guidance. While a superior can help the community spiritually through a good personal life, conferences, well-prepared prayer services and retreats, etc, spiritual direction consists in the help offered by one to another to discern God’s action in one’s life and get closer to God. It is God who directs. The so-called spiritual director’s is a humble role of accompaniment. It respects each one’s individual inner journey, and refrains from imposing the director’s views on the one who comes for spiritual direction. One thing I remember from my guided retreats under Father M.M Balaguer SJ, a wonderful spiritual director, was this. He did not impose his views on me, nor take decisions for me. One day, during one of our spiritual direction encounters, I got into a heated argument with him. At the end of it, I apologized, saying, “Father, I am sorry to have argued with you. I am just a beginner, and you have lived a lifetime practising all this.” His gentle reply, “That is perfectly all right, Joe. The Lord may be leading you differently.” This is wise spiritual direction! Fr Balaguer did not claim to know what was best for me, nor did he try to insist that I should agree with him. (If we, who guide others, as superiors, spiritual directors, etc, believe in our ministry, we ourselves will see the need of getting spiritual direction. Our decisions need to be in line with God’s plans; or else, we may mislead others. So, too, my ministry can be a wonderful help for me to get closer to God, but I need occasional checks with someone who knows my inner journey.)
 3. *Spiritual direction overlaps very much with psychological counselling,* especially if the two persons involved are priests, seminarians or religious. In fact, going by my twenty years of experience in formation work, I would say that most of what happens under the tag of spiritual direction in formation houses is really counselling. Formees come for help with personal problems, such as, fear, sexuality, relationships, family matters. It is good and necessary that candidates get help with these problems. What I am saying is that these are matters for counselling, and not, properly speaking, for spiritual direction. A person under distress seeks help; this is counselling. If the meeting leads to greater happiness, confidence or inner freedom, the encounter serves a good purpose. In spiritual direction, the driving motive is not finding freedom from personal problems; it is deepening one’s relationship with God. Thus, a very happy person can seek spiritual direction. A very mature, confident individual can benefit from spiritual direction. It is about deepening and clarifying one’s inner journey; it is not really about fixing life’s trouble spots. Spiritual direction cannot be a substitute for therapy, or vice-versa. The psychologist is not the best help for my inner journey, nor is the spiritual director equipped to deal with emotional or mental illness and abnormalities.
 4. *Spiritual direction is not a tool for “saving vocations.”* Some congregations and superiors seem to be overly concerned about saving vocations, as if we know for certain what everyone’s vocation is. Such persons operate on the assumption that whoever joins the seminary or religious order must stay in, that leaving is a bad thing, and that we must somehow prevent candidates from leaving. Then, we may send them to “spiritual directors” who are likely to tell them to stay, not leave. This is a violation of a person’s right. A vocation is a vocation only if the candidate genuinely wants this way of life, as is seen in the peace and happiness one experiences in living it, and other signs. We have no right to keep anyone in against their well-considered desires, or to chase them out without good reason. If we are spiritual directors, our task is one of humble accompaniment—to

make it easier for the person to listen to God's voice. And, since no one knows God's voice or will for certain, we do this by helping a person to identify his or her deeper desires and persistent dreams.

5. *The main matter for spiritual direction is the directee's religious experience.* Hence the importance of really listening to it. Such questions as, "How do you pray?" "How do you picture God?" "Who are the persons who inspire you most?" "Want to tell me about your vocation journey?" "How do you meet God in your daily life?" are far more important than advice-giving. We really need to listen to the directee's experience and help them deepen their relationship with God, rather than get them to listen to our well-intentioned advice. If we end up talking more than the person coming for spiritual direction, something is seriously wrong! We may be turning the meeting into a sermon or an advice-giving session, rather than helping the person to deepen their unique way of relating to God and responding to God's love. This particular person's way to God may not be the same as yours or what you have found most useful. So, respect, listen, pray, be open. You will be wonderstruck by the way God operates in the lives of different people. As one experienced spiritual director in Rome told me as I approached him for guidance on what to do when students came to me for help, "Don't say No to them. God will help you through them." Yes, God will teach us many things through the very persons whom we may think we are helping.
6. There are no infallible guidelines for deciding who would make a good spiritual director. But the following check list may help you to see how far you are suitable for this ministry, or how well you are doing it.

Am I a Good Spiritual Director?

A check list

Joe Mannath SDB

I am more likely to be an effective spiritual director if the following are true about me:
(Rate yourself on a 1-5 scale, 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest. Discussing your findings with someone you trust, especially if that person is an experienced spiritual director, would be an additional help.)

- (1) Am I a warm-hearted and loving human being who cares about people? 5 4 3 2 1
- (2) Am I ready to give time to people who need my help? 5 4 3 2 1
- (3) When someone comes to talk to me, do I give them my complete attention? 5 4 3 2 1
- (4) Do I see the inner journey (the spiritual life) as an important area of interest? 5 4 3 2 1
- (5) Do I have an integral understanding of spirituality (affecting all areas of my life rather than something limited to particular activities)? 5 4 3 2 1
- (6) Does what I understand as religion or spirituality make me a person of integrity, love, justice, respect for people and care for the earth? 5 4 3 2 1
- (7) Do I have sufficient experience of life to understand and help people (that is, not very young or over-protected or out of touch with reality)? 5 4 3 2 1
- (8) If I am working mostly with a particular group (e.g., women, youth, seniors, sick people, refugees,), am I familiar with their setting, problems and aspirations? 5 4 3 2 1

- (9) Have I received spiritual direction for a sufficient length of time (e.g., for months or years, not just during one retreat or two)? 5 4 3 2 1
- (10) Has this been a happy and useful experience I would be delighted to repeat? 5 4 3 2 1
- (11) If people come to me regularly for spiritual direction, do I get supervision (that is, do I check with an experienced spiritual director how far my way is helpful)? 5 4 3 2 1
- (12) Do I believe in personal prayer? 5 4 3 2 1
- (13) Do I engage in it regularly and sincerely? 5 4 3 2 1
- (14) Do I believe that the best thing we can do is to do what God wants us to do? 5 4 3 2 1
- (15) Am I familiar with the Bible, using it for personal prayer and decisions? 5 4 3 2 1
- (16) Do I have at least a basic understanding of Catholic doctrine and theology? 5 4 3 2 1
- (17) Have I studied at least the basics of psychology, or read up in the area? 5 4 3 2 1
- (18) Are the people I admire most and try to imitate good and inspiring persons? 5 4 3 2 1
- (19) Am I ethical in my spiritual direction practice (confidentiality, avoiding abuse, referrals, etc.)? 5 4 3 2 1
- (20) Do I make a serious effort to follow Jesus' values (e.g., trust in God, love, forgiveness, compassion, asking pardon, respect for all, sharing my resources,...)? 5 4 3 2 1
- (21) When I experience a personal problem, do I face it, get help if needed, and grow through it (rather than stay in it, and make myself and others miserable)? 5 4 3 2 1
- (22) Do people (e.g., younger religious or parishioners or students) tend to approach me for help with personal problems or spiritual queries? 5 4 3 2 1
- (23) (If I am a superior), do I really seek the good of those in my care, rather than make them do what I want? 5 4 3 2 1
- (24) (If I am a superior), do I create a climate in which individuals and the community really are helped to do God's will rather than please the superior? 5 4 3 2 1
- (25) In making major decisions, do I try to discern God's will? 5 4 3 2 1
- (26) In making the "minor" decisions of the day, am I led mostly by truth and love? 5 4 3 2 1
- (27) Is my judgement about persons, events and situations generally sound (according to most people who know me)? 5 4 3 2 1
- (28) Do I respect, and sincerely promote, the other person's individual journey ("direction") rather than impose my views on him/her? 5 4 3 2 1
- (29) When I do not know the answer, do I admit it honestly, and consult other sources? 5 4 3 2 1
- (30) Do I look for the good in people, point it out to them, and encourage them? 5 4 3 2 1

- (31) When I have to confront, do I do it in a caring and respectful way? 5 4 3
2 1
- (32) Am I happy? 5 4 3 2 1
- (33) Do I seek happiness in leading a good (honest, loving, responsible, simple, God-centred) life rather than a comfortable or easy life? 5 4 3 2 1
- (34) Have I had experiences of God's love and nearness? 5 4 3 2 1
- (35) Do these experiences affect the way I see life, and the way I live and relate? 5 4 3 2 1
- (36) Do I believe that we can create a better (more just, more loving, more peaceful) world, if I train myself and those in my care to live as God wants? 5 4 3 2 1
- (37) Has joining religious life or becoming a priest helped me to become a God-centred person? 5 4 3 2 1
- (38) Do I (and my setting) try to see what helps people to pray, rather than merely impose some common practices on all? 5 4 3 2 1
- (39) Am I (Is my congregation/diocese) deeply interested in the inner journey of the candidates and in helping them get closer to God? 5 4 3 2 1
- (40) Compared to the care I take of my body, intellectual development and emotions, do I invest sufficient energy in my inner journey? 5 4 3 2 1
- (41) Do I believe that seeking God's will is a much wiser strategy (even for my happiness) than following my likes and dislikes? 5 4 3 2 1
- (42) Have I received some training in counselling and spiritual direction? 5 4 3 2 1
- (43) Does the ideal of holiness (being Christ-like, being led by the Holy Spirit, living as God wants, living the Gospel today, ...) really interest and attract me? 5 4 3 2 1
- (44) Do I believe God has a plan/ mission for each person, and works in everyone's life? 5 4 3 2 1
- (45) Do I believe that a person can do great things if he/she allows God to guide him/her? 5 4 3 2 1
- (46) Do I believe that lay persons and women religious and non-ordained men can be good spiritual directors? 5 4 3 2 1
- (47) Do people find me a good listener (interested, patient, respectful, attentive)? 5 4 3 2 1
- (48) Do I pray for those who come to me for help? 5 4 3 2 1
- (49) (If I am a priest) Do I celebrate the Sacraments, esp. Eucharist and Reconciliation, devoutly and meaningfully, so that it becomes a God-experience for people? 5 4 3 2 1
- (50) Am I becoming more and more like the good relatives, superiors and spiritual directors/counselors I have had? 5 4 3 2 1

Personal Strengths I have identified:
(1)
(2)
(3)
(4)

(5)

Personal Weaknesses I have identified:

- (1)
- (2)
- (3)

Steps to take to become a better spiritual director:

- (1)
- (2)
- (3)

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