

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

FATHER WILLIAM, O.C.D.

ONE of the most obvious things in the world today is the fact that a priest cannot fulfil his sacerdotal function without being a *spiritual director*. It is not enough to administer the sacraments and preach the word of God in general from the pulpit. He must convince his flock of the message of Christ by an 'I-Thou' relationship born of a highly personal commitment, which we can refer to here as *spiritual direction*. The desire and need for spiritual direction on the part of the laity has been expressed persistently, pleadingly, over a rather long period of time. It can no longer be ignored. It is imperative that all priests respond with zeal, intelligence, and untiring labour.

So many Christians have become aware of their apostolic responsibility and at the same time are conscious of their spiritual poverty. They are hungry for the things of God; they are crying out for bread and they must not be handed a stone in the form of any weak or inadequate excuse such as: 'Too advanced for me', 'No time', 'Not necessary', 'Big crowds at confession', 'Better to be just an ordinary Christian'. Now is the hour. We must meet their demands if they are to remain effective instruments of Christ's peace and power in the world. God has called them all to divine union; the Church has called them all to work—the most divine work; it is the duty of priests to help them in every way possible to achieve their vocation.

Definition and purpose

Spiritual direction is 'the delegated action of Christ for the building-up of his mystical body, through the ordinary organ of the priesthood' (Gnocchi). With regard to the individual effect of direction, one could say: it is for the formation of the perfect member of the mystical body. The fact is that the purpose of spiritual direction is to aid a person to become himself, his best self, a perfect human being; and this is done primarily through a progressive enlightenment of the mind and enlargement of the heart, involving an adequate response to God and other men.

The aim is toward knowledge of God, because you cannot love what you do not know; and it is impossible really to know God without loving him, he is so infinitely attractive. 'Whoever loves is born of God and knows God; who does not love, does not know God, for God is love' (1 John iv, 7). For St John, then, to know God is not an abstract intellectual process but an *experience* that involves all of our powers—*affective* as well as *intellectual*. And the experience finds concrete manifestation through the exercise of the same affective and knowing faculties in our adjustment to one another. The by-product, the *indirect result* of the God-ward aim of spiritual direction is perfection—the perfection of charity. When a man loves God perfectly, he is perfect.

Spiritual direction is not, therefore, concerned mostly with moral problems, but with theological problems—with the positive concern for the actuation and development of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. And so spiritual direction is not meant to give a precise solution to all moral problems, but to help a person come closer to Christ, the source of his entire spiritual life. Through this personal direction, one is led toward the experience of knowing God. Direction does not produce the experience, but it prepares and helps one to achieve, with the grace of God, the necessary dispositions for such an experience. And God has given the director a mandate to judge the authenticity of the experience and eventually help the person manifest his experience in everyday living.

The director is nothing but an instrument in the hands of God. St John of the Cross teaches: 'The spiritual guide of these souls must consider that the principal agent, the real guide in such an office, is not himself, but the Holy Spirit who never ceases to watch over them. He is nothing but an instrument to direct them in the way of perfection according to the lights of faith, and according to the gifts that God has accorded to each of them.' His role is not the same as that of the teacher of the human sciences. The professor is appointed to teach philosophy, literature, mathematics, etc., which reveal only the conclusions of reason. It does happen that a director has recourse to certain precedents: he learns how to pray, to discern what is sinful, to mortify himself. This is horizontal direction. It is useful, and it bears fruit, but it is not sufficient in itself. But there must also be vertical direction which considers the grace proper to the one being

directed. A delicate work! Even supposing that the continual advancements of psychology permit us to delve more deeply into the mystery of the individual, there still remains a zone which will escape scientific explanation. The director will never penetrate that zone except with the light which God alone can dispense. It is necessary that his word be efficacious; it must bring light and strength. It will have this power only if it is penetrated by the divine motion, in such a way that the action of the director is nothing but an instrument the effect of which belongs principally to God.

As St John of the Cross says: 'The spiritual director must content himself with preparing the soul to receive God. He must restrain himself from going too far and from seeking to build the spiritual edifice. This role belongs entirely to the Father of lights.'

General principles should be outlined, particularized directions given. He should not be an overbearing empiricist. He must not be authoritarian. He should show how his rules of action are based on dogma and experience, and thus little by little educate the soul until it is able to guide itself. He should take care to base the soul's spiritual life on solid doctrine and on an intimate knowledge of dogma and liturgy.

This is not enough. Principles must be applied explicitly to the case of the soul being directed. We often act illogically in our spiritual life; we hold the principles firmly but we do not correctly make the deductions from them because we are blinded by passion and prejudice. Hence even advanced souls who know the principles quite well will need direction in many matters.

Cases occur rather frequently in which circumstances make direction by letter desirable. For instance, if a soul's former director has guided it for quite a long time, he will know it intimately and profoundly, he will have adapted his direction to its needs, and he will have had proof from its progress that his guidance is effective. And if, further, the state of the soul in question is complex or difficult, and if the present available directors are quite unsuited to its needs, then it will be better if it has recourse by letter to its former director. But rarely can a prudent director propose this expedient, because to propose it might seem to be to impose it. It will be sufficient if he accedes to the request made by the soul directed.

Importance and Necessity

Pope Leo XIII declared it to be 'a common law of providence that souls be led to the loftiest spiritual heights by being helped by other men'. This is tantamount to saying that spiritual guidance is necessary in order to raise the level of the Christian life in souls, and also to point out that in the hands of God, men, and especially, priests, become instruments to produce spiritual growth in souls. 'We find at the very origin of the Church a well-known manifestation of this law: although Saul, breathing out threats and carnage, had heard the voice of Christ himself and had asked him: "Lord, what do you want me to do?" he was sent for the answer to Damascus, to Ananias: "Enter into the city and there it will be told to you what you must do"' (*Testem Benevolentiae*).

Spiritual direction frequently prevents one from merely going through the motions of religion. There are so many Christians who do not appreciate the magnificent dignity of their vocation to sanctity, to the perfection of love. There are so many who have practically no idea of the immense love of God for them, and of the personal nature of that love, and of the power of that love to do them good, to bring them indescribable happiness. The seeds of this perfect happiness, this divine life, are planted in every Christian soul at baptism. But seeds must grow and develop before you reap the harvest. There are thousands of Christians walking about the face of the earth bearing in their bodies the infinite God of whom they know practically nothing. The majority in the Church stand on the threshold and go through the external motions of religion and dutifully profess their faith. But never have they come to the heart of the Church where the living God dwells. They do not enjoy their faith, they do not know God by experience.

The Christian religion has got to come alive in the individual life. A man needs more than abstract knowledge. He needs to know God at first hand. He needs to go through the arduous process of loss and gain, trial and error. The supernatural life is necessarily adventurous, dangerous. It is governed by the principles of sanctity, not safety. One ought not to risk it alone. And it seems that nobody wants to. And so they stand on the threshold, fulfilling all their obligations but missing the joy and the power and the glory of religion. That is why G. K. Chesterton said: 'Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been

found difficult and left untried'. If they would only come all the way in and drink of the eternal fountain of life bubbling up at the heart of the Church! But their cry is heard all around the world: 'How can I, unless some man show me?'

Without direction it is difficult to avoid the common aberrations, inroads, subtle fallacies: a negative outlook and approach, the extremes of Pelagianism or Jansenism, etc.; or to withstand the forces that are against spiritual growth. Alone, a man cannot ordinarily withstand the constant pressure of human respect, public opinion, or the pull toward the least common denominator, mass conformity, opportunism, the world, the flesh, and the devil.

As a rule, one needs spiritual direction for the adequate solving of problems. Without it, many try to escape problems rather than solve them, which, of course, is spiritually, psychologically, and socially disastrous. With direction it is much easier to solve problems and make decisions and thus grow by one victory after another. It is particularly necessary for assisting a person through the precarious periods: transitional stages of prayer, scruples, temptations, doubts, darkness, and crises of all kinds. It is, finally, an aid to perseverance. For one aiming at holiness, the most besetting temptation is to give up. He needs periodic checking for stimulation, correction, encouragement; above all, perhaps, for continuity—a continuous thread running straight through all moods, providing orientation and balance to one's whole life, precluding unwholesome periods of elation and depression.

St Teresa undertook nothing without direction. She says: 'Every Christian should try to consult some learned person if he can, and the more learned the person the better. Those who walk in the way of prayer have the greater need of learning; and the more spiritual they are, the greater is their need. . . . I, myself, through not knowing what to do, have suffered much and lost a great deal of time. I am sorry for souls who reach this state (prayer of quiet) and find themselves alone.' And in the sixth mansion where supernatural manifestation may become frequent, direction is indispensable.

Lack of spiritual growth is accredited by St John of the Cross to the absence of spiritual direction, 'because they do not understand themselves and lack competent and alert directors who will guide them to the summit'. This is not God's fault, as St John

goes on to point out. 'When God says or reveals something to a soul, he gives this same soul to whom he says it a kind of inclination to tell it to the person to whom it is fitting it should be told. Until this has been done, there is not entire satisfaction because the man has not been reassured by another man like himself.' A layman who takes seriously the command to be perfect needs spiritual direction even more than a religious.

St Paul went to the apostles to be confirmed in his faith. St Peter, although taught and favoured by God himself, went astray on his own with regard to a ceremony concerning the Gentiles. The Fathers of the desert, in spite of an insatiable thirst for solitude, gathered together for the sake of direction. The majority of saints had spiritual directors, and all of them had some kind of direction. In the case of some, the relationship between director and directed led to a warmhearted, holy friendship in which both found, besides light for their ascent of the mount of perfection, a marvellous spiritual enrichment and fruitfulness in works of mercy. Think of St Francis and St Clare, St Francis de Sales and St Jane, Jordan of Saxony and Diana.

Function of the director

The spiritual director has a twofold function. He is to be a *guide* and a *counsellor*. As a guide, he is expected to give advice and impart information, and it is the responsibility of the guide to see that the information which is imparted is accurate and appropriate to the individual seeking advice. His purpose is to educate, stimulate, and inspire. The guide should be able to map out a general sort of positive programme of life, he should be able to suggest the best and most appropriate and timely spiritual books to be read, he should be able to offer specific and practical ways of practising virtue and overcoming temptations. One of the most valuable services he will have to render as guide will be in the vastly important field of prayer.

So many people who pray faithfully and respond generously to the divine energy and grace perpetually beating in on them are led by the Spirit into a communion with God that is exquisitely simple. But because a new, elevated (infused) form of prayer is strange and mysterious to them a painful inward struggle and dryness ensue. This is what St John of the Cross has described as 'the night of the senses'—a period of distress and obscurity, in

which it seems to the soul that it is losing all it had gained of the life of prayer. This is more especially felt by people who have a real contemplative attitude, and whom this type of spirituality is destined in the end to dominate. It meets and must conquer many resistances in their active minds, must cut for itself new paths; and this may involve tension and suffering and apparent withdrawal of the ordinary power of prayer. Here is a point at which skilled and sympathetic guidance is of special service to the soul, which is often confused and disheartened by its own experience, its strange sense of dimness and incapacity.

People today are absolutely convinced of the necessity of a daily programme of mental prayer for the sustenance of any decent kind of spiritual life. They are learning the art of prayer, and are coming to recognize more and more that contemplation is normal: knowing God by experience, a pure intuition of God born of love. A priest therefore must be sufficiently experienced and instructed in the ways of prayer in order to perceive their needs, which after all are quite simple, and to provide the appropriate solution to their questions. He will need a clear and solid doctrine reduced to a few principles with clear, practical, incisive directives to permit him to direct souls with prudence and security in the way of prayer, and even in the way of contemplation, as well as to judge in what cases they should be encouraged to see a more specialized spiritual director. If, for instance, a person complains to a priest that he cannot meditate, the priest after a few judicious questions should be able to ascertain the causal factor: whether the incapacity to meditate be due to natural or supernatural causes, physical or spiritual, an unreal concept of meditation, sinfulness or carelessness, or finally the grace of God. The person who complains that he cannot meditate may simply mean that he can no longer think clearly about God. But St Teresa teaches, in this regard, that prayer consists 'not in thinking much, but in loving much', and that it ought to be simply a humble and spontaneous conversation of the soul with the Lord, a sort of colloquy in which one tells him freely all that he feels in his heart: his difficulties, anxieties, desires, and above all, his love for him. A worried person, upon hearing this, would begin to feel at ease once more and readily understand that he too is capable of meditating in such a manner. On the other hand, the inability to meditate at all can be very real, as when a soul feels itself in

great aridity which makes it incapable not only of producing good thoughts but even of stirring its heart; it seems to the soul that it is no longer serving or loving God. And this may be due to no human fault. The spiritual direction should be capable of doing much more to help the suffering soul than simply recommending patience.

The good spiritual director will recognize the sanctifying hand of God, who uses this means (aridity) to cause the soul to pass from meditation to contemplation. Contemplation here refers to a simple type of prayer in which the soul, instead of reasoning and forming distinct affections, feels impelled to stop and recollect itself in a kind of simple loving attention to God that is very profitable for the interior life. Precisely because the Lord wishes it to be occupied in this way, he begins by making meditation impossible for it. So when aridity is prolonged in the faithful soul and at the same time it feels inclined to attend simply to God, St Teresa advises it no longer to continue the effort to meditate, but to leave off meditation and to accustom itself to remaining there contentedly before God, loving him, wishing only to offer him the most affectionate companionship, and bearing the trials which the spontaneous movement of the imagination brings about. His loving attention to the presence of God will in time become easy and meaningful. To be able to explain this to people is certainly to help them more efficaciously than simply to recommend patience. The spiritual direction will nourish in such contemplative souls the sense of total generosity: only in this atmosphere of boundless self-sacrifice can the grave of contemplation develop and reach full maturity.

The director will also learn to distinguish the pure gold from counterfeit subjective phenomena in the development of the graces of contemplation. He must not confuse contemplation with revelations, which are much less secure and constitute a field full of dangers and stumbling-blocks. Nevertheless, it is not rare for these things to attract people and even at times an imprudent director. And so he will demand that souls in general should not place any importance upon visions and revelations, but recollect themselves with simplicity in God when they experience such phenomena, being content to refer everything to the spiritual director and to follow his orders. The director will try as soon as possible to eliminate these phenomena from the life of the person

whom he is directing; if he does not succeed in doing so, he will apply the rules for the discernment of spirits and seek to discover the 'spirit' of these phenomena, which can be either a help or a hindrance to the spiritual life: he will never permit the person to fulfil a command received through a vision or revelation, unless other sufficient motives based on reason prove the opportuneness of the actions suggested in that way.

The priest is also a *counsellor*. Counselling emphasizes the development of understanding rather than the imparting of information. The understanding which is sought in counselling is self-understanding or insight on the part of the one being counselled. The counsellor's function is to make self-thinking possible, rather than to do it himself. It involves much more than solving problems. Its function is to produce changes in the individual that will enable him to make wise future decisions as well as to extricate himself from his immediate difficulties. It aims at changing attitudes of soul rather than actions. Counselling inevitably involves personal relationships. It is difficult for a person undergoing counselling to understand why it is that the thinking he does in the counselling situation changes his life more than the thinking he does about his problem by himself at home. Actually, it is the relationship with the counsellor that makes the difference.

That is why the art of spiritual advice and every form of human counsel consists for the most part in an ability to establish *rapport*, to achieve union; in other words, to love the person concerned objectively. This relationship involves an intensely searching and probing dialogue. The relationship between client and counsellor is unquestionably one of deep emotional significance, but it is most of all a matter of the giving or withholding of the selves of both client and counsellor. The degree to which both commit themselves to this relationship seems to determine the success of the whole counselling process.

(*To be continued*)