

THE SPIRIT AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

The term "*Spiritual Direction*" in Christian tradition is a misnomer. (1) It is not "*direction*" in the strict sense: the director is not a guru who tells another person what to do or how to do it, but rather a facilitator or enabler who helps the other respond to God's call and action in his or her life. The real director is God's Spirit, whose light, wisdom and strength are needed by both persons engaged in the process of spiritual direction. (2) It is not "*Spiritual*" in the narrow sense i.e., concerned only with so-called spiritual aspects of our life like prayer, sacraments, morality. It embraces the whole of human life - our relationships, our work and leisure, our preoccupations and tensions, our relatedness to the world of politics and poverty, business and culture, conflict and injustice. In this fuller sense, to be spiritual (or holy) is to be fully human; it is to be spirit-led, not led by our false and selfish selves. "Let the Spirit direct your lives..... the Spirit has given us life; he must also control our lives" (Gal 5:16, 25)

With the clarifications given above, we will continue to use the term "*spiritual direction*", as it is the expression commonly employed. A suitable working definition is given by John Wright: Spiritual direction is an interpersonal situation in which one person helps another to develop and come to greater maturity in the life of the Spirit i.e. the life of faith, hope and love.

Other ways of looking at spiritual direction also bring out the all-important role of the Spirit :

(i) *helping another put on the mind and heart of Jesus Christ* : his attitudes, convictions, values, options. Jesus himself says that the Spirit would enlighten the disciples and reveal the truth to them. "The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you..... I will send him to you from the Father and he will speak about me" (Jn 14:26, 15:26). It is the Spirit who enables us to know, love and follow Jesus, to become like Jesus, to become Jesus! In fact, "no

one can confess 'Jesus is Lord' unless he is guided by the Holy Spirit". (I Cor 12:3).

(ii) *helping another to a deeper experience of God's unconditional love and a stronger commitment in love* : Spiritual growth is possible "for God has poured out his love into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit, who is God's gift to us" (Rom 5:5). The more we accept God's total love for us, the more we will accept ourselves, accept others, and accept the reality of our world - a condition for any responsible and authentic commitment.

(iii) *education in the freedom of God's children* : This inner freedom implies a growing liberation *FROM* fears, prejudices, attachments and other emotional blocks on the personal level, as well as ideologies, mind-sets and cultural addictions like creed, clan or caste on the social level; it also means a freedom *FOR* authentic love, generous service and an effective desire to build a better world. Such freedom is the Spirit's gift to us: "Those who are led by God's Spirit are God's children. For the Spirit that God has given you does not make you slaves and cause you to be afraid; instead the Spirit makes you God's children, and by the Spirit's power we cry out to God "Father! my Father!" (Rom 8:14-15; Cf. also Gal 5:1).

Key Areas in Spiritual Direction

(1) **PRAYER** : Real spiritual direction is only possible if the directee's relationship with God finds some expression in personal prayer. It is not a question of long prayers, but of a certain familiarity with God in trust and love on a personal level. To grow in prayer one may have to first recognize and then let go of some negative images of God that one carries often unconsciously e.g. a punishing or condemning God, one who loves us *if* we are good or who wants us to be perfect. The Holy Spirit not only purifies our relationship with God, enabling us to cry out "Abba, Father" (Rom 8:15), but also teaches us to pray, "For we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in words that groans cannot express. And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is" (Rom 8:26).

(2) *DISCERNMENT* : Discernment may be called the core of spiritual direction. It is one of the Spirit's gifts enumerated by Paul : "the ability to tell the difference between gifts that come from the Spirit and those that do not" (1 Cor 12:10). The directee is conscious of the tension between the Spirit and the flesh (Gal 5:16 ff), and is helped to become aware of inner movements - thoughts, feelings, desires, imaginations, attachments, assumptions - which can take one in a positive direction towards good or in a negative direction towards evil or lesser good. The directee prays to the Spirit for light to see all that is false within, and for strength to let go of all that the heart is attached to. A growing awareness and understanding of inner movements and an increased sensitivity to the promptings of the Spirit, especially through practices like the Consciousness Examen, enable the directee to make discernment more and more a way of life.

(3) *HEALING* : Most of us carry burdens of the past - our sins, hurts, failures, griefs and painful memories - which prevent our spiritual growth and keep us prisoners of the past. The only way to be free is to let go - a decision which, at times, is extremely difficult. The Spirit gives us the necessary strength; to accept that what has happened has happened and cannot be reversed, no matter how much we regret it; to forgive others as Jesus forgave (Lk 23:34); to learn from these "breaking" experiences and even to become stronger at the broken places; to be thankful to the Lord that even from these painful and negative experiences, something positive has come out for ourselves or for others: "we know that in all things God works for good with those who love him" (Rom 8:28). Through inner healings, the directee becomes a whole person, one who judges, condemns and blames others and self less and less and puts on the compassion of Jesus more and more.

(4) *MOVING AHEAD* : One of the pitfalls or temptations of spiritual direction is for the directee who has made some initial progress to reach a plateau and settle down. This may even lead to mediocrity or stagnation. The call of Jesus is ever new and actual, challenging us to respond in the present moment with generosity and courage, making us ask ourselves "what more can I do? How can I offer a better and

response?" (In Jesuit terminology, we speak of the "magis" - the more - not being content with the status quo, the beaten path, the known, but always ready to move beyond, to launch out into the deep). In the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit is constantly reminding the infant Church and her leaders that they have a long way to go, by surprising, disturbing and even shocking them e.g. Peter's strange vision (Ch. 10) followed by his meeting (Ch. 13). In spiritual direction, the directee is challenged to move ahead, to use unused potential, to say yes to all that is to come, to dream dreams and be ready to pay the price that the dreams come true.

(5) *PASSING THROUGH THE DESERT* : The Gospel tells us that after Jesus' baptism at the Jordan, "the Spirit made him go into the desert, where he stayed forty days, being tempted by Satan" (Mk 1:12). The time in the desert was one of inner struggle which prepared and strengthened him for his mission. In spiritual growth, each person goes through one or more deserts - painful experiences of darkness, emptiness, bafflement, meaninglessness or feeling remote or estranged from God - and all this especially at the time of prayer. We want to pray, and can't; we desire to be with God and feel it a waste of time. Very often such experiences are an invitation to a deeper faith and trust in the Lord, a greater detachment from all that is not God, a call to surrender and abandonment. At these difficult moments, the directee is encouraged to go beyond the negative feelings and experiences, to hold on and persevere somehow, and to focus on the whole of life where generally the fruits of the Spirit are evident : serenity and equanimity, genuine love and compassion, readiness for hardship, humility, trust and commitment. If such fruits are present, one need not be too worried about the desert dryness; through it one is led to greater spiritual maturity and a deeper relationship with God.

Some Indicators of Growth

One sign of growth through spiritual direction is a *progressive integration in the person*. The Holy Spirit is the principle of unity not only *among* persons - fostering fellowship, mutual acceptance and dialogue, ecumenism and wider human community - but also *within* persons, e.g.

- bringing together in a well-knit whole one's feelings, desires, thoughts, words and actions, by minimizing the gaps between the inner self and external behaviour.

- integrating one's past with the present so that one can truly say, "For all that has been: thanks!"

- reconciling apparent opposites in one's life : love of God and love of neighbour, contemplation and action, faith and justice, being a prophet and being a peacemaker. The Spirit helps to maintain a healthy tension and achieve a dynamic integration between these "opposites", not just a peaceful co-existence.

Another indication of spiritual growth is a *more positive and compassionate attitude towards the Church* and her leaders. While we see her in her weakness and even sinfulness, we can still accept and love her as our mother, recognizing in her the same Spirit who worked in Jesus Christ and who continues his saving and liberating mission in the Church and in the world.

A third sign is a *growing concern and solidarity with the suffering world*. Spiritual direction helps the directee to listen to the cries of the poor and to develop a facility in reading the signs of the times (that part of God's revelation manifested in socio-political reality). The directee has the courage to speak the truth, to take sides with the afflicted and the oppressed, and to suffer the consequences arising from such an option. The boldness (fortitude) is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the directee's whole life and all its aspects reflect a *Christ-like love*; the person manifests the qualities and virtues which Paul enumerates when describing a good Christian community: "You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own, so that you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another. Whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else, you must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you. And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity" (Col 3:12-14). The fruits of the spirit - love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control (Gal 5:22) - become more and more not just occasional experiences of the directee, but permanent attitudes as the person becomes increasingly Spirit-led, a "pneumataphoros", one bearing the Spirit within.

Conclusion

St. John of the Cross, a renowned master of spiritual direction, recognized in this ministry a great potential for helping and for harming the directee's relationship with God. In "The living Flame" he lists three dangers to spiritual growth; the devil, books (to each of which he devotes a few paragraphs) and the spiritual director (to which he gives 30 paras!). An image he uses to show how an inexperienced director can interfere with God's work is that of an artist who spoils a beautiful painting; he speaks of a "portrait of extremely delicate workmanship touched over with dull and harsh colours by an unpolished hand" and asks, "who will succeed in repairing that delicate painting of the Holy Spirit?" Juliana Devoy comments that for John of the Cross "the principal guide of souls is the Holy Spirit. God is the Artist at work, and his creation of each person is the process of a life-time. The spiritual director is an instrument God uses or an artist with a small "a", (whose) whole concern is to observe what God is doing to help the soul respond to God.... Being artist with God is being intimately involved in the creative work of forming Christ in one's fellow Christian". In truth, spiritual direction is creative work. Spiritual guides are, in a way, co-creators with God in helping to form the image of his Son in directees.

To end on a personal note : the realization that we are really co-operating with the Holy Spirit in the ministry of spiritual direction fills me with awe, humility and gratitude. It has been a constant consolation and joy during my 32 years of priesthood to meet persons and share at the deeper levels of self, to journey with them as fellow-pilgrim, to receive confidences and listen to experiences and struggles rarely shared with others, to freedom, commitment and sanctity-all this through the poor and weak instrument that I am, and sometimes, in spite of me

independently of me. To God, Father, Son and Spirit be all glory forever and ever!

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