

Brief Historical Overview of Spiritual Direction Up to The 19th Century

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Personal spiritual direction is the science and art of leading Christians towards holiness. It is carried out through advice offered by a spiritual guide or director to the person being guided. This practice has been a constant reality in the life of the Church throughout its history. In the following pages, we present examples of the forms or models that spiritual direction has taken down through the centuries, after first explaining its Biblical foundations.

1. SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN THE LIGHT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

It would be forcing the issue to try to find in the pages of the Bible the reality of spiritual direction as we practice it today. Nevertheless, we do find in Sacred Scripture valuable indications that give a foundation for this practice. For example, the book of *Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)* recommends that we go frequently to “a godly man whom you know to be a keeper of the commandments, whose soul is in accord with your soul, and who will sorrow with you if you fail” (*Sir 37:12*). And in the book of *Tobias* we read: “Seek out the counsel of a wise man and do not despise any worthy advice” (*Tob 4:18*).

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In various Gospel passages, we find the example of our Lord, the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep individually; he calls them by name and they know him, and listen to him and follow him (cf. *Jn* 10:14-16). Jesus dialogues constantly with his disciples and directs them patiently during his public life and after his Resurrection. We see Jesus speaking personally with Nicodemus, dispelling his doubts (cf. *Jn* 3:1-21), with the Samaritan woman at the well, to whom he reveals himself as the Messiah (cf. *Jn* 4:4-30), and also with the publican Zaccheus, who is converted (see *Lk* 19:2-10). Another example of Jesus' dialogue with his disciples is the encounter on the road to Emmaus in the early evening on the Sunday of the Resurrection (see *Lk* 24:13-35). In this scene we see how Jesus welcomes the two disciples, listens attentively to them, accompanies them and instructs them patiently. These are attitudes that should be found in any spiritual director.

The *Acts of the Apostles* contains two episodes that have traditionally been cited in support of the practice of spiritual direction. The first is the calling of St. Paul, who "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (*Acts* 9:1), travels towards Damascus. After being engulfed in light and falling to the ground, Saul asks his first question, "Who are you, Lord?" Jesus responds, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (*Acts* 9:5). In response to Paul's second question, "What will you have me do, Lord?," Jesus says, "Rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do" (*Acts* 9:7). Only through Ananias will Paul learn all that God is asking of him. The second episode is that of the centurion Cornelius, who through a divine command sends two of his servants and a soldier to Jaffa to bring St. Peter to Caesarea so Cornelius can hear what he has to tell him (cf. *Acts* 10). In both cases, God uses the mediation of a human being to make known his will in a specific way.

Finally, in his pastoral letters, Paul imparts spiritual direction to Timothy and Titus, guiding them not only with general doctrinal principles, but also with specific advice, suggestions and words of encouragement.

2. SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN EARLY EASTERN MONASTIC LIFE

Although spiritual direction has been present since the beginning of Christianity, it is in the documents of early monasticism that we find the first historical testimonies of stable models of systematic spiritual help.

Among the many terms used to designate the person whom today we would call a "spiritual director," the most frequent ones are *abba* (father) and *amma* or *imma* (mother),

at times followed by the adjective *pneumatikós* (spiritual). Other terms, although used less often, are *didáskalos* (teacher) and *paideutês* (educator).

According to the first monks, the principal quality a “spiritual father” should have is precisely the fact of being “spiritual”; in other words, of possessing the Holy Spirit and acting under to the impulses of the Paraclete.

Independently of the sacrament of Penance, the monk goes to seek advice from his spiritual father, who usually is not a priest, since the anchorites, and later the abbots of monasteries, ordinarily are not priests. In monastic life, often the spiritual father is the abbot or *hêgoúmenos* (the one who guides), or some of the abbot’s assistants whom he designates to help him in this task. The anchorites, in contrast, choose their spiritual fathers from among monks who merit their confidence and trust, since the anchorite life entails putting oneself under the guidance of a master who is well-experienced in the ways of the Spirit, and who is freely chosen by the disciple.

The proper object of spiritual direction in early monasticism is the *exagóreusis tôn logismôn*, the revelation or declaration of thoughts. What must be manifested in spiritual direction are not one’s sins, but the *logismoí*, the thoughts that disturb one’s peace of soul. In the psychology of the monks of the desert, several stages of temptation are distinguished. The first is the *prosbolê*, the attack of the temptation, in which there is no responsibility on the part of the tempted individual. After that comes the *syndasmós* or interior dialogue; then the *pálê* or struggle against the temptation, which can end either with victory or with the *sygkatáthesis*, the approval or consent, which is already a sin. The specific matter for spiritual direction is the first phase of temptation, the *prosbolê*, so as to be able to conquer right from the beginning.

A person who goes to the spiritual father for guidance should first have done what is called the *nepsis*, a type of examination of conscience to discern the goodness or badness of one’s thoughts.

Besides being spiritual, the one who guides souls must have the gift of *diákrisis*, which means both “discretion” and “discernment” of the *logismoí*. This discernment is a grace or charisma of the Holy Spirit given for the good of the whole Church.

In the *Rules* of **St. Basil** († 379) governing monastic life, we see that in the monastery the younger monks are guided spiritually by the older ones. But St. Basil allows the monks to freely choose their spiritual director from among those monks who have the requisite quality—that is to say, *diákrisis*. Nuns also can be “spiritual mothers” (*ammas*) for

other nuns. The rights and duties of these “spiritual mothers” are described in the *Regulae Breviores* of St. Basil

3. SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN THE BEGINNINGS OF WESTERN MONASTIC LIFE

John Cassian († 435) gathers the experience of Eastern monasticism in his *Institutiones cenobiticae* and *Collationes*, while adapting it to the mentality and conditions of Western life. In these works he deals amply with spiritual direction, insisting on its necessity for reaching sanctity. For example: “He who obeys his own personal inspiration and trusts too much in his own judgment will not be able to reach the heights of perfection. It is impossible for him to not to succumb to the dangerous illusions the devil plots for him everywhere... No one is authorized, however wise he may be, to believe that he is able to do without the advice of his brother. The illusions of Satan will deceive him and he will not escape the bonds of pride and presumption.”¹ Cassian also underscores the importance of sincerity on the part of the person receiving direction. “Pulling aside the veil with which false shame seeks to cover them, let us show our elders all the secrets of our soul, and let us go with confidence to seek in them the remedy for our wounds and the example of a holy life.”²

The *Rule* of **St. Benedict** († 547) indicates that the spiritual director of those beginning the monastic life should be an elderly monk, while for the rest of the monks, the spiritual father is the abbot himself, who is elected by the monks of the monastery.

4. SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FROM THE 6TH TO THE 13TH CENTURY

Pope **St. Gregory the Great** († 614) was a great director of souls. His work *Regula Pastoralis* was an essential book for the formation of the clergy during the Middle Ages. Although this work does not cover personal spiritual direction, but rather pastoral care in general, nevertheless it offers many ideas for the spiritual director as a pastor of souls. For example: “What rashness it is for the unprepared to give pastoral guidance, since the government of souls is the art of arts!” (*Ars est artium regimen animarum*).³

¹ JOHN CASSIAN, *Collationes*, 2 and 16.

² *Ibid*, 2.

³ ST. GREGORY THE GREAT, *Regula pastoralis*, I, 1.

At the beginning of the 7th century, Irish monks under **St. Columban** arrived in Gaul and began to spread the practice of frequent confession, which since that time has become an ordinary path for spiritual direction.

Regarding spiritual direction, practically nothing new occurred from the 7th to the 11th century. The history of spiritual direction took a new turn in the 11th century, when bishops began to ordain the abbots of monasteries as priests, which had not been the practice in previous centuries. The bishops began this practice in order to remedy the situation caused by the disastrous condition of the secular clergy. Thus was born the figure of the “abbot-confessor-spiritual director.” As the “*sacerdos proprius*” of the community, the abbot received the confessions of those under him at least once a year, but he was frequently also their regular confessor as well.

In the 12th century, **St. Bernard of Clairvaux** († 1153) stands out as a true spiritual guide for the Christianity of his era. In his work *De consideratione ad Eugenium Papam*, he offers valuable advice to Eugene III—who had been his disciple in Clairvaux and was elected Pope in 1145—for his spiritual life as well as for governing the Church. In this work, St. Bernard gives great importance to the gift of discernment, which a spiritual director must necessarily possess. Regarding the necessity of spiritual direction, we find in one of Bernard’s letters this trenchant phrase: “He who has himself for a teacher makes himself the disciple of a fool.” (*Qui se sibi magistrum constituit, stulto se discipulum facit.*) He adds: “I do not know what others think of themselves in this matter; I speak from experience and, as far as I am concerned, I tell you that it is easier and safer for me to direct others than to direct myself.”⁴

5. THE “CURA ANIMARUM” OF THE MENDICANT ORDERS AND IN THE COUNCILS

The mendicant religious orders arose at the beginning of the 13th century. These represented something quite new in religious life and in pastoral practice. In fact, the mendicant friars enjoyed a great freedom of movement, and could therefore reach many more people than the monks enclosed in their monasteries. Because of this, interest in spiritual direction began to spread to the lay faithful, who started receiving it much more frequently than they had before. The *cura animarum* of the mendicant orders consisted essentially in forming the faithful by means of the *officium praedicationis et confessionis*, which ultimately sought the same objective, namely the Christian formation and direction of the souls of the faithful.

⁴ ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, *Letter 87*, 7.

During this period, besides the initiatives of the mendicant orders, it is worthwhile mentioning the efforts of the general and provincial councils of the Church to foster the *cura animarum*. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council insisted that in cathedral and monastic churches there were to be priests who were capable not only of the ministry of preaching but also of administering the sacrament of confession and “of the other matters related to the care of souls” (Canon 10).

In addition, all the medieval manuals for priests insist that a confessor should be not only a distributor of absolution, but also a pastor and director of souls.⁵

6. SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FROM THE 15TH TO THE 17TH CENTURY

In the 15th century, **St. Vincent Ferrer** († 1419) wrote about the need for spiritual direction: “Our Lord, without whom we can do nothing, never grants his grace to the one who, having someone available to him, a man capable of instructing him and directing him, would scorn this very efficacious means of sanctification, believing that he is enough for himself, and that with his own strength he can seek and find what is necessary for his eternal salvation.”⁶

Also in the 15th century, mention should be made of the *Imitation of Christ* (1441), an authentic spiritual guide, where one reads: “Consult with men who are wise and of upright conscience and try to let yourself be guided by one who is better than yourself, instead of following your own inspirations.”⁷

The Golden Age of spiritual direction was during the 16th and 17th centuries, when the main architects of the Catholic Reformation spread widely the benefits that spiritual direction brings to souls who want to progress in Christian life. We will look at only a few of these spiritual masters, chosen from among many others.

The Spiritual Exercises of **St. Ignatius of Loyola** († 1556) are not, strictly speaking, a manual for spiritual direction, but rather a guide for directing and undertaking the exercises themselves. Nevertheless, this work describes some “Rules for the discernment of spirits” that are very useful for personal spiritual direction. The spiritual director is, for St. Ignatius, “God’s witness,” who admires and respects the action of God in

⁵ See C. VOGEL, *Il peccatore e la penitenza nel medioevo*, Torino-Leumann 1970.

⁶ ST. VINCENT FERRER, *De Vita Spirituali*, part II, no. 1.

⁷ *Imitation of Christ*, Book I, Ch. 4.

souls.⁸ He is also an arbitrator who ought to discern the interior movements of the soul (“discernment of spirits”). Therefore St. Ignatius gives a lot of importance to the fact that the person being directed should show openly the movements he experiences in his soul.⁹

In the life of **St. Teresa of Jesus** († 1582), the role of the spiritual director was ordinarily carried out by her confessor. The saint had to suffer a great deal because of poorly educated confessors, and for that reason she considered learning to be an important quality of a spiritual director. “I was always fond of learning, although confessors who were half-learned did my soul much harm, for I did not always find confessors whose learning was as good as I could wish it was. I know by experience that it is better, if they are good men and of holy lives, that they should have no learning at all, rather than just a little; for such confessors never trust themselves without consulting those who are learned—nor would I trust them myself; and a truly learned confessor has never misguided me.”¹⁰

Moreover, St. Teresa herself provided genuine spiritual direction not only to her spiritual daughters, but also to some clergymen and lay faithful. In this sense, her letters to her brother Lorenzo de Cepeda are letters of true spiritual direction, above all in what refers to progress in prayer.

St. John of the Cross († 1591) sees the spiritual director as God’s witness and the presence of the Church along the Christian’s spiritual path, especially in the more advanced stages of the spiritual life. Therefore he protests against the incompetence of some spiritual directors: “Many spiritual teachers do a lot of harm to souls, because, not understanding themselves the ways and modes of the spirit, they often make souls lose the unction of those delicate inspirations with which the Holy Spirit prepares souls for Himself, and they go on teaching them by other poor means that they themselves have employed or read about somewhere, and which really are only of use for beginners.”¹¹

During the 16th century, another exceptional spiritual director was **St. John of Avila** († 1569), to whom a multitude of people from all walks of life went for spiritual advice. Almost all the great saints of Spain in that century had some dealings with this saint. In some cases he was their spiritual director; in others, their adviser in bringing forward the Catholic Reformation. Among them we can mention St. John of God, St. Francis Borgia,

⁸ See ST. IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, *Spiritual Exercises*, No. 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, nos. 13-14.

¹⁰ ST. TERESA OF JESUS, *Life*, 5,3

¹¹ ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Living Flame of Love*, B, Song 3, 31.

St. John de Ribera, St. Peter of Alcantara, St. Thomas of Villanueva, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and St. Teresa of Jesus.

In the 17th century, the figure who unquestionably stands out is **St. Francis de Sales** († 1622), who advanced the theory and the methods of spiritual direction. This holy bishop of Geneva insisted on the need for every Christian to receive spiritual direction if he or she wanted to make progress in the path towards holiness: “When Tobias was bidden to go to Rages, he was willing to obey his father, but he objected that he knew not the way;—to which Tobit answered, ‘Seek thee a man which may be thy guide (*conducteur*).’ And even so, daughter, I say to you, If you would really tread the paths of the devout life, seek some holy man to guide and conduct you. This is the precept of precepts ... Choose one among a thousand, Avila says;—and I say among ten thousand, for there are fewer than one would think capable of this office.”¹²

7. SPIRITUAL DIRECTION DURING THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES

From the 18th century, we must mention **St. John Baptist de La Salle** († 1719), who directed many religious, and **St. Paul of the Cross** († 1775), a director full of kindness who encouraged trust in God’s mercy. During the same century, another outstanding saint is **St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori** († 1878), who insisted on the exercise of spiritual direction on the part of confessors. To this end, he wrote: “Those words which the Lord said to Jeremiah: *Lo, I have set thee this day over the nations, and over kingdoms, to root up, and to pull down, and to waste, and to destroy, and to build, and to plant* (Jer 1:10) are being repeated by Him to all confessors, who not only should be pulling up vices from the soul, but also planting virtues.”¹³

From the 19th century, mention should be made of **St. John Bosco** († 1888), **St. Joseph Cottolengo** († 1842) and **St. John Marie Vianney** († 1859), all of whom exercised their duties as spiritual directors in a most incisive way, above all in the confessional. About this last saint, also known as the Holy Curé of Ars, Pope Benedict XVI reminded us in the Letter opening the Year for Priests (June 16, 2009), that “he dealt in a different way with each penitent ... If someone showed desires and dispositions toward a deeper spiritual life, he would show him openly the depths of love, explaining to him the beauty of living united to God and of being in His presence. ‘Everything under the eyes of God, everything

¹² ST. FRANCIS DE SALES, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part 1, Ch. 4.

¹³ ST. ALPHONSUS MARIA DE LIGUORI, *Practical manual for the Confessor*, 99.

with God, everything to please God. What a marvelous thing!’ And he taught them to pray: ‘My God, grant me the grace to love You as much as I am capable of.’”

8. EPILOGUE

We can sum up this brief panoramic history of spiritual direction in the following statements:

1. The practice of spiritual direction is a constant in the history of Christian spirituality. It has taken place in every epoch, and therefore one can conclude that it is an important reality in the life of the Church.
2. Spiritual direction is multi-faceted: that is, it has taken place under a variety of forms or models over time.
3. Such forms or models depend mainly on the form of spiritual life or specific spirituality of those exercising or receiving spiritual direction.
4. The capacity for directing others is not necessarily tied to a specific ecclesiastical condition: spiritual directors are found among priests, religious, and lay people.
5. Nor is spiritual direction linked to being a man or a woman: spiritual direction is conducted by “spiritual fathers” as well as by “spiritual mothers”.
6. Spiritual direction can be exercised within or outside of the Sacrament of Penance.
7. The masters of the spiritual life all insist on the great importance of spiritual direction for reaching Christian holiness.
8. Spiritual masters also point out the main qualities a spiritual director should have: in the first place, to be a spiritual person, i.e. holiness of life; and in the second place, to have knowledge and experience.

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