

The Practice of Spiritual Direction

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE NATURE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

All Christians are called to holiness.¹ This holiness essentially consists in the “fullness of charity,”² because it is the Holy Spirit, infinite Love, who makes us children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. The Paraclete guides us to holiness by means of his inspirations and interior motions in the soul, as well as by means of other persons whom he uses as his instruments.³

¹ *For this is the will of God: your sanctification* (1 Thes 4:3). Cf. Eph 1:4; Vatican II, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, no. 39; Bl. John Paul II, Apost. Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, January 6, 2001, no. 31.

² St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 739.

³ There are numerous passages in the Bible that show this reality. One may recall, for example, the

The Holy Spirit is the origin also of this human collaboration in the process of sanctification. In sanctifying us, he makes us collaborators in the sanctification of others: he makes the Christian a “sanctifier” and a mediator—in the one Mediator, Jesus Christ—of the salvation which our Lord has won for us.⁴ *And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*⁵ Every Christian, as a living member of the Body of Christ, is responsible for the growth of his or her own Christian life, and in some fashion, also of the progress of others. “He [Christ] continually distributes in his body, that is, in the Church, gifts of ministries in which, by his own power, we serve each other unto salvation so that, carrying out the truth in love, we might through all things grow unto Him who is our Head (cf. Eph 4:11-16).”⁶

To attain this Christian maturity, besides the sacraments, we can count on prayer and the various forms of help we give one another: *[L]ove one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor.*⁷

Christian life implies a sense of being called to identify ourselves with Christ.⁸ This calls for lifelong growth in the study of doctrine and in the practice of the virtues.⁹ Spiritual direction plays an important role in this process. We can describe it as the habitual assistance that one person lends to another in the Church, to guide him or her—seconding the motions of the Holy Spirit—towards the full development of his or her Christian life. The term “direction” here should not be understood as an imposition of a certain pattern of behavior, but as guiding others towards identification with Christ along the path of their Christian life, helping them to correspond freely to God’s grace. From the perspective of

correction God makes to King David through Nathan the prophet. (cf. 2 Sam 12:1-7), or the role of the disciple Ananias in the conversion of Saint Paul (cf. Acts 9:10-18).

⁴ Cf. *Heb* 12:24; etc.

⁵ *Eph* 4:11-13.

⁶ Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, no. 7.

⁷ *Rom* 12: 10.

⁸ “...that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (*Phil* 3:10-11).

⁹ Cf. Bl. John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. *Christifideles laici*, no. 58: “The fundamental objective of the formation of the lay faithful is an ever-clearer discovery of one’s vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfil one’s mission.”

the person exercising spiritual direction, it can be seen as the art of accompanying others in the development of grace and in faithfulness to their personal vocation, helping them to be docile to the action of the Holy Spirit in their souls.

a) *Personal freedom, a presupposition of spiritual direction*

Spiritual direction, as “direction,” is not opposed to freedom. On the contrary, it presupposes freedom and strengthens it. The free person decides for himself to choose what is good – and to avoid evil – for the simple reason that, trusting in God, he wants to direct himself to his proper end. This end is happiness; it is ultimately to be found in God, the final end of each human being. To choose what is good thus requires knowledge of the truth about the human person,¹⁰ since, for its exercise, there is a “fundamental dependence of freedom upon truth.”¹¹ At the same time, knowing the truth allows us to exercise this gift well: *The truth will make you free.*¹² Ultimately, the true exercise of freedom has Jesus Christ as its model,¹³ and leads to identification with Him, who is “the Way, the Truth and the Life.”¹⁴ “When we strive to be really *ipse Christus*, Christ himself, then in our own lives the human side intermingles with the divine.”¹⁵

We Christians have been called to freedom,¹⁶ which “finds its true meaning when it is put to the service of the truth which redeems, when it is spent in seeking God’s infinite Love which liberates us from all forms of slavery.”¹⁷ *All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything.*¹⁸

Spiritual direction starts with a deep respect for each one’s personality, and ought to encourage and facilitate true freedom of spirit, which leads one to commit oneself to the

¹⁰ Cf. John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, no. 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, no. 34.

¹² *Jn* 8:32.

¹³ For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice (*Jn* 18:37). Cf. *Veritatis splendor*, nos. 8-9.

¹⁴ Cf. *Jn* 14:6. *And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth.* (*Jn* 17:19).

¹⁵ St. Josemaría, *Way of the Cross*, 10th station, point 5.

¹⁶ Cf. *Gal* 5: 13.

¹⁷ St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 27.

¹⁸ *I Cor* 6:12.

struggle for holiness.¹⁹ This help for the soul, seconding the action of grace, respects each one's free will, with the realization that in the depths of each man, of each woman, there lies something inviolable – conscience – where only God can enter fully. Spiritual direction serves as a help for us to come to know the will of God more deeply, and to fulfill it, with complete freedom and inner conviction, for love.

Using our freedom for love of God draws us further and further away from evil inclinations, which make the good use of this gift difficult: “The more charity one has, the greater freedom he possesses.”²⁰ In contrast, “where there is no love of God, the individual and responsible use of personal freedom becomes impossible. There, despite appearances to the contrary, the individual is coerced at every turn. The indecisive and irresolute person is like putty at the mercy of circumstances. Anyone and anything can mould him according to its whim, and especially his passions and the worst tendencies of his own nature wounded by sin.”²¹

It is worth keeping in mind that in the fulfillment of God's will, there are some actions that are required, in the sense that they are commanded (for example, refraining from stealing or, for a Catholic, attending Mass on Sundays). And this does not mean that we are not free when we do these actions; we freely do so because we want to love God. Similarly, there are many other actions—the vast majority—which are neither commanded nor forbidden (for example, lending someone a hand, or not doing so in order to do something else that is also good), and it would be false to say we are only free in these situations, i.e. that our freedom is involved only when we can choose among actions that have not been categorically commanded or forbidden by God. What is essential to freedom is the desire to love God, doing what is good because we want to love, both in what is obligatory and in what is not. In the latter case (which is the most frequent one), love will provide the light we need: sometimes to discover what is most pleasing to God and, at other times, to make what one has chosen into the best choice.

¹⁹ *But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit (Rom 7:6).* Cf. also Rom 6:22, 8:21, etc.

²⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *In III Sent.*, d. 29, q.1, a.8, q.3, sc.

²¹ St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 29.

b) *The primacy of grace in spiritual direction*

We call spiritual direction “spiritual” not only because it refers to the life of the spirit, but also and principally because the Holy Spirit is the only one who can lead us to holiness. Through spiritual direction the Paraclete guides us to act as children of God, freely: “The sons of God are moved by the Holy Spirit not as slaves, but as free men. ... in that He makes us lovers of God. Therefore, the sons of God are moved by the Holy Spirit freely, by love, not slavishly, by fear.”²² Hence it is very important in spiritual direction to know how to recognize the motions of the Paraclete in souls, and to trust in grace, which is never lacking, being docile to the action of God.

Spiritual direction carried out properly, with the director simply trying to second the motions of grace, helps people to fall more and more in love with God, in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, and to love him with all their strength. Thus we can say that spiritual direction has as its aim to accompany people along the path towards identification with Christ, following God’s plan for each soul. It is a matter therefore of helping souls to discover, within the broad range of all the different forms of Christian spirituality, what God is asking at a particular moment and, with his grace, to put it into practice.

Spiritual direction also helps people to come to grips with their personal situation before God, realizing that holiness is not a question of pure will-power (though personal struggle will always be necessary), but rather of using the supernatural means to second the action of God, with docility and trust. With his grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, God enables us to see, desire, and carry out what he expects of each of us. *For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*²³

²² *Summa contra gentiles*, IV, c. 22. And Saint Thomas continues: “Therefore, since the Holy Spirit inclines the will by love toward the true good, to which the will is naturally ordered, He removes both that servitude in which the slave of passion infected by sin acts against the order of the will, and that servitude in which, against the movement of his will, a man acts according to the law; its slave, so to say, not its friend. This is why the Apostle says: ‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty’ (2 Cor 3:17); and: ‘If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law’ (Gal 5: 18).

This does not imply that his inspirations are only *suggestions* or *invitations* to do what is most fitting. At times they are precise and serious indications which, without countering freedom, guide it. For example, when He gives his light and moves a soul from within to avoid an occasion of sin, or to persevere along the path of his Christian vocation, with the indispensable and morally required means in certain specific situations.

²³ *Deus est enim qui operatur in vobis et velle et perficere pro suo beneplacito* (Phil 2:13).

In the quest for holiness, we must always keep in mind the primacy of grace. It is appropriate to speak of struggle and of the effort to correspond to the call of God, but we can never lose sight of the fact that it is God who takes the initiative and gives the strength to win out. Or, if a defeat should occur (no matter how great it may appear), God is the one who gives us the strength to immediately get up and continue forward, with renewed trust in his help, which will never be lacking. To be surprised or upset by one's own weaknesses would imply a lack of objectivity and even of maturity in one's interior life. The appropriate reaction is one of humility, of contrition, and of redoubling our hope in God. Instead of becoming discouraged at every fall, we have to renew our conviction that "all our fortitude is on loan,"²⁴ and tell our Lord, with words of Saint Josemaría: "each day, my God, I am less sure of myself and more sure of You!"²⁵ We should always foster optimism, grounded in the certainty that we can expect everything from Jesus: "Depend on Jesus for everything. You have nothing, are worth nothing, are capable of nothing. He will act, if you abandon yourself to him."²⁶

The person who relies on divine filiation, convinced that a Christian's strength comes from God who always is with us, and who counts above all on the supernatural means, will always be serene and cheerful, since he knows his rest is in the Lord, who never loses battles.²⁷ St. Paul teaches this: *when I am weak, then I am strong*,²⁸ words that paraphrase what he heard from our Lord: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*.²⁹ Every Christian can apply this spiritual locution to himself or herself and say with the apostle, *I can do all things in Him who strengthens me*,³⁰ convinced that *he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus*.³¹

²⁴ St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 728.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no.729.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 731.

²⁷ Cf. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, nos. 732-733.

²⁸ *2 Cor* 12:10.

²⁹ *2 Cor* 12: 9.

³⁰ *Phil* 4:13.

³¹ *Phil* 1: 6.

c) *Christian life as the subject matter for spiritual direction*

The subject matter for spiritual direction is the “spiritual life of the Christian.” However, it is good to consider that this assistance is not limited to “spiritual” issues (practices of piety, moral questions, etc.), as though Christian life were “something exclusively ‘spiritual.’”³² Rather, spiritual direction concerns a person’s whole life, and all that proceeds from the Holy Spirit, uncreated Gift, source of the life of grace that is infused in the person—a substantial unity of body and soul—and that He himself strengthens and leads towards complete identification with Christ.

Hence the breadth and richness of this spiritual help is easy to see. It is a guide to help people sanctify all their temporal activities: their “professional, social and family life, full of small earthly realities.”³³ All this, precisely because it can be directed toward God – turned into an instrument of divinization – is an arena for growth in the virtues, in dealing with our Lord, in interior life, and thus it is also matter for spiritual direction. Indeed, as we are reminded by Vatican Council II, “in every temporal affair [we] must be guided by a Christian conscience, since even in secular business there is no human activity which can be withdrawn from God’s dominion.”³⁴ This is what Saint Josemaría preached right from the beginning of his pastoral work, teaching Christians to strive for *unity of life*; that is, to enliven with charity all their thoughts, affections, words and actions as children of God in Christ.

Finally, we should emphasize that there is a wide range of ways to sanctify family, social, professional and other activities, different ways that are each compatible with the faith and the search for holiness in each one’s particular situation.³⁵ Therefore one’s legitimate choice of opinions and actions in temporal matters is not in itself subject matter for spiritual direction.³⁶ At the same time, one should always form such views and opinions in keeping with the faith one professes.³⁷

³² St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 113.

³³ *Ibid.*, no. 114.

³⁴ Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, no. 36.

³⁵ Cf. Past. Const. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 36.

³⁶ With respect to these activities, normally the only aspect that is matter for spiritual direction is the way one tries to carry them out with a Christian spirit and to exercise the virtues therein.

³⁷ Cf. St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 90.

2. GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

The most important task of those who carry out spiritual direction is to help others rely above all on the supernatural means needed to reach holiness. They should encourage those they guide to place all their trust in God, in the sacraments, in prayer, in the intercession of Holy Mary, without any fear of the demands of God, who knows our weakness. With supernatural sense, without downplaying the importance of defeats, they should avoid discouragement and increase the person's trust in God.³⁸

The purpose of spiritual direction can be summed up as helping people travel along the path of holiness: opening up horizons for their interior life; helping them to form sound criteria; pointing out obstacles, so that neither the guide nor the one guided may hinder the action of grace; indicating the most adequate steps for each person in the different circumstances of their life; correcting possible deformations or deviations along the way; always encouraging them in their spiritual struggle; spurring them on to be Christian leaven amid all human activities; fostering apostolic responsibility for all those they come into contact with and the search for holiness in all the duties and circumstances of ordinary life.

a) *Helping people one-by-one*

Spiritual direction is an art, requiring theoretical knowledge of the spiritual life as well as the virtue of prudence to know how to apply that knowledge in accordance with each one's specific situation. It demands great refinement, since we are helping persons, and must dedicate all the necessary attention to each one. Obviously, this implies one-on-one dedication to each soul. It is like tailoring a suit to measure, as Saint Josemaría pointed out: guiding each person by the path God wants, without generalizations or universal remedies, without hurry or routine. Each person needs the appropriate advice. Generic remedies are insufficient. Each man or woman needs a personalized assessment, carried out with supernatural outlook; merely human reasons, even when they are true reasons, sometimes do not suffice to motivate the will, or are not conclusive in themselves, or can even be disagreeable.

³⁸ Cf. John Paul II: "Not only the rich man but the disciples themselves are taken aback by Jesus' call to discipleship, the demands of which transcend human aspirations and abilities: 'When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, Then who can be saved?' (Mt 19:25). But the Master refers them to God's power: 'With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible' (Mt 19:26)" (*Veritatis splendor*, no. 22).

The guidance given will usually involve suggestions regarding piety, the practice of mortification, apostolate, some specific virtue, etc.; and about the Christian spirit and way of carrying out one's professional and social responsibilities, so that they can be turned into prayer and a means of apostolate. Usually these are rather broad issues that the person involved can pray about and address in subsequent conversations.

When helping someone to make specific decisions—resolutions, small points of mortification, etc.—ordinarily the one giving spiritual direction will limit himself or herself to providing advice and setting forth possible examples, suggesting that the person consider these in prayer and put into practice what is seen there, so as to specify this point more fully in the next conversation.

In general, it is neither necessary nor helpful to give a response or solution to each and every point the person talks about. Rather one should try to center the struggle on what is essential for that person, giving specific examples. Therefore, the counsels given can and at times should be in the same vein for more or less long periods of time without changing them each time. This can be done by means of a particular examination, without keeping the same one indefinitely. Both the director and the person receiving advice should ponder it in their prayer, in order to try to shed new light on different aspects of the same theme.

The one giving spiritual direction should help each person go up an inclined plane, as it were, in order to discover the joy of living with God, of being with Jesus Christ, falling more and more in love with Him, loving Him *opere et veritate*, with all their strength.³⁹ This love involves a growing totality and exclusivity in a unity of life where nothing is left outside, and everything bears the mark of that love. We must reach the point of knowing and loving God *ex toto corde, ex tota anima, ex tota mente, ex tota virtute*.⁴⁰ But one must not forget that spiritual direction takes into account the individual's dispositions and conditions, which can vary a lot. Some are able to quickly pick up practices of Christian conduct; others need to struggle in order to attain a certain virtue or strengthen their knowledge of basic teachings of the faith; etc.

In any case, whoever accompanies others along their Christian path must teach them to channel to God each and every aspect of their faculties and senses, their situations and activities; purifying all so that nothing is left outside or at the margin of his love. This

³⁹ *Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth (1 Jn 3:18).*

⁴⁰ *Mk 12:30.*

should spur those who are guided in spiritual direction to grow in loving and fulfilling God's will, so as to become—as Saint Josemaría used to say—*alter Christus, ipse Christus*.

At times, one may see the need to move someone to conversion, because an obstacle to grace has arisen, or ways of acting that are incompatible with the development of Christian life. In such cases, one must begin by preparing that soul, encouraging them to place their confidence in God and to abandon themselves in his hands. As Saint Josemaría said, we need to act like the blacksmith who heats up the iron before giving it the desired shape.

It is not enough to think about what advice one should give; one also needs to consider what would be the most helpful manner in which to give it – what words to use, when to say it – so that it can reach the person most effectively. The one receiving spiritual direction opens his soul; he is letting himself be guided in his interior dispositions as well as in his exterior conduct as it relates to Christian life; he counts on the person listening to him guarding a refined and strict silence of office.

The one giving spiritual direction should also keep in mind that moments of greater difficulty can present themselves along our earthly path.⁴¹ But precisely through the struggle these moments entail, they can become an opportunity to exercise greater faith in God and to have recourse to supernatural means. They are moments allowed by God to grow in identification with Jesus Christ, corresponding to grace. The ascetical struggle is a life-time project, so we should not be afraid to come to know ourselves, or to see our own weaknesses.

Saint Josemaría also pointed out another temptation we may need to confront: thinking that our interior response is just a comedy, because at times it takes real effort to carry out certain practices of piety, or the ascetical struggle fails to provide any sensible consolations, or perhaps one's work or family life do not seem fulfilling. At other times, the stirrings of rebellion present in the *fomes peccati* (the consequence of original sin that never disappears) try to take hold, accompanied by pride, laziness, sensuality. In these cases, Saint Josemaría used to say that the moment had arrived to live out a human comedy before a divine spectator: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Blessed Trinity. We need to be faithful to God, because true happiness consists in fulfilling our duty for the love of God, even if we often have to go against what our feelings dictate.

⁴¹ *But I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members (Rom 7:23).*

b) *Fostering freedom and personal responsibility*

When giving spiritual direction, it is important to help each soul freely want to struggle to fulfill God's will better each day. For this reason, one ought never command (except with those who are scrupulous or in certain special cases) but rather suggest, counsel, encourage, etc. Alongside this marvelous freedom in one's own struggle, one also has to foster a sense of responsibility: to insist that it is God who asks for our love, who awaits our response in corresponding to the continuous gifts He gives His children. It is He who will judge each of us according to our works. Thus it is a question of "helping each person to face up to all the demands of his life and to discover what God wants from him in particular—without in any way limiting that holy independence and blessed personal responsibility which are the features of a Christian conscience."⁴²

The fact that advice is habitually given in the form of suggestions does not imply that the one receiving it should just keep it in mind, as any other opinion; this advice has sure value to guide one on the path leading to God, within the bounds of respect for personal freedom.

This advice can sometimes involve specific tasks or circumstances in the person's life.⁴³ For example, when it seems necessary to stop working in an activity that entails something morally illicit, or because for this person, these specific circumstances (objective or subjective) are an obstacle to holiness, impede the fulfillment of other more important duties, or are harmful to health, etc. In these situations (which frequently the spiritual director recognizes with greater clarity than the person involved), one must remember our Lord's words: *For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?*⁴⁴

⁴² St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 99.

⁴³ The one receiving spiritual direction may sometimes consult about personal decisions he has to make (for example, whether to undertake a new job or not, make modifications in his use of time to better carry out his many responsibilities, etc.) or regarding moral questions in his professional work. Clearly, such consultations always require a refined care for the silence of office, in both parties. In these cases the spiritual director should advise the person concerned to meditate in God's presence on the advice he has been given, and to decide freely (unless morality clearly requires a specific solution), with full personal responsibility in deciding how to act.

⁴⁴ *Mt* 16:26.

Sometimes, when circumstances demand it because of the goods that are at risk, spiritual direction can require imperative counsels.⁴⁵ In these cases the advice given is what Christian conscience dictates (or what it would dictate, if it were not blinded by error or disturbed by a disordered passion). This is why they can be called *imperative* counsels: not because the spiritual director commands them, but because he expresses what a right conscience dictates or would dictate. He will urge the person concerned to sincerely consider in God's presence the advice received and to ask for help to act in accord with God's Will.

In today's environment, not a few persons think that what takes effort is not really done freely. They overlook the value of expiation, of voluntary sacrifice offered for love, and they think it is unnatural to choose something difficult, that goes against the grain or requires a prolonged struggle. People confuse what is free with what is spontaneous and the spontaneous with the authentic. They think that whatever is spontaneous is good, because it is more authentic. They forget the reality of our evil inclinations, a consequence of sin. Those who follow that path end up adopting a languid life, and wind up more conditioned by their circumstances than those who voluntarily decide to take their Christian faith seriously.

It is important to understand correctly what it means to *want to want to*, without confusing "I don't feel like it" with "I don't want to." Love always leads to self-giving, to overcoming one's selfishness, which certainly requires effort. For a person who loves it is normal to try to always do what one ought, even though one doesn't feel like it. The good is primary, so duty urges us towards the achievement of the true good. This requires growth in the virtues of sincerity, docility, fortitude, generosity and loyalty. Each soul should feel personally responsible for his or her own life—a responsibility that is non-transferable and spurs us always to act and behave with a unity of life as coherent Christians.

We can summarize what has been stated so far by saying that spiritual direction consists in forming persons of sound judgment,⁴⁶ who desire freely to love God above all things. Ultimately, it is a question of forming people in freedom, offering them a solid and

⁴⁵ For example, when they entail a specific moral demand arising from justice or charity; the obligation to flee from a proximate occasion of sin, avoiding some reading materials or a specific place or person; the duty to employ the necessary means to be faithful to one's Christian vocation; the need to avoid serious danger of scandal or grave harm to other souls; etc.

⁴⁶ St. Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 93: "Spiritual guidance should not be used to turn people into beings with no judgment of their own, who limit themselves to carrying out mechanically what others tell them. On the contrary, it should tend to develop men with their own Christian standards."

deep doctrinal formation, since good judgment “requires maturity, firm convictions, sufficient doctrinal knowledge, a refined spirit and an educated will.”⁴⁷

A loyal response to the love of God should fill the soul, not in the form of a list of indications or a series of unconnected practices, but as a manifestation of the fully living Christian spirit: this is the only way to foster the desire to practice the virtues, day after day, for love.

One should help form conscience of those who receive spiritual direction by giving doctrine, while fostering sound moral and intellectual habits. It is important to give them guidance so that they do not just follow their heart, which would lead to an empty sentimentalism, but rather that they acquire and live by a knowledge of Christian conduct that is both theoretical and experiential.⁴⁸ It is the believing intelligence, “the ‘heart’ converted to the Lord and to the love of what is good which is really the source of *true* judgments of conscience”⁴⁹, which knows how to recognize God’s will in each moment,⁵⁰ and how to act with complete interior freedom.

It is a matter of helping people consider their areas of struggle in their prayer, so as to discover what God wants of them, getting to the root of their defects by being sincere with God and with themselves in their examination of conscience, and asking trustingly for grace to put into practice what they see. It is important that the advice one gives be placed in this context, so as to avoid the danger of a merely external fulfillment of Christian virtues and practices.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Cf. Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, no. 64, Cf. *St. Thomas Aquinas*, *S. Th.*, II-II, q. 45, a. 2:

“So, for example, in the area of chastity, it rightly judges by seeking the truth, which is the purpose of having moral knowledge; on the other hand he who has the habit of chastity judges with a certain connaturality.” The goal, then, is to come to possess a wisdom regarding the things of God that comes from knowledge and personal struggle, and that is also a gift of the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Veritatis splendor*, no. 64.

⁵⁰ To guide one’s actions not by what “seems good for me,” but rather by what is “truly good for me,” one needs to follow a free decision guided by reason, not just by desire.

To form our conscience we must, in the end, “make it the object of a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good,”⁵¹ with an uninterrupted growth in interior freedom, *the freedom of the glory of the children of God*.⁵²

c) *Helping people grow*

The spiritual director should accompany those he is helping as they build up and strengthen their unity of life,⁵³ little by little, so that nothing remains voluntarily outside of their response to God. Always, but especially as the years go by, one should ask more of souls, with a vigilant charity.⁵⁴ The director can never be satisfied with souls “just getting by,” but has to suggest new points of struggle, asking for light from the Holy Spirit to discover what they need, and to help them to see it. It is good to set high goals and, with a right intention, to ask each person to give what they can, because God is the one who is asking for it.

Our Lord wants each one to make progress according to their possibilities, talents and conditions. Therefore in spiritual direction we need to open up horizons for souls, reminding people that they will never lack the help of grace. Our Lord calls everyone to be a saint, and no one should settle for less. We need to ask of each soul what he or she is capable of giving at that moment, with God’s grace. In doing so, it can be opportune to tell those receiving advice that this does not mean that there is a lack of struggle on their part, or that our Lord is not happy with them, but on the contrary, He loves them so much that He wants them to draw nearer to Him, and is asking for more because He is granting more grace.

⁵¹ *Veritatis splendor*, no. 64.

⁵² *Rom 8:21*. A morally well-formed person (i.e. one who is virtuous) not only knows which behaviors are commanded or forbidden, but understands why this is so. Therefore he is also able to perceive in a given case if observing what seems to be the law would lead to behavior that harms justice or the common good. In this case, *epikeia*, which is the virtue that perfects the good or right choice, is the rule that has to be followed (cf. *S. Th.*, II-II, q. 120).

⁵³ St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 10: “For there is no human undertaking which cannot be sanctified, which cannot be an opportunity to sanctify ourselves and to cooperate with God in the sanctification of the people with whom we work . . . To work in this way is to pray. To study thus is likewise prayer. Research done with this spirit is prayer too. We are always doing the same thing, for everything can be prayer; all activity can and should lead us to God, nourish our intimate dealings with him, from morning to night. Any honorable work can be prayer and all prayerful work is apostolate. In this way the soul develops a unity of life, which is both simple and strong.”

⁵⁴ *Cor meum vigilat* (*Song 5: 2*); “Because the charity of Christ urges us” (*2 Cor 5:14*).

We cannot forget that, sooner or later, one's fidelity to the faith is confronted with a clear and unequivocal choice, which in some way presents itself throughout our path to God: either we strive with all our being to fulfill God's will at every moment, or we seek ourselves, watering down the commitments we have made, curtailing our efforts to love. It is the temptation to egocentricity, either in its spiritual form – pride, self-love, etc. – or in its more material form – sensuality, comfort-seeking. In reality, both components always go together. Usually the radical nature of this dichotomy does not appear all at once, but it is forged through a series of choices, perhaps in small points, which however become more serious over time.

When someone, with God's grace, sincerely tries to say yes to the inspirations and suggestions of the Holy Spirit, he or she acquires an ever greater sensitivity allowing him or her to discover God's will in everything and to follow it. In contrast, when we say no to God, without rectifying these negative responses in sacramental confession or by acts of penance, our soul becomes insensitive to subsequent calls.

To live as if on a tightrope, straddled between “yes” and “no”, makes progress difficult and leads to lukewarmness. In the face of such situations, one needs to have a holy intolerance of that which weakens correspondence to grace, and with great refinement, after having prayed and offered mortifications, employ an energetic remedy that will spur that person to react, so as to at least begin to *want to want to* again. This should always be done with supernatural hope and optimism. We have to understand and forgive, while knowing how to give encouragement with fortitude and prudence. To be very supernatural one must be very human, remembering that the best way to be effective is to present the demands of Christian life in an attractive way. And this requires the effort to truly understand each person, because what would be an encouragement for one person could be counterproductive for another. By striving to be understanding, the spiritual director can put himself in the place of the other person, and always take a positive approach, making the struggle attractive, being strong but never harsh.

We have to avoid two equally harmful extremes: hardness or a lack of understanding; and softness due to a lack of fortitude. We must learn to combine patience and understanding with making the demands necessary in order to help people improve. Otherwise, it would be a lack of love, or cowardice, or superficiality on the part of the one giving guidance. Being demanding (in the right sense of this word) is a sign of love for souls, inasmuch as it seeks what is best for them: that they become ever more fully identified with Christ. These two modes – being understanding and demanding – help pull people upwards, without forcing matters, without wounding them, waiting for the

opportune moment and the proper occasion – that is to say, letting time do its work. When it is necessary to say something strong, one should also seek an opportunity afterwards to reassure that person of our affection and interest, which will never be lacking.

We have to help each person build on the good qualities he or she has, and suggest points of struggle that contribute to growth in the virtues.

Thus, we have to know how to impart peace and serenity to those who feel more strongly the weight of their limitations or defects. The saints also had defects, right to the end of their lives, and they reached holiness by making an effort to correspond to grace. For the interior struggle to produce fruit, we have to press on, “beginning and beginning again,” which is like a law of the interior life:⁵⁵ virtue is acquired by the repetition of good acts, rapidly getting up again after each fall. Moreover, we have to teach people to draw profit from their contrition after their failures, so as to unite themselves even more closely to our Father God, with a love that heals and cauterizes the wound.

d) *Facilitating sincerity*

Sincerity is a virtue *sine qua non* for anyone who wants to grow in holiness. If we fail to open our soul completely, nothing else can be of much help to us.

Obviously, sincerity is a virtue that has to be practiced by each one, personally; at the same time, the person giving spiritual direction should try to facilitate it. He has to realize that the mere fact that he loves and understands people is not enough; he has to win over people’s affection and help them actually *experience* the fact that they are understood and accompanied. This way one can facilitate sincerity *beforehand*, helping people speak clearly when the first symptoms of a problem appear, without giving in to the snares set up by the *mute devil* inciting one to keep quiet.⁵⁶

In the end, sincerity in spiritual direction is nothing less than a sign of one’s unity of life, of the transparency and simplicity with which a coherent Christian ought to live. That is why it is so important for the director to collaborate with divine grace, so to speak, to encourage each person to know himself or herself before God.

⁵⁵ St. Josemaría, *The Way*, 292: “Your interior life has to be just that: to begin... and to begin again.”

⁵⁶ Cf. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 236. “At the time of examination beware of the devil that ties your tongue.”

No matter whether one is dealing with older or younger people, there are certain topics that are especially important to know how to ask about, without becoming in any way “heavy-handed” or forcing things, since spiritual direction is not a matter of giving an “account of one’s conscience.” Charity with all, holy purity and a just detachment from material goods are virtues that promote and protect three fundamental goods for a Christian. One’s questions about these matters should be well-aimed, discreet, pleasant, and of course, there has to be complete trust in the reply received, since any sign of mistrust would make sincerity more difficult.

Especially with those taking their first steps on the path towards God, one should not take for granted that they already know the Church’s moral teachings well.⁵⁷ Moreover, some people (due to their temperament or the formation they have received from their family, etc.) do not know how to express what is happening to them—not because they want to hide something, but rather because they think they do not have anything to say, and that what is happening to them is normal, or that it is just the way they are. One needs to help them, perhaps by directing the conversation towards some doctrinal point which for them may be unclear, or by asking opportune questions—without creating unnecessary complications, knowing that the action of grace also takes time—to help them discover broader panoramas of a more intimate relationship with God in prayer, in the reading of the Gospel or spiritual reading, so that they acquire more refinement in their examination of conscience, etc.

One also has to teach people, always in a refined way, how to call things by their name. Sometimes people don’t do so because they are embarrassed, or because they think others are different, or simply because they don’t know how to speak of certain things. At other times, the lack of exactitude or correctness in speech, the use of euphemisms or circumlocutions, can mask a form of insincerity. Each person needs to face up to his or her weaknesses in God’s presence, determined to struggle while always counting on supernatural help, without being surprised by anything. When the interior struggle is presented in these terms, it leads to a serenity filled with peace – even in defeats – which is a fruit of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it is essential to teach people to examine their conscience with great finesse, never overlooking small symptoms that can point to underlying hidden problems.

⁵⁷ For example, with questions regarding professional ethics, in all that refers to the virtue of holy purity, truthfulness, etc.

Sincerity should be accompanied by a readiness to follow the advice received, with trust and the responsibility of a mature person,⁵⁸ striving to understand it well and remember it, so as to put it into practice with an intelligent and free obedience.

It is always helpful for the one who receives such advice to consider it in prayer, so as to engrave it in his or her heart and to understand better that by following these indications, with the help of grace, the good dispositions of one's will, intellect, and heart are strengthened. It is not a matter of mechanically carrying out a specific resolution, but rather of growing in virtue by struggling in those points, and thus becoming configured to Christ, becoming *alter Christus*.

3. DISPOSITIONS NEEDED TO CARRY OUT SPIRITUAL DIRECTION WELL

The person giving spiritual direction need to proceed with a great sense of responsibility. The efficacy of the action of grace that reaches us through the supernatural means (the sacraments, prayer, the communion of the saints, etc.), and the consequent growth in interior life of those receiving direction, depend to a great extent on how the spiritual director carries out this task.

a) *Need for interior life and supernatural outlook*

In taking care of others, it must be kept in mind that the first concern of the spiritual director has to be his own interior struggle, striving for holiness in order to help sanctify others. Otherwise, he would not be able to serve souls effectively.⁵⁹

No one can give what he does not have. There is a certain experiential knowledge of God and of divine realities that cannot be obtained by means of any human science. St. Thomas explains that right judgment regarding the things of God requires a wisdom that is obtained by a kind of "connaturality."⁶⁰ "Accordingly it belongs to the wisdom that is an

⁵⁸ *Wretched are they who scorn wisdom and discipline (Wis 3:11); frequent the company of the elders; whoever is wise, stay close to him (Sir 6:34)*, for, in the area of prudence, no one is self-sufficient (cf. S. Th., II-II, q. 49, a. 3, ad 3).

⁵⁹ St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 399: "Agreed: your concern ought to be for them. But your first concern must be yourself, your own interior life. Otherwise, you will not be able to serve them."

⁶⁰ *St. Thomas Aquinas*, S. Th., II-II, q. 45, a. 2, c: "Now rectitude of judgment is twofold: first, on account of perfect use of reason, secondly, on account of a certain connaturality with the matter about which one has to judge."

intellectual virtue to pronounce right judgment about divine realities after reason has made its inquiry, but it belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit to judge aright about them on account of connaturality with them.”⁶¹ This is the *habitual* knowledge acquired through an assiduous attention to the person loved. Therefore, St. Josemaría affirms that without interior life, without constantly seeking God who dwells in the center of the soul in grace, the guide’s efforts become “fragile, fictitious even.”⁶²

This has to lead those giving spiritual direction to seek the true good – their own, and that of those whom they help with their direction – with rectitude of intention⁶³, to personally practice generous prayer and offering mortification for those whom they are trying to help, convinced that this is the best way to serve them. Here too we can apply that order indicated in *The Way*: “First, prayer; then, atonement; in the third place, very much ‘in the third place,’ action.”⁶⁴

Our Lord gives his light and gifts to those who strive to draw close to Him, and helps them discover specific ways to help others. Experience and good will are not enough; to carry out a supernatural task one needs to employ supernatural means. One must always invoke the help of the Holy Spirit, imploring his gifts.

Together with mortification and beseeching the help of the Paraclete, the spiritual director needs to foster in himself, with the help of divine grace, the mentality of the Good Shepherd, striving to make our Lord’s sentiments his own.⁶⁵ He should always be very supernatural and at the same time, very human; and very human in order to be very supernatural, without forgetting that in this supernatural task of guiding others, he should never give in to merely human considerations: that is, he can never make false excuses for omitting the fulfillment of his duty towards the person he is advising, thinking that that person is more virtuous, is older or has more experience, etc. Our Lord takes into account

⁶¹ *Ibid.* As St. Thomas goes on to clarify: “thus Dionysius says (*Div. Nom.* ii) that Hierotheus is perfect in divine realities, for *he not only knows them, but has experienced them.* Now this sympathy or connaturality for divine things is the result of charity, which unites us to God, according to *1 Corinthians* 6:17: “He who is joined to the Lord, is one spirit with Him.”

⁶² Cf. St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 892.

⁶³ “Such a connaturality is rooted in and develops through the virtuous attitudes of the individual himself: prudence and the other cardinal virtues, and even before these the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. This is the meaning of Jesus’ saying: *He who does what is true comes to the light (Jn 3:21)*” (*Veritatis splendor*, no. 64).

⁶⁴ St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 82.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Phil* 2:5.

one's limitations, and even makes use of them for one's own sanctification and for that of the others. When one is docile to the Holy Spirit, God's grace is never lacking.

b) *Charity and patience*

Just as charity is the form of all the virtues,⁶⁶ it is also the root that nourishes all the dispositions needed to carry out spiritual direction effectively, and the nucleus around which they develop.

Whoever exercises spiritual direction must always act with a charity that is both effective and affective, in such a way that nothing is a matter of indifference to him.⁶⁷ With sincere concern he has to take a true interest in everything, from the most material to the spiritual. This noble and upright affection is far removed from selfish sentimentality, since he knows he is serving the children of God.

Each soul has to be known and understood, one by one, with their virtues, defects, and possibilities, and also with each one's way of being, likes, dislikes, and interests. When those receiving spiritual direction sense they are known and loved, it is much easier for them to trust, to be sincere, and to allow themselves to be demanded of. And this knowledge of each person is acquired by meditating in prayer about the interior life of those one takes care of, and asking for light from the Holy Spirit so as to give prudent advice.

The spiritual director has to understand others in great depth, seeing things through their eyes, understanding how and how much things affect them. Events which in and of themselves have little importance can at times become very significant for someone. One has to evaluate properly in the presence of God what is important or could become important, even when it is something quite small.

It is important never to be scandalized by anything—not even to make a gesture of surprise or any show of astonishment—especially if someone were to mention something out of the ordinary and precisely for that reason could find it more difficult to tell.

⁶⁶ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* I-II, q. 62, a. 4, c.

⁶⁷ Though, naturally, this is not shown with signs of particular sympathy that might imply what is traditionally called *respect of persons*. Everyone should receive the same warm affection; the director should know how to “do and disappear” so that no one becomes attached to him personally.

Patience, informed by charity, is a necessary virtue for those carrying out tasks of spiritual direction.⁶⁸ The spiritual director exercises patience so as never to be overcome by discouragement when he does not perceive immediate fruit in his work with souls, and to know how to hit upon the right moment to demand more, when he sees that this is possible or necessary.

Patience and fortitude, also, so as to have dominion over one's own temperament: gentleness, tact and affability in one's dealings with others, and a sincere interest for their problems. At no time should one show impatience, and this not as a tactic but as a consequence of acting in the presence of God. Moreover, sometimes the simple fact of finding someone who listens can trigger the beginning of a conversion.

Finally, patience with the weaknesses and limitations of others, with faith in the supernatural means and hope in the power of God, without focusing solely on others' defects or allowing oneself to be carried away by pessimism.

The Holy Spirit fills us with hope in our work with souls—with supernatural optimism and confidence—so that we can transmit God's joy and peace in the face of any falls or failures, with the conviction that when there is sorrow, there is struggle, and our Lord can draw great good out of great evils: *In patientia vestra possidebitis animas vestras* — “By your perseverance you will secure your lives.”⁶⁹

c) *Prudence*

Saint Thomas explains that “actions are in singular matters: and so it is necessary for the prudent man to know both the universal principles of reason, and the singulars about which actions are concerned.”⁷⁰ Because prudence is necessary in order to determine what is the best advice to give in each situation, without resorting to general prescriptions, the spiritual director has to cultivate the virtue of prudence and ask God for it assiduously.

One sign of prudence is to give the right advice at the right time, taking into account the person's circumstances and capacities, realizing that one cannot deal with everyone in

⁶⁸ *Love is patient, love is kind . . . it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury . . . It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor 13:4-7).*

⁶⁹ *Lk 21:19.* St. Thomas Aquinas translates this more literally: “man maintains possession of his soul through patience” (*S. Th.*, II-II, q. 136, a. 2, ad 2).

⁷⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, II-II, q. 47, a. 3, c.

the same way and that a straight line is not always the shortest path to a goal. Gently, but firmly, one has to propose goals that are attainable for each person at the right moment.

Sometimes it will be necessary to suggest different fields of struggle, without insisting on a specific point – even though it may be an objective need – when the person is not in a condition to make progress on that point. At other times, it can be opportune for the spiritual director to take some time before making a specific judgment, so as to consider it slowly in personal prayer and refine it as needed. Furthermore, it is not enough just to listen to what people say, without trying to consider in advance the situations in which a soul may find itself, so as to give opportune suggestions at the right time. Saint Thomas says that “good counsel requires not only the discovery or devising of fit means for the end, but also other circumstances. Such are suitable time, so that one be neither too slow nor too quick in taking counsel, and the mode of taking counsel, so that one be firm in the counsel taken, and other like circumstances.”⁷¹

It will always be necessary to implore the assistance of the Holy Spirit, who makes the works of virtue more perfect: He helps us to discover the truth and teaches us to give advice wisely.

d) *Humility of knowing oneself to be an instrument*

The spiritual director is the instrument God wants to use to help each one come to know his Will. *Servi inutiles sumus; quod debuimus facere, fecimus* – “We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.”⁷² Souls belong to God alone, and therefore the one guiding others has no power or dominion over them. To create the climate of sincerity and trust that is proper to spiritual direction, a deep humility is required, shown in willingness to sacrifice oneself for others.

Among other expressions of humility, it is very much appreciated when the spiritual director is sympathetic, refined in his manner of dealing with people, generous with his time: all this helps people to open up their souls. It is important for everyone to experience this close accompaniment and availability. The spiritual director should consider this point in his own examination of conscience.

⁷¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, II-II, q. 51, a. 1, ad 3.

⁷² *Lk* 17:10.

Humility also means rejecting any trace of putting oneself in the limelight, or of a desire for originality in the way one gives spiritual direction. The director should bring souls to God, without letting them get attached to him personally. To achieve this, he must reject all temptations to being the center of attention, following the teaching of the Baptist: *Illum oportet crescere, me autem minui* – “He must increase; I must decrease.”⁷³ This humility should be combined with availability to listen at any moment to the joys and concerns of those being guided. Everyone should always find an open door and be received with a smile.

At the same time, humility will lead one to be demanding when necessary, even in those aspects in which perhaps one has one’s own struggles: a good doctor can cure others even though he himself suffers from the same disease. The contrary would imply little supernatural outlook, and a lack of conviction that one is only an instrument. This disposition leads the spiritual director to be convinced that he can rely on the grace and help of the Holy Spirit to carry out faithfully the duties of his task.

e) *Respect for all forms of spirituality*

Within the broad framework of Christian faith and morals, each soul has the right to follow the form of spirituality to which he feels God is calling him.⁷⁴ The spiritual director should not only respect that spirituality, but should adhere faithfully to it in the advice he gives, without trying to add his own personal preferences or ideas. As stated many times above, souls belong to God, and one must accompany them along the path that our Lord has disposed for each one. To do otherwise would mean one has forgotten that in the sanctification of souls one is only an instrument of the Holy Spirit.

If the one receiving spiritual direction has contracted obligations with an institution of the Church, he has to be encouraged to fulfill these obligations faithfully and to take advantage of the means of sanctification, formation and apostolate in the manner foreseen in that institution.

⁷³ *Jn* 3:30.

⁷⁴ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 214; *Code of Canons of the Oriental Church*, can. 17.

f) Silence of Office

The spiritual director is obliged to keep the strictest silence of office regarding everything he knows through this task.

In the event (which would not be frequent or habitual) that he were to consider it necessary to consult another person who is more knowledgeable about a particular matter, he can suggest that the individual himself or herself speak to someone who is better able to help him or her in that specific question. Ordinarily, if there is need to resort to a doctor, lawyer, etc., he will advise the individual to try to become well informed, so as to choose someone who has good judgment. There is no problem with the spiritual director providing him or her with names (preferably more than one) of some professionals to go to who are known to be reliable.

On some occasion, the spiritual director may need to consult someone who is more expert, presenting him with all due prudence with a hypothetical case and changing the circumstances, so that the identity of the person involved is kept completely hidden.

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