

Personal spiritual direction: a theological and spiritual approach based on the spirit and praxis of Opus Dei

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On presenting God's plan of salvation to the Ephesians, St Paul clearly brings out its historical manifestation: it is through Christ and his Church that this plan is to be accomplished for all men. Of great theological depth, this Letter is a genuine document of spiritual direction. The Apostle contemplates life in Christ and shows how the holiness of Christians has to be reflected in all the different human relationships found in their surroundings, whether between

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husbands and wives, or parents and children, or masters and slaves. All of these persons should know that, in Christ, God “chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (*Eph* 1-4). This is the viewpoint from which Saint Josemaría Escrivá sees the role of spiritual direction, and gives it its place in the life of the spirit. It couldn’t be otherwise, given the tenor of “his preaching on the universal calling to holiness”¹. What is the aim of spiritual direction? Saint Paul gives thanks to God for the new life of those to whom he is writing his Letter, and asks, “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (*Eph* 1:17-18). These words point out the aim of all spiritual direction: to second the work of the Holy Spirit in souls, to help them struggle in a Christian life that is “a constant beginning, and beginning again”², and to lead them to union with Jesus Christ as adopted children of God the Father.

1. THE CHURCH AS THE FAMILY OF GOD’S CHILDREN IN CHRIST

As Vatican Council II teaches, “At all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him (cf. *Acts* 10:35). He has, however, willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness”³. He chose the people of Israel, and afterwards Christ established a new pact, “the new covenant in his blood (cf. *1Cor* 11:25); he called a race made up of Jews and Gentiles which would be one, not according to the flesh, but in the Spirit, and this race would be the new People of God”⁴.

“You and I belong to Christ’s family”, Saint Josemaría writes, “for ‘he himself has chosen us before the foundation of the world, to be saints...’”⁵. In fact, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “the Church is nothing other than ‘the family of God’”⁶. “Becoming a disciple of Jesus means accepting the invitation to belong to *God’s family*, to live in conformity

¹ BENEDICT XVI, Post-Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, Sept. 30, 2010, no. 48; cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, ch. “Direction”, e.g. no. 56: “If you don’t allow God’s grace and your director to do their work, the sculptured image of Christ, into which the saintly man is shaped, will never appear”, etc.

² ST JOSEMARÍA, *Forge*, no. 384.

³ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium* (*LG*), no. 9.

⁴ *LG*, no. 9.

⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, no. 2.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1655; cf. 542, 759, 815, 854, 959; cf. JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Apr 17, 2003, no. 61.

with His way of life: ‘For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother’” (*Mt 12:49*).⁷ The Church is a mystery of communion that “always involves a double dimension: the *vertical* (communion with God) and the *horizontal* (communion among men)”⁸. As Saint Josemaría preached in a eucharistic celebration, it is the presence of Christ that “makes us *cor unum et anima una* (*Acts 4:32*), ‘one heart and one soul,’ and transforms us into a family, a Church”⁹. The mutual charity that is active in spiritual direction increases the communion among those who “form the family of the children of God”¹⁰.

a) In the Communion of Saints

This consideration of the Church as a family, present in Vatican Council II¹¹, gives the key for interpreting the personal spiritual direction of souls in the Church, and therefore also in Opus Dei, a “family of the children of God in his Holy Church”¹². The foundation of Christian life, Saint Josemaría teaches, is God’s loveable paternity and its response on the part of a person who knows he or she is a child of God. Spiritual direction, then, is a fraternal service that is offered to brothers and sisters of the same family, the Church. Spiritual direction is a kind of human mediation. Fernando Ocariz asserts that the communion of the saints is a sharing in the goods of salvation as well as a communication of those goods from one to another. In summarizing Saint Thomas on the matter, he says: “the supernatural good of each member of the Mystical Body has an impact on the supernatural good of all of them”¹³. This good, communicated solely because of our solidarity in grace, can also be communicated, in a certain way, by means of spiritual direction. In Opus Dei, it helps us live as Christians in meeting the ordinary obligations of daily life, especially in sanctifying our work and the duties of our state in life, thanks to our sacramental life and prayer. These draw their nourishment from the Bible and the Liturgy, with the Eucharist at the center, and they are solidified by the study of the Magisterium and Tradition, especially the Fathers of the Church.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2233.

⁸ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Letter *Some aspects of the Church understood as communion*, May 28, 1992, no. 3.

⁹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 123.

¹⁰ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Past. Const. *Gaudium et spes* (*GS*), no. 40.

¹¹ Cf. *LG*, no. 51; *GS*, no. 40; see also JOHN PAUL II, Postsynod. Ap. Exh. *Ecclesia in Africa*, Sep 14, 1995, no. 63.

¹² ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 113

¹³ FERNANDO OCÁRIZ, *Naturaleza, gracia y gloria*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 2000, p. 167; cf. ST THOMAS AQUINAS, *Exposit. in Symb. Apost.*, a. 10; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 947-953.

b) A baptismal concept

In the words of John Paul II, “the human person is not only brought into being and progressively introduced into the human community by means of education, but by means of the rebirth of baptism and education in the faith the child is also introduced into God's family, which is the Church”¹⁴. We enter this family through baptism. And in this Communion of the Saints that is the Church, we are all, in the words of Saint Catherine of Sienna, “donors and beggars.” The grace that saves us is also the grace that unites us. Spiritual direction is part of this “donation” among the baptized. Spiritual direction, Benedict XVI says, shows the “ecclesiality of our faith”¹⁵. We could say that spiritual direction is a baptismal concept in so far as baptism is its sacramental foundation: it is rooted in our belonging to the Body of Christ, the Church, through baptism. The People of God, the Church, is the place of holiness; as she lives, so she transmits to every generation what she is, what she believes¹⁶. The formation of people depends a lot on the help of others; and this is also true for their growth in faith¹⁷. “Spiritual individualism”, on the other hand, isolates the person, hindering him from openness to others and interchanges of gifts.¹⁸

Spiritual accompaniment is also a baptismal concept insofar as it helps one to grow in the gift received in baptism: by the power of the Sacrament of Confirmation, it sustains a progressive identification with Christ and participation in his evangelizing mission. John the Baptist himself was essentially giving spiritual direction when he said to his disciples, “After me comes he who is mightier than I...” (*Mk* 1:7), and when he pointed out Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (*Jn* 1:29), directing these disciples toward Christ who is the goal of all Christian preaching and all spiritual direction.

c) Personal and collective direction

Spiritual direction can be defined as the sum total of the cares and spiritual helps by which the Church assists the faithful on the path to sanctity. The teachings of Saint Josemaría, as Pedro Rodríguez points out, highlight “the need a Christian has of being guided along the way to God; this guide is, above all, the Holy Spirit’s action in the soul, along with the forms of

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Ap. Exh. *Familiaris consortio*, no. 15, Nov 22, 1981.

¹⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Discourse*, Sep 16, 2009.

¹⁶ Cf. *DV*, no. 9.

¹⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Fides et ratio*, no. 31; cf. *GS*, no. 12.

¹⁸ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Doctrinal note on some aspects of evangelization*, no. 5. About the importance of Christian existence in the Church as a family of children’s of God vid. for example, MIGUEL DE SALIS, *Concittadini dei santi e familiari di Dio, Studio teologico sulla santità della Chiesa*, EDUSC, Roma 2009, pp. 340-349 and 373-388.

mediation and accompaniment that are found in the Church: the ecclesiastical Magisterium, the priestly ministry, spiritual direction in the context of full openness and sincerity"¹⁹. In the Church there is a collective spiritual direction that the Pope and Bishops provide through pastoral letters, exhortations, homilies, etc. Priests, in communion with the Pope and other bishops, also give this direction when they preach the word of God. With regard to the faithful of Opus Dei, the Prelate of Opus Dei and his Vicars in their respective regions or delegations also exercise this type of collective spiritual direction; and they are assisted by the faithful of the Prelature—priests and lay people—who, for example, give Circles, talks, classes, and (in the case of priests) homilies and meditations.

2. THE NATURE OF PERSONAL SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

There is another type of spiritual direction that is imparted to each person in particular. The word “direction” does not connote here an exercise of hierarchical government, but orientation and advice. There are other terms—e.g. accompaniment, assistance—which could be added to the traditional ones, though not eliminating the latter. This type of direction is based on the love God has for us: it reminds us of his infinite charity, enables us to discover it, and spurs us on to do everything for love of God and of others in Him. This love is shown in a supreme way in Christ’s self-giving on the Cross to save us, thereby fulfilling the Father’s Will and sending us, from the Father, the Holy Spirit.

a) Progressive identification with Christ

Spiritual direction is the task of orienting human persons who, created in the image of God, are capable of self-transcendence through knowledge and love and of openness to God and others. Spiritual direction, therefore, leads to dialogue and communion. Among the means of personal spiritual direction in Opus Dei are the fraternal chat, or “confidence” (a brief, weekly or bi-weekly fraternal conversation of spiritual assistance), sacramental confession, and fraternal correction²⁰. Spiritual direction looks not only toward imitation of Christ, but also toward progressive identification with Him; and this is the work of the Holy Spirit, as St Josemaría affirms, quoting St Cyril of Jerusalem: “When we participate in the Eucharist, ‘ writes St Cyril of Jerusalem, ‘we are made spiritual by the divinizing action of the Holy Spirit, who not only

¹⁹ PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ, on JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ DE BALAGUER, *Camino*, edición crítico-histórica, Madrid, Rialp, 2004³, p. 268.

²⁰ Cf. JUAN ALONSO, *La corrección fraterna*, Jul 2010. Available at www.collationes.org.

makes us sharers in Christ's life, as in baptism, but makes us entirely Christ-like, incorporating us into the fullness of Christ Jesus"²¹.

All of the baptized are called to this "configuration" with Christ. But this is nothing other than growing in divine filiation, which is the very holiness of the members of the Church, the family of God. This holiness is shown in the exercise of the virtues out of love for God and for others; and according to the spirit of Opus Dei, it is shown especially in ordinary life (in the family and in professional work).

In the expression "spiritual direction", the word "spiritual" comes from "spirit", for the most important factor in spiritual direction is the action of the Holy Spirit "who is the one who has to sanctify you"²². St Josemaría expressed this in the following way: "The model is Jesus Christ; the sculptor is the Holy Spirit, by means of grace"²³. The one providing spiritual direction thereby "finds his proper place: he is only the "instrument"²⁴.

The matter of spiritual direction, taken in its widest sense, includes a person's external conduct as well as his internal dispositions, in so far as these refer to faith and morals, to the way of living the spirit of Opus Dei—especially for those who have made a commitment to it by following a divine calling—and to the apostolate that each person carries out with other persons so as to bring them closer to God. In other words, the Prelature helps its faithful and others who so desire, "to know and practice the Christian faith so they can make it a reality in their lives, with full individual autonomy"²⁵. Spiritual direction, as it has always been understood in the Church, presupposes on the part of each person the free manifestation of the state of his soul and his interior dispositions in relation to spiritual progress.

b) Spiritual help and advice, not a task of government

Personal spiritual direction does not belong to the Prelature's system of government, but to the sphere of mutual help and advice²⁶. This is what St Josemaría had in mind when he spoke

²¹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, no. 87.

²² ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, no. 57.

²³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Carta 8-VIII-1956*, no. 37.

²⁴ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Carta 8-VIII-1956*, no. 37.

²⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 53.

²⁶ Cf. PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ, *La dirección espiritual: fundamentos antropológicos y teológicos*, in *Teología y espiritualidad en la formación de los futuros sacerdotes*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1997, nos. 34-35. "Spiritual direction, as a spiritual relationship, belongs ... on the level of Christian fraternity". On the other hand, the present study clearly does not deal with the figure of the spiritual director in seminaries, which has its own typical features (cf. *Code of Canon Law* can. 239 and 246).

of “helping another soul by supporting it in its struggles, getting it used to the practices of prayer and penance and to the fulfillment of its duties of state. It is just what a good father and Christian mother would do with their children, a noble friend with his companions, or a young Christian woman with her friends”²⁷. So the authority of the one imparting spiritual direction is not hierarchical; neither is it a power. Indeed, the sphere of the direction received by the faithful of Opus Dei, or whoever approaches its apostolate, is clearly spelled out: to provide assistance exclusively for one’s spiritual and apostolic life.

This will certainly involve encouraging people to care for their own family, professional work, rest, and social life, even though these matters are not the immediate concern of spiritual direction, which excludes any kind of interference. Such assistance aims rather at enabling each person, in the exercise of his freedom and responsibility, and with sound Catholic faith and morality, to make his own decisions and to know the reason why. Indeed, “Christian faith and calling affect our whole existence, not just as a part of it. Our relations with God necessarily demand giving ourselves completely. The man of faith sees life in all its dimensions”²⁸. Spiritual direction will make us more aware that our whole life is under God’s loving Providence. Benedict XVI expresses this relationship between one’s interior life and God’s designs for every person: “The life of faith and prayer will lead you along the paths of intimacy with God, helping you to understand the greatness of his plans for every person”²⁹.

Within this vocational frame of baptism, the Christian has to reach maturity, a way of being that takes a lifetime’s work. Spiritual direction serves this personal dynamism that leads the one seeking direction to improve his conduct and finally shape his “spiritual makeup”³⁰. And this is oriented toward one thing alone: the glory of God, the love of God, life in God, the fullness of charity.

To this end, spiritual direction in Opus Dei helps a person to be faithful to a “plan of life”, which structures his life without constraining it. It consists of a combination of practices of

²⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, *La abadesa de las Huelgas. Estudio teológico jurídico*, Rialp, Madrid 1974², p. 153.

²⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, no. 46.

²⁹ BENEDICT XVI, Address to Youth, “Paulo Machado de Carvalho” Municipal Stadium, Pacaembu, in Sao Paulo, May 10, 2007.

³⁰ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, Aug 6, 1993, no. 71: “Human acts are moral acts because they express and determine the goodness or evil of the individual who performs them. They do not produce a change merely in the state of affairs outside of man, but to the extent that they are deliberate choices, they give moral definition to the person who performs them, determining his *profound spiritual traits*. This was perceptively noted by Saint Gregory of Nyssa: “All things subject to change and to becoming never remain constant, but continually pass from one state to another, for better or worse....Now, human life is always subject to change; it needs to be born ever anew...but here birth does not come about by a foreign intervention, as is the case with bodily beings...; it is the result of a free choice. Thus *we are* in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we will, by our decisions”.

piety from proven ecclesial tradition that vivify one's daily life so that everything is turned into prayer: a sense of divine filiation supports Christian living that revolves around work and family duties. The plan of life expresses the priority of God, and therefore the primacy of grace in all interior growth—a far cry from Pelagianism. It includes participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice and Communion, frequent confession, mental and vocal prayer, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, examination of conscience, spiritual reading, etc. According to Pedro Rodríguez, St Josemaría “considered the ‘plan of life’ to be an important aspect of spiritual direction”. It was “a widely accepted concept in schools of spirituality and spiritual theology”. The founder of Opus Dei “was trying to give a formal structure to the collection of acts of piety and of Christian living, which were widespread among ordinary Christian faithful and which, in one way or another, were being lived personally by members of the Work, as a consequence of the spiritual direction he gave them”³¹. This plan of life leads one to the knowledge of God and of oneself, to dealing with God, to “falling in love” with Jesus Christ³². What does it mean for one to grow in union with God? José Luis Illanes writes that the answer to this question lies in “the unifying power of love since, as St Thomas Aquinas writes perusing a text of Dionysius the Areopagite, those who love, precisely because they love, are already in some way united, and aspire to be fully united. Hence the union between those who love one another is at the same time the cause of their love, the substance of their love and the effect of their love”³³.

c) Announcing the Gospel

Cardinal Ratzinger, on the occasion of a theological symposium on the teaching of Josemaría Escrivá, said: “Holiness consists in this—living our daily life with our sights fixed on God; shaping all our actions to accord with the Gospel and the spirit of Faith”³⁴. In conclusion, personal spiritual direction in Opus Dei is simply a practical and interpersonal form of announcing the Gospel. Likewise, the Prelate of Opus Dei asserts: “The Gospel is the Way, the Truth that leads to the fullness of Life (*Jn* 14:6). To be able to accept it, to recognize in it the voice of Christ who calls, it is necessary to create in the mind and heart dispositions of humility and sincerity, of bravery and abandonment, of openness to hope and love. This is the aim that the priest should propose to himself in preaching and spiritual direction: to guide souls—each soul, one by one—to a personal encounter with the Lord, to that intimate and vital union with Christ

³¹ PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ, *cit. com.*, *The Way*, no. 76, p. 287.

³² Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way*, nos. 91, 999.

³³ JOSÉ LUIS ILLANES, *Tratado de Teología Espiritual*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2007, p. 196; cf. ST THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* 1-2, q. 28, a. 1.

³⁴ JOSEPH RATZINGER, *Opening Ceremony Message*, in *Holiness and the World, Studies in the Teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, Scepter Publishers, Inc., Four Courts Press & Midwest Theological Forum, 1997, p. 30.

that is an interchange of love, of giving and receiving. And this interchange finds its culminating moment in the sacraments”³⁵.

The spiritual accompaniment a person receives therefore leads to a confrontation of his whole life with Christ, to the very heart of Jesus’ message: “I give you a new commandment: that you should love one another. As I have loved you, so you also love one another” (*Jn* 14:34). This means loving others because Jesus has loved us and as He has loved us, that is, loving others with the very love of God that is in us—God’s gift of himself—and loving them to the end. This is what is important in every moment of life, since charity is the measure of all action, the life of the soul.

This personal relationship with the Gospel takes on a particular relevance in the “today” of the Liturgy. Benedict XVI teaches that “when God leads the People of God to discover the “performative” character of the Word of God in the liturgy, he also helps it perceive the action of God in the history of salvation and in the personal life of each member”³⁶. Spiritual accompaniment helps a person discover, in the light of Scripture, the hand of God in his own life. The Christological and pneumatological perspectives of spiritual direction presuppose “understanding it as a mystagogical task, that is to say, not merely one that is ascetical and ethical-moral, but also theological, as leading closer to the mystery of God and to a loving response to his call”³⁷.

>From the Gospel St Josemaría teaches that “what is written there—the words and deeds of Christ—is something that you should not only know, but live. Everything, every point that is told there, has been gathered, detail by detail, for you to make it come alive in the individual circumstances of your life”³⁸. From this we can understand, for example, why the Servant of God Montse Grases (1941-1959), after reading the Gospel a month before her death, should ask “about the passages and terms she did not understand well”³⁹. (Montse was a member of the

³⁵ JAVIER ECHEVARRÍA, *Para servir la Iglesia. Homilias sobre el sacerdocio*, Rialp, Madrid 2001, p. 105. St Josemaría asserted that spiritual direction leads to the sacraments, especially Penance and the Eucharist; and reciprocally, from confession comes spiritual direction.

³⁶ *Verbum Domini*, no. 53.

³⁷ JOSÉ LUIS ILLANES, *La teología como elemento conformador de la dirección espiritual*, in *Teología y espiritualidad en la formación de los futuros sacerdotes* (dir. PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ), Eunsa, Biblioteca de Nuestro Tiempo, Pamplona 1997, p. 71.

³⁸ ST. JOSEMARÍA, *Forge*, no. 754.

³⁹ MARÍA DEL CARMEN DELCLAUX FERNÁNDEZ, *cit.* in JOSÉ MIGUEL CEJAS, *Montse Grases. La alegría de la entrega*. Rialp, Madrid 1993, p. 438 (ref. AGP, MGG T-013). St Jerome, in *Epistulae* 53, 5-6, comments on *Acts* 8:30-31 saying that Philip shows the functionary Jesus, “who was hidden and imprisoned, as it were, in the letter”; and he adds: “Without a guide to go before you to point out the way, you cannot enter into Holy Scripture”.

Work who died in the odor of sanctity before she was twenty years old). A person becomes another Christ through his participation in the mysteries of Jesus' life, particularly his life of hidden work: since Christ's work was always united to the paschal mystery, and therefore possessed an essentially Eucharistic value; through our participation in Christ's life of work in particular, we too die, only to rise again with Him⁴⁰. For the children of God are children of the resurrection (cf. *Lk* 20:36). Within the unity of the vocation of the faithful of Opus Dei, "every member of Opus Dei, like any other human being, has...a personal vocation that is unique and is his alone, for God's plan for each man and woman is unique and embraces his whole life"⁴¹. Spiritual direction helps a person discover this design and respond to it with self-giving.

3. THE NEED FOR PERSONAL SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT

Personal spiritual direction has a long tradition in the Church going back to the Gospels⁴². Its fruit is seen in the lives of many saints. St Francis de Sales, for example, was a great promoter of spiritual direction for all the faithful, calling it "the counsel of counsels"⁴³. When some people in the nineteenth century wanted to get the faithful to shun spiritual direction out of false respect for the Holy Spirit's action in souls, Pope Leo XIII rejected the idea, affirming that God has decreed that the ordinary way for men to be saved is through the help of other men, and that a spiritual guide is needed for seeking sanctity⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ Vid. for example, ST JOHN EUDES, *A Treatise on the Kingdom of Jesus*: "For the mysteries of Jesus are not yet completely perfected and fulfilled. They are complete, indeed, in the person of Jesus, but not in us, who are his members, nor in the Church, which is his mystical body. The Son of God wills to give us a share in his mysteries and somehow to extend them to us. He wills to continue them in us and in his universal Church. This is brought about first through the graces he has resolved to impart to us and then through the works he wishes to accomplish in us through these mysteries. [...] This is the plan by which the Son of God completes and fulfills in us all the various stages and mysteries. He desires us to perfect the mystery of his incarnation and birth by forming himself in us and being reborn in our souls through the blessed sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. He fulfills his interior life in us, *hidden with him in God*. He intends to perfect the mysteries of his passion, death and resurrection, by causing us to suffer, die and rise again with him and in him."

⁴¹ FERNANDO OCÁRIZ, in PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ, FERNANDO OCÁRIZ, JOSÉ LUIS ILLANES, *Opus Dei in the Church*, Scepter Publishers, Inc., N.Y. 2003, p. 132.

⁴² For example, Jesus' dialogues with the disciples of Emmaus (cf. *Lk* 24:13-35); or, regarding the Apostolic age, the oft-quoted passage of the calling of Paul, who was sent to Ananias (Act 22:6-17).

⁴³ ST FRANCIS DE SALES, *Introduction to the devout life*, I, 4.

⁴⁴ Cf. LEO XIII, Letter *Testem benevolentiae* to the Archbishop of Baltimore, Jan 22, 1899 (against Americanism), ASS 31 (1898/1899) 471-479.

a) *Directed toward holiness*

The faithful of Opus Dei know that “sanctity is not reserved for a privileged few. All the ways of the earth, every state in life, every profession, every honest task can be divine”⁴⁵; and that “the purpose of Opus Dei is to foster the search for holiness and the carrying out of the apostolate by Christians who live in the world, whatever their state in life or position in society”⁴⁶. “And to those who grasp this ideal of holiness, the Work offers the spiritual assistance and the doctrinal, ascetical, and apostolic training which they need to put it into practice”⁴⁷.

“Within the framework of the universal call to holiness, members of Opus Dei receive in addition a special call to dedicate themselves freely and responsibly to look for holiness and carry out the apostolate in the middle of the world, committing themselves to live a particular spirituality and to receive throughout their lives a specific formation”⁴⁸. And one of the means for receiving this formation is spiritual direction. For St Josemaría, the function of spiritual direction is comparable to that of an architect in constructing a house; in an analogous way, we can think of the role of a soccer or tennis coach, with all the limitations these examples present (providing spiritual accompaniment is not simply “*coaching*”, among other reasons, because of the primacy of the Holy Spirit’s action). John Paul II stated that “it is necessary to rediscover the great tradition of individual spiritual accompaniment, which has always yielded so much precious fruit in the life of the Church”⁴⁹.

Spiritual direction is a regular practice in the life of the faithful of Opus Dei, priests and laypeople alike, and of the priests of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, who are not incardinated in the Prelature. In fact, the essential service the Prelature provides is precisely that of offering an adequate spiritual accompaniment. In this sense, to receive spiritual direction constitutes, for the faithful of Opus Dei, a right, since they need it in order to follow a path of sanctification in daily life in the middle of the world and to carry out an intense apostolate. Spiritual direction leads to the knowledge of “the actual will of the Lord in our lives,” and to an “ever clearer discovery of one’s vocation and the ever-greater willingness to live it so as to fulfill

⁴⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 26.

⁴⁶ ST JOSEMARÍA, *op.cit.*, no. 60. Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 211: to spread the Word of God is a juridical right and moral duty of the Christian; cf. CARLOS J. ERRÁZURIZ M., *Corso fondamentale sul diritto nella Chiesa, I. Introduzione. I soggetti ecclesiali di diritto*, Giuffrè Ed., Milan 2009, pp. 215-216.

⁴⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 60.

⁴⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 61.

⁴⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Post-synod. Ap. Exh. *Pastores dabo vobis*, Mar 25, 1992. Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Ap. Exh. *Ecclesia in America*, Jan 22, 1999, no. 29: “In order to mature spiritually, Christians do well to seek the counsel of the Church's ministers or of other persons expert in the field of spiritual direction, which is a traditional practice in the Church”.

one's mission"⁵⁰. In the case of lay people, this means to be guided by a Christian conscience so as to order temporal things according to God⁵¹. The whole of life enters on the horizon of spiritual direction, but not just in any sort of manner: a person's decisions in the secular sphere of family, professional and social life are to be free and responsible.

Since everyone needs to grow in faith, hope and charity, spiritual direction helps a person first of all to get to know God and be a witness of the faith. This entails prayer (vocal and mental), confession, the Eucharist as the center of life, familiarization with the Sacred Scripture, the witness of our lives, a spirit of sacrifice, and a spirit of examination (a general one) on all of one's activity during a certain period of time, for example, a day; it also includes an area for particular examination and disinterested friendship and apostolate.

Spiritual direction invites the one receiving it to make a particular, practical examination of conscience, which is a traditional practice in the Church⁵². This should help him to develop his talents, or to struggle against a dominant defect, e.g., to overcome his lack of order through an effort to be punctual in finishing his work or to return home without any unnecessary delay. This examination can be based on the different themes of the liturgical year, e.g., the effort to be more cheerful during Christmas Time, or to practice self-restraint at meals during Lent.

b) To reach a unity of life

Self-knowledge and self-acceptance lead a person to the maturity of a unity of life under the loving gaze of God. This is the horizon that spiritual direction, with God's grace, opens to a person: it helps achieve complete harmony in the different aspects of one's behavior, while respecting and fostering his personality in freedom. Thus, St Josemaría spoke of a "numerator" that is very diverse among the faithful who are so different in their ways of being and acting within the limits of Christian faith and the unique calling to Opus Dei, which form the common "denominator."

⁵⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Post-synod. Ap. Exhort. *Christifideles laici*, Dec 30, 1988, no. 58.

⁵¹ Cf. *LG*, 31 & 36.

⁵² It is only human and in accord with common sense for one to concentrate his own effort on a specific point, e.g. a dominant defect. Seneca pointed out this practice. In Christian tradition we find it in many authors such as St John Climaco (+649). Earlier, at the end of the 4th century, St John Chrysostom preached to the Antiochians: "If you dispute the custom, I will tell you that there precisely is the ease of the work. It is enough to substitute one custom for another and everything is obtained." *In Mattheum*, 17, 7, PG 57, 264. The "particular examination" was espoused by the "*devotio moderna*", a current of thought that first spread in the Low Countries, and afterward to Germany and France in 14th and 15th centuries. E.g. Juan Vosde Heusden (+1424). cf. Pierre Debongie, "Dévotion moderne", en *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique*, Beauchesne, Vol. 3 (1957), col. 732.

Unity of life⁵³ is, in the first place, unity of aim: of seeking and loving God constantly and in everything. St Josemaría, accordingly, affirms that souls have to become contemplative: “contemplative souls in the midst of the world, who try to convert their work into prayer;”⁵⁴ they have to be prayerful and Eucharistic souls. Spiritual direction accompanies the process of “divinization” of human persons and cooperates in their progressive identification with Christ, as sons and daughters of the Father in the Spirit. It tends to simplify life, which produces unity. At the same time, it leads us to “foster, in ourselves and in others, a contemplative outlook”⁵⁵, which stimulates our ability to marvel at life.

Spiritual direction fosters witness to one’s own faith: esteem for the persons around us, ability to love them, and capacity for showing them how we live our faith, since friendship with God leads to apostolate, and vice-versa. Spiritual direction helps us discover Christ who is passing by in our life, not the least of times with the cross, when we are faced with the death of a family member, the sufferings of a loved one, health problems, etc. Then we will not lose our cheerfulness. On the contrary, only Christ’s presence gives those situations their true dimension—the redeeming love of God.

c) *Persons with Christian standards*

“Spiritual guidance...should tend to develop men with their own Christian standards”⁵⁶, St Josemaría says. His prologue of *The Way* ends with the expression, “worthy soul,” (“alma de criterio”) literally “a soul with criteria”, an expression full of meaning⁵⁷. It is not a question of merely desiring a human and Christian maturity but of being just that: a *person with Christian standards*, capable of discerning what he should do. This is how he explained it in 1965: “In the midst of this world, which we love with all our soul, we have to know how to gaze upwards; we have to try to reach this divine wisdom that will make us men with Christian standards, capable

⁵³ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, no. 10: “Everything, from the most abstract knowledge to manual techniques, can and should lead to God. 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.” Cf. *GS*, 43: “One of the gravest errors of our time is the dichotomy between the faith which many profess and the practice of their daily lives.” Cf. *Christifideles laici*, nos. 17, 30, 34, 212.

⁵⁴ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Furrow*, no. 497.

⁵⁵ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Evangelium vitae*, Mar 25, 1995, no. 83; cf. *ibidem*, no. 84.

⁵⁶ ST JOSEMARIA, *Conversations*, no. 93.

⁵⁷ Cf. GUILLAME DERVILLE, Une connaissance d’amour. Note de théologie sur l’édition critic-historique de *Chemin*, II, in *Studia et Documenta* (vol. 3, Roma 2009) pp. 294-295.

of discerning, of being secure in the faith, generous in charity, prepared by love for the truth and the disposition of serving, so as to offer to those in our surroundings a dialogue of light, of love”⁵⁸. Wisdom, security, and capacity for dialogue here presuppose a deep and continuous theological formation. It is precisely through spiritual direction that a person is moved to gain a greater understanding of the faith and to consolidate it, since he needs to decide on a course of action throughout life.

Unity of life, Christian maturity, and persons with their own Christian standards represent three different perspectives. All three are essential to the teaching of St Josemaría because they integrate his Christian experience and go to the heart of his concept of holiness. Unity of life embraces the entire person; from the intellectual perspective, he will be a person with standards, from the perspective of the heart and will, a person who has Christian or spiritual maturity. (The latter could simply be called Christian maturity, which by analogy to Christ, is made up of a twofold element, human and divine). Pedro Rodríguez even goes so far as to consider that, for St Josemaría, “a person with Christian standards” designates the saint⁵⁹. To be a “person with Christian standards”, “a worthy soul”, is to attain wisdom, the knowledge of divine things. This communion with the divine, whose formal cause is charity, is a great gift from God: it leads to the fullness of divine filiation and apt judgment about events and situations of life.

4. THE ROLE OF LAY PEOPLE

As we have already said, personal spiritual direction belongs to a sphere that is totally different from the power of governing; and it is imparted by lay people and priests to persons in the area of their interior dispositions. As minister of the Sacrament of Penance in virtue of his ministerial power and faculties received from a bishop, a priest, besides imparting sacramental absolution, certainly does give spiritual direction⁶⁰. But there are also other situations where

⁵⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Carta 24-X-1965*, no. 75; in PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ, *Camino*, edición crítico-histórico, *cit.*, p. 31.

⁵⁹ Cf. PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ, *Vocación, trabajo, contemplación*, Eunsa, Pamplona 1986, 93 note 6.

⁶⁰ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Discourse to the members of the Sacred Apostolic Penitentiary and of all the Colleges of the Minor Penitentiary Fathers, ordinary and extraordinary, of the four Patriarchal Basilicas of Rome, Jan 30, 1981: “The Sacrament of Penance, in so far as it entails the salutary exercise of humility and sincerity, for the faith it professes ‘in actu’ in the mediation of the Church, for the hope that it includes, for the attentive analysis of conscience it requires, is not only a direct instrument for destroying sin—its negative phase—, but a precious exercise of virtue, of atonement itself, an irreplaceable school of spirituality, a highly positive work of regeneration in the soul of the ‘vir perfectus’, ‘in mensuram aetatis plenitudinis Christi’ (cf. *Ef* 4:13). In this sense, the Confession that is well done is already of itself a very high form of spiritual direction.” JOHN PAUL II, Post-synod. Exhort. *Reconciliatio et Penitentia*, December 2, 1984, 32: “Thanks then to its individual character, the first form of celebration makes it possible to link the sacrament of penance with something which is different but readily linked

laymen can give true spiritual direction⁶¹; and this has a place in the development of the Church's life, as Gustave Thils affirms: "The history of Christian spirituality also shows that this function of the 'spiritual director' does not pertain exclusively to priests. It also correspond to all those who take part in some way in the *Christian education of the baptized*. Parents are 'spiritual counselors' by nature and designation: theirs is the task of the primary education of their children in holiness.... *Educators*, in general, must not neglect this essential element of the mission entrusted to them"⁶².

a) A mediating function

As St Thomas Aquinas writes, "Only Christ is the perfect mediator between God and men [...] but nothing prevents some others from being called mediators between God and men in some manner; i.e. in so far as they cooperate in uniting men to God by way of disposing them or serving as a minister (the priests)"⁶³. Thus, St Thomas does not confuse the notions of *priest* and *mediator*, though they both are one in Christ⁶⁴. The concept of "mediator" covers other persons as well as priests. Indeed, it allows for persons who are not priests to exercise this function in subordination to Christ, as was the case of the prophets in the Old Testament. Thus, for example, Moses could affirm: "I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD" (*Dt* 5:5), that is, "I was mediator and intermediary." Fulfilling the mission of spiritual direction is a way for a lay person to exercise his common priesthood and participate in the mediating mission of Christ: lay people "by virtue of their royal priesthood, participate in the offering of the Eucharist. They exercise that priesthood, too, by the reception of the sacraments, prayer, and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, abnegation and active charity"⁶⁵.

with it: I am referring to spiritual direction. So it is certainly true that personal decision and commitment are clearly signified and promoted in this first form".

⁶¹ On discernment with a sense of faith as a gift shared by all the faithful in the different situations of marriage, cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synod. Ap. Exhort. *Familiaris consortio*, no. 5: "The Church, therefore, does not accomplish this discernment only through the Pastors, who teach in the name and with the power of Christ but also through the laity: Christ 'made them His witnesses and gave them understanding of the faith and the grace of speech (cf. *Acts* 2:17-18; *Rv.* 19:10), so that the power of the Gospel might shine forth in their daily social and family life."

⁶² GUSTAVE THILS, *Santidad Cristiana. Compendio de Teología ascética*, Sígueme, Col "Lux mundi" 5, Salamanca, 1965⁴, p. 537. Original: *Sainteté chrétienne. Précis de théologie ascétique*, Lannoo (Tielt) - Desclée de Brouwer (Paris) 1963.

⁶³ ST THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae*, III^a, q. 26 a. 1; "Nihil tamen prohibet aliquos alios secundum quid dici mediatores inter Deum et homines prout scilicet cooperantur ad unionem hominum cum Deo dispositive vel ministerialiter".

⁶⁴ Cf. JEAN-PIERRE TORRELL, *Encyclopédie Jésus le Christ chez saint Thomas d'Aquin*, Cerf, Paris 2008, 406.

⁶⁵ *LG*, no. 10.

b) Ecclesial tradition and the actualization of the common priesthood

In the history of the Church, people who did not have the ministerial priesthood have exercised spiritual direction on different occasions: Catherine of Sienna, Catherine of Genoa, Teresa of Avila; Jean de Bernières and Gaston de Renty⁶⁶ in the 17th century; St Francis of Assisi, St Ignatius of Loyola, before 1537, and St Philip Neri, also before his ordination (the latter two even gave direction to women)⁶⁷. We are not taking into account here the role of Abbesses in consecrated life, nor, as we already said, the particular mission of parents before God with regard to their children, for the Christian family constitutes a spiritual “space” and domestic Church; nor are we considering the mission of some professors and other educators.

The role of laymen in this sphere is a current issue⁶⁸. As Vatican Council II teaches, “the laity are made to share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ; they have, therefore, in the Church and in the world, their own assignment in the mission of the whole People of God”⁶⁹. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* recalls this ecclesial richness when it says, in reference to spiritual direction, that “the Holy Spirit gives to certain of the faithful the gifts of wisdom, Faith and discernment”⁷⁰. Lay people have received in Baptism the gift of counsel, strengthened by Confirmation. This gift instructs the conscience for its moral choices,

⁶⁶ Cf. GABRIEL DE SAINTE-MARIE-MADELEINE, *Direction spirituelle: justification théologique*, in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, Tome III, Beauchesne, Paris 1957, col. 1183.

⁶⁷ Cf. UMILE BONZI DA GENOVA, “*Direzione spirituale*”, in *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, IV Città del Vaticano 1950, col. 1692. Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *La abadesa de las Huelgas. Estudio teológico-jurídico*, Rialp Madrid 1974², pp. 152-153, notes 45-46 where he quotes the declaration of Fray Juan Hurtado de Mendoza in the cause of Blessed Piedrahita (1511) (JESÚS LUNA ALMEIDA, *Historia del Señorío de Valdecorneja*, Avila 1930, p. 169) and recalls that “Bishop Yepes recounts in his Life of the reformer of Carmel that St Teresa and the first discalzed nuns of Seville were denounced to the Spanish Inquisition for hearing the confessions of one another (DIEGO DE YEPES, *Vida, virtudes y milagros de la bienaventurada Teresa de Jesús, Madrid, 1776*, tomo I, p. 393)”. On pointing out that these same excesses were attributed to the Abbess of Huelgas, St Josemaría defends the Abbess and goes on to say: “A greater excuse could be found for hearing her subjects in confession if it is benignly interpreted in the sense of limiting oneself to listening to faults, as can be done even by a lay person, *in periculo mortis y deficiente sacerdote*; allowing the unburdening of conscience and the fostering of contrition, as permitted from ancient times in religious institutes; or, if it were not a matter of manifesting any kind of fault but only communicating mutual desires of perfection and apostolate; or of sustaining another soul in its struggles, accustoming it to the practices of prayer and penance and the fulfillment of the duties of its state, just as a good father and mother do with their children, a noble friend with his companions or a Christian girl with her friends.” And he quotes Merkelbach on the help that laymen give to the dying in the absence of a priest (*Summa Theologiae Moralis*, edition quarta, III, Bruges, 1943, no. 574, p. 530). He also refers to “FÉLIX M. CAPPELLO: *Tractatus canonico-moralis de sacramentis*, vol.II, *De Poenitentia*, third ed., Romae, 1938, no. 362, p. 278; *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1917), Can. 530, I 22.”

⁶⁸ Cf. for example, FLAMINIA GIOVANELLI, Assistant Secretary of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, Jul 22, 2010.

⁶⁹ VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, [abbr. AA], no. 2.

⁷⁰ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2690.

perfects the virtue of prudence, and enlightens the soul⁷¹, also to help others. When they give direction to others, lay people exercise their common priesthood. As Cornelio Fabro writes, “It is not easy to find the affirmation of the common priesthood of the faithful so developed in all its capacities as in Escrivá de Balaguer”⁷². Here is a quotation: “An apostle—that is what a Christian is, when he knows that he has been grafted onto Christ, made one with Christ, in baptism. He has been given the capacity to carry on Battle in Christ’s name, through confirmation. He has been called to serve God by his activity in the world, because of the common priesthood of the faithful, which makes him share to a certain degree in the priesthood of Christ. This priesthood—though essentially distinct from the ministerial priesthood—gives him the capacity to take part in the worship of the Church and to help other men in their journey to God, with the witness of his word and his example, through his prayer and work of atonement”⁷³. The Church is built up when she lives as a community faithful to the Lord and to her mission, in all that her members do, not only in the celebration of the Word and sacraments, but also in family, social and professional life—in the communion of her members, of which spiritual accompaniment is an element⁷⁴.

c) Spiritual direction as apostolate

The root word “apostle” obviously is not taken here in its strict meaning as referring to the successors of the apostles who are the bishops, but to all Christians who, by virtue of their baptism, are sent to announce Christ to all men. The Servant of God, Alvaro del Portillo, points out that “the Council generally uses the word *apostolate* to denote the whole reality of the task entrusted to the Church”⁷⁵. As the Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* teaches, “All activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of this goal is called apostolate, and the Church carries it on in various ways through all her members. For by its very nature, the Christian vocation is also a vocation to apostolate”⁷⁶. The apostolate of lay people includes the mission of strengthening in the faith those who already believe in Christ⁷⁷. Some words of St Josemaría are relevant in this regard: “Today’s challenge is not just to cultivate what lies uncultivated, but to increase the productive capacity of what has already been planted; to make what is fertile even

⁷¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Regina Caeli*, May 7, 1989, *L’Osservatore Romano*, May 8 and 9, 1989, 4.

⁷² CORNELIO FABRO, *La temprá di un padre della Chiesa*, in *Santi nel Mondo*, Ares, Milano 1992, p. 141.

⁷³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, no. 120.

⁷⁴ Cf. MIGUEL DE SALIS, *Concittadini dei santi e familiari di Dio*, *Studio teologico sulla santità della Chiesa*, cit., pp. 373-388.

⁷⁵ ALVARO DEL PORTILLO, *Faithful and Laity in the Church. The Basis of their Legal Status*, Ecclesia Press, Shannon, Ireland, 1972, p. 167, note 41.

⁷⁶ AA, 2.

⁷⁷ Cf. AA, 6: “to the faithful to instruct them, strengthen them, incite them to a more fervent life.”

more so; to get the workers to think of themselves, too, in terms of harvest”⁷⁸. This task is especially undertaken in spiritual direction. As Vatican Council II teaches, “Following in the footsteps of the men and women who assisted Paul in the proclamation of the Gospel (cf. *Acts* 18:18-26; *Rom* 16:3), lay persons of a genuinely apostolic spirit supply the needs of their brothers and are a source of consolation no less to the pastors than to the rest of the faithful” (cf. *1Cor* 16:17-18)”⁷⁹.

5. CHARACTERISTICS AND CONDITIONS OF PERSONAL SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT

To love so as to know: this is the disposition the person who gives spiritual guidance most needs: *oculus meus, amor meus*. This is a genuine love that seeks the other’s good and sees God’s goodness in him or her. It is not a selfish love, nor does it create any attachment⁸⁰. The person who helps another in this way will have an encouraging attitude as long as he is positive, optimistic, and capable of seeing virtue in the other.

The personality of the one giving spiritual guidance is obviously important for the fulfillment of his task, and especially for the one who is the object of his attention. Christ has said that “if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit” (*Mt* 15:14). St John of the Cross, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, states that “in addition to being learned and discreet, a director should be experienced”⁸¹. At the same time, as André Maurois observes, a disciple is always grateful to find that a great man is still human⁸². This also applies to spiritual guidance: we are grateful to find that the person carrying out this task shows, with due prudence, that he also has to struggle in his Christian life; in short, we are glad to find the person showing

⁷⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Letter* of Jan 12, 1945 to Roberto María Cayuela Santesteban, s.j., in ANDRÉS VAZQUEZ DE PRADA, *El Fundador del Opus Dei, Vida de Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, II, Rialp, Madrid 2002, p. 520.

⁷⁹ AA, no. 10.

⁸⁰ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Homily* on ordination of deacons, May 7, 2006; “Obviously, Jesus' words also contain the entire practical pastoral task, caring for men and women, going to seek them out, being open to their needs and questions. Obviously, practical, concrete knowledge of the people entrusted to me is fundamental, and obviously, it is important to understand this way of “knowing” others in the biblical sense: there is no true knowledge without love, without an inner relationship and deep acceptance of the other. The shepherd cannot be satisfied with knowing names and dates. His way of knowing his sheep must always also be knowing with the heart. However, it is only possible to do this properly if the Lord has opened our hearts; if our knowing does not bind people to our own small, private self, to our own small heart, but rather makes them aware of the Heart of Jesus, the Heart of the Lord. It must be knowing with the Heart of Jesus, oriented to him, a way of knowing that does not bind the person to me but guides him or her to Jesus, thereby making one free and open. And in this way we too will become close to men and women”.

⁸¹ ST JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Living Flame of Love*, stanza 3, in *the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2690.

⁸² Cf. ANDRE MAUROIS, *Lyautey*, Club des Éditeurs, Paris 1959, p. 101.

us the understanding proper of a mediator who, besides possessing God's grace with which to help us, has something in common with us, too. St Teresa used to say that she had also loved those who had to guide her and that she saw them as God's representatives. St Paul himself pleaded with the Thessalonians "to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work" (*1Thess* 5:12-13). The fundamental consideration previously made about Christ and the Spirit allows us to glimpse the secondary, though relevant, character of the "instrument". The following are essential considerations that can be added.

a) Primacy of grace

A first consideration can immediately be deduced from the spiritual dimension of our lives: the primacy of grace. St Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building" (*1Cor* 3:7-9). The Lord's parable of the Kingdom of God applies to the fruitfulness of spiritual guidance, which precisely looks to restoring this Kingdom in human hearts: "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how" (*Mk* 4:26-27). Without knowing how: Doesn't this draw our attention? "The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear" (*Mk* 4:28). Without the water of the Holy Spirit there is no growth. Hence, the first duty of the one who gives spiritual guidance is to pray for people and invoke the Holy Spirit a lot.

The grace we are speaking of is obviously not an object, but a participation in the very life of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As Fernando Ocáriz explains it: "Grace is not an 'object' that can be passed around from hand to hand, but a supernatural *way of being*, a "divinization" produced by God in the depths of the created spirit and inseparable from the invisible missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit, by whom the created spirit '*fit particeps divini Verbi et procedentis Amoris*' (St Thomas).The term of the divine action *ad extra*—which is therefore common to the three Persons—is the 'introduction' of the creature to the divine life which those missions entail. And this introduction 'begins' (but not in a temporal sense) through union with the Person of the Holy Spirit, a union that "moulds" in the finite spirit its identification (participated likeness and union) with the Son, so that *in* the Son, it is now a son of the Father. In the words of John Paul II, "He himself (the Holy Spirit), as love, is the eternal uncreated gift. In him is *the*

source and the beginning of every giving of gifts to creatures”⁸³. In this sense, the sacraments are the first source of sanctification.

b) The mystery of the human person

The second consideration is anthropological. It can be gleaned from some statements of St Josemaría, which reflect his deep experience of life, filled with respect for the mystery of the human person: “In every soul there is an exquisite core that only God can enter”⁸⁴. In fact, “man has been created in the image and likeness of God; and this is what gives a mysterious and ineffable dimension to his being”⁸⁵. A person’s face only partially reveals his interior. Every person is a “world”: while sharing a common nature, he is distinct from all others, unique. Everyone aspires toward the perfection of his being and is called to give himself⁸⁶. Spiritual direction leads a person to rid his soul of everything that is not authentically “his”, in so far as it obstructs the image of Christ. It paves the way for answering this “call of the infinite that is so specific and irrenounceable to the human heart”⁸⁷. From this point of view, sincerity is essential.

c) Over and above private advice, God’s law

Every person is subject to many influences in his life, coming from parents, spouse, children, friends, colleagues, from what he reads, etc., that make up “the diverse social and historic situations in which one lives.”⁸⁸ But in the matter of Christian life, a person does not receive advice in spiritual accompaniment as an individual, disconnected from ecclesial communion, but only within the sphere of the Church. “Over and above any private advice stands God’s law, which is contained in Sacred Scripture, guarded and taught by the Magisterium of the Church with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. When a particular piece of advice contradicts God’s word as taught by the Magisterium, we have to reject it decisively. God will give his grace to those who act with an upright intention. He will inspire them as to what to do, and, when necessary, he will enable them to find a priest who knows how to lead their souls

⁸³ FERNANDO OCÁRIZ, *Naturaleza, gracia y Gloria*, cit., p. 151; he quotes ST THOMAS AQUINAS, S.Th. I, q. 38, a. 1 c), and JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Dominum et vivificantem*, May 18, 1986, no. 34.

⁸⁴ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Carta 8-VIII-1956*, no. 37.

⁸⁵ LUCAS F. MATEO SECO, “Persona” in *Conceptos básicos para el estudio de la Teología*, Ediciones Cristiandad, Madrid 2010, p. 406.

⁸⁶ Cf. GS, no. 24: “There is a certain parallel between the union existing among the divine persons and the union of the sons of God in truth and love. It follows, then, that if man is the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake, man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself”.

⁸⁷ LUCAS F. MATEO SECO, cit., p. 406.

⁸⁸ *Christifideles laici*, no. 58.

along pure and right paths even though at times they may be difficult ones”⁸⁹. To sum up: “It is necessary,” Bouyer writes, “always to consider both the duty of obeying one’s conscience just as it is and the duty of enlightening it as well as one is able. This assumes that, far from opposing the different authorities that can guide it, the conscience should acknowledge them, giving each its proper value. For the believer, the data of faith possesses an incomparable value”⁹⁰.

In Opus Dei spiritual direction also tends to help persons who belong to the Prelature, or those who approach its apostolate and desire it, to faithfully assimilate a spirit that has been transmitted by St Josemaría and proposed by the Church⁹¹. In this regard, the faithful of Opus Dei do not consider that they have “a spiritual director”; nor do they speak of “my director”: such a “personalization” is simply not to be found. Since they realize that a mission is being carried out (that of transmitting the spirit of Opus Dei) everyone speaks in the chat or confidence in a fraternal, family tone with another person who is not a priest (to whom they would go for confession). The persons who guide others do so with clear consciousness of being instruments in the hands of God to transmit a spirit.

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Spiritual direction, as it forms “people with their own Christian standards,” helps them to be able to make decisions freely, while taking responsibility for the consequences of their actions and omissions so that they might reach a “more personal and active commitment of faith”⁹². It is amazing that whenever St Josemaría reminds people of the essentially spiritual character of Opus Dei and of its work of formation, the word “freedom” should immediately be on his tongue. This explains why the formation that the Work imparts “not only respects its members’ freedom,” but “helps them to become fully aware of it”⁹³. He adds: “To achieve holiness in their profession or job, Opus Dei members need to be formed in such a way that they can administer their freedom in the presence of God, with sincere piety and with doctrine”⁹⁴. They can thus grow in virtue and make their talents bear fruit. This point is very much present in the teaching of St Josemaría: we will always have defects, and with them we have to become saints. To achieve this, it is fascinating, encouraging and fruitful to be able to lean on what is best in us—our qualities—

⁸⁹ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 93.

⁹⁰ LOUIS BOUYER, *Dictionnaire Théologique*, Desclée 1990, p. 91.

⁹¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Ap. Const. *Ut sit*, Nov 28, 1982.

⁹² *GS*, no. 62. The Council addresses here the importance of human culture and secular sciences for Christian formation, so that people achieve a more profound comprehension of their faith.

⁹³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 53.

⁹⁴ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 53.

without being obsessed with other facets of our personality. To make these talents productive, as the Gospel teaches, is to unfold all the potential of our freedom for the service of others, thereby making our natural gifts and the supernatural graces we receive from God yield their fruit.

a) *Freedom, the ability to love*

Spiritual direction enlightens the intelligence: freedom depends on truth⁹⁵. Freedom, in turn, has an indispensable value in spiritual direction, which occurs in time; without freedom, there can be no genuine direction. As St Thomas Aquinas writes, the Holy Spirit, on making us “lovers of God”, leads us to act in a voluntary manner: “God’s children are moved by the Holy Spirit freely, out of love, not in a servile manner, out of fear”⁹⁶. Benedict XVI teaches that “man’s freedom is always new and he must always make his decisions anew. These decisions can never simply be made for us in advance by others”⁹⁷. St Josemaría speaks of “doing things as God wants them done, *because we feel like it*, which is the most supernatural of reasons”⁹⁸. This expression can surprise us, since freedom is a natural gift: if the “because we feel like it” is naturally human, in what sense can it be the most supernatural of reasons? Sanguinetti explains this paradox very well: “Freedom is above all the capacity to love God: without freedom, one cannot love God. But this capacity, which intervenes in a fragile and mysterious way in the interplay between grace and human existence (an inexhaustible theological theme), is itself a gift of God which comes with Redemption, since it was lost through sin”⁹⁹.

St Josemaría expressed the idea succinctly: “Only when we love do we attain the fullest freedom”¹⁰⁰. The Gospel is “the perfect Law of freedom” (*Jas 1:25*), because, as Ocáriz explains, “it is all summed up in *internal grace that gives strength to love*. As St Thomas Aquinas wrote: ‘*Lex nova est ipsa gratia Spiritus Sancti, quae datur fidelibus*’: the New Law is the very grace of the Holy Spirit which is given to those who believe”¹⁰¹.

⁹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, Aug 6, 1993, no. 34.

⁹⁶ ST THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa contra gentiles*, IV, 22.

⁹⁷ BENEDICT XVI, Enc. *Spe salvi*, Nov 30, 2007, no. 24.

⁹⁸ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, no. 17.

⁹⁹ JUAN JOSE SANGUINETI, *La libertad en el centro del mensaje del Beato Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, in *La dignità della persona umana*, (ed. Antonio Malo), EDUSC, Roma 2003, pp. 82-83.

¹⁰⁰ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Friends of God*, no. 38.

¹⁰¹ FERNANDO OCÁRIZ, *Naturaleza, gracia y Gloria*, 294; quoting ST THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae I-II*, q. 106, a. 1.c.

The possibility that the Holy Spirit might accuse us of sin because we don't believe in Christ (cf. *Jn* 16:11), leads us to discover, in the words of John Paul II: "the gift of the truth of conscience and the gift of the certainty of redemption"¹⁰², that is, to believe in God. Spiritual direction invites us to do just that. In this sense, it is authentic *kerigma*, being at once an announcement of Christ and the substantial content of our faith in Him. To believe in the love of God leads us also to hope: to hope for heaven, and also to hope for daily things, for hope is "something that involves every aspect of Christian existence. We have the hope that the future is ours because the future is God's"¹⁰³. In this sense, patience is "the daily form of love"¹⁰⁴. This helps us understand the words one of Péguy's daring poems puts in the mouth of God: "The faith I most love, says God, is hope."¹⁰⁵ And this hope should lead us to spiritual direction, which, with God's grace, makes us a true Christian: not one who hears the Word of God and "forgets but a doer that acts" (*Jas* 1:25); and St James adds: "He shall be blessed in his doing," that is, he will attain happiness.

b) Docility

Spiritual direction, interpersonal announcement of the Gospel, therefore requires interior docility to the Holy Spirit, who, while being given to us, inspires that docility in us. "It is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (*Rom* 8:17). We see the fruit of spiritual direction in our lives, as it makes us discover our participation in the cross and resurrection of the Lord, with whom we suffer with a view to future glory (cf. *Rom* 8:17-18). As the Prelate of Opus Dei explained, "Maturity consists in acquiring a spirit of dedication, deciding to give ourselves for an ideal that transcends the narrow confines of our own self. But if we want to second the action of the Holy Spirit, if we want to grow spiritually to the point of truly becoming like Christ, we need to cultivate a virtue that on the surface can seem the exact opposite of maturity, more suited to a child than to a mature person: namely, *docility*. This virtue

¹⁰² *Veritatis splendor*, no. 31.

¹⁰³ BENEDICT XVI, *General Audience*, May 30, 2007.

¹⁰⁴ JOSEPH RATZINGER, quoted in G. VALENTE, *Ratzinger professore*, Milano 2008, p. 11.

¹⁰⁵ CHARLES PEGUY, *Portal del misterio de la segunda virtud*; original: *Le porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu* (1912): «La foi que j'aime le mieux, dit Dieu, c'est l'espérance». Cf. PAUL CLAUDEL, Letter, May 25, 1907, in JACQUES RIVIÈRE - PAUL CLAUDEL, *Correspondance (1907-1914)*, Paris, Plon, Col. "Livre de vie", 35, Paris 1963, p. 51: Claudel advises Paul Rivière, who was close to converting: "If you fall, don't give up, don't be discouraged, but have a unshakeable faith in God's love". («Si vous tombez, ne vous découragez pas, mais ayez une foi imperturbable dans l'amour de Dieu»). This means understanding temptation as a proof of one's love.

sums up what our attitude should be toward the Holy Spirit¹⁰⁶. Docility is the best weapon to fight against selfishness because in it humility (necessary to let oneself be guided by another person) joins up with generosity and loyalty. I invite you not to neglect spiritual direction, the true path of docility and freedom”¹⁰⁷.

Spiritual direction reflects this educational dimension of freedom in various ways. It is based on trust, aims at things that are essential, without “straitjacketing” souls, as St Josemaría used to say: and thus “tasks are taken on and carried out with personal conviction and adherence”¹⁰⁸. In other words, people are not “precast.” All formalism and ready-made recipes should be left aside.

In the long experience of Opus Dei going back to the year 1928, there are many testimonials that verify the practice of an authentic direction of souls. For example, the Servant of God, Ernesto Cofiño (1899-1991), referring to the person who was helping him in his spiritual life, remarked: “I was glad to be shaped, and enjoyed seeing the sharp edges and projections of my character being worn away. I really didn’t notice the figure that was emerging, but I had faith in the sculptor”¹⁰⁹. Then there is the testimony of the Servant of God Tomás Alvira (1906-1992). Stressing the pedagogical value of explaining the aim of our actions, he observed: “It’s not a question of getting others to do what you say, but of getting them to love the one whom you love”¹¹⁰. In other word, the aim is not to get them to want what I, the spiritual director, want, but what God wants: the spiritual director does not seek to dictate a certain kind of behavior, but something more profound, namely that the person he is spiritually assisting might truly desire holiness whose horizon he, as spiritual director, tries to disclose to him. St Josemaría spoke of helping souls to “want to”¹¹¹, by suggesting things, opening up horizons to them, encouraging them to see the questions that arise in their prayer.

If a person receives a particular piece of advice in spiritual direction, for example, to read the Book of Job or the Pope’s latest encyclical, or to try to listen more to his spouse, and if he follows the advice given, he will not say or think that he is doing so simply because he has been

¹⁰⁶ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, no. 130.

¹⁰⁷ JAVIER ECHEVARRÍA, *Homily* in the Mass of Confirmation in the Basilica of San Eugenio, Rome, May 24, 1998, quoted in “Romana” 26 (1998) p. 74.

¹⁰⁸ JUAN JOSÉ SANGUINETI, *cit.* p. 87.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. JOSÉ LUIS COFIÑO—JOSÉ MIGUEL CEJAS, *Ernesto Cofiño, Perfil de un hombre del Opus Dei*, Rialp, Madrid 2003, p. 124.

¹¹⁰ Cf. ANTONIO VÁZQUEZ, *Tomás Alvira. Una pasión por la familia y la educación*, Palabra, Madrid 1997, p. 256.

¹¹¹ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Carta 8-VIII-1956*, 38: “The function of the spiritual director is to help the soul to want—“to feels like”—fulfilling God’s will. Don’t command, but advise.”

advised to, but because he wants to, just as he listens to his neighbor because that is his desire: he has decided to and fully takes this decision upon himself, although his prior deliberation, certainly, was enlightened by the advice given him.

As Luís Clavell observes: “The sending of the Holy Spirit leads us to the Son, makes us capable of receiving truth and enables every Christian to act and do what is good by his own determination (*ex seipso*), and thus act freely (*libere agit*). The person who avoids sin only because of the divine command and not because it is evil, is not free. On the other hand, the person who rejects evil because it is evil, *is* free. To act in this way—freely, moved by oneself and not by another—is something the person owes to the Holy Spirit’s action, which perfects the soul with a good habit. This way he seeks what is good out of love, the same as if the divine law were to prescribe it”¹¹².

c) Assume his responsibilities

The freedom we assume in this way (as a choice of what is good) is inseparable from its correlative personal responsibility. “The advice of another Christian and especially a priest’s advice, in questions of faith or morals, is a powerful help for knowing what God wants of us in our particular circumstances. Advice, however, does not eliminate personal responsibility. In the end, it is we ourselves, each one of us on our own, who have to decide for ourselves and personally account to God for our decisions”¹¹³. In the same vein, Card Piacenza, referring to baptismal identity and the relationship between grace and freedom, writes: “The baptized person exercises his own *munus regendi*, ‘governing’ his life, his own conduct, in ever more perfect conformity with his Lord, while learning how to control his feelings and passions in the faithful, daily exercise of those human virtues that grace perfects, strengthens and elevates, which we call prudence”¹¹⁴. Spiritual direction is an exercise of the common priesthood, and also, in the case of priests, of the ministerial priesthood as well, since the priest is always and in everything a priest; and it shares in the priesthood of Christ, unfolding the *triplex munus* (prophetic, priestly, and royal) as it enlightens, sanctifies and seconds the person’s initiative in assuming his own responsibilities.

¹¹² LUÍS CLAVELL, *El hombre como ser libre*, in J.J. Borobia et alii (ed.), *Idea cristiana del hombre*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2002, pp. 63-81, quoting ST THOMAS AQUINAS, *In Ep. II ad Cor. III*, lect. 3: “Quicumque ergo agit ex seipso, libere agit; qui vero ex alio motus, non agit libere. Ille ergo qui vitat mala, non quia mala, sed propter mandatum Domini, non est liber: sed qui vitat mala quia mala, est liber. Hoc autem facit Spiritus Sanctus, qui mentem interius perficit per bonum habitum, ut sic ex amore caveat, ac si praeciperet lex divina: et ideo dicitur liber, non quia subdatur legi divinae, sed quia ex bono habitu inclinatur ad hoc faciendum quod lex divina ordinat”. Cf. also FERNANDO OCÁRIZ, *Hijos de Dios por el Espíritu Santo*, “Scripta Theologica” (1998), pp. 479-503.

¹¹³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 93.

¹¹⁴ MAURO PIACENZA, *Il sigillo. Cristo fonte dell’identità del prete*, Cantagalli, Roma 2010, p. 132.

In this way spiritual direction, far from producing personalities dependent on others, forges authentically human, and therefore free, persons. “Spiritual direction 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. This requires maturity, firm convictions, sufficient doctrinal knowledge, a refined spirit, and an educated will”¹¹⁵. Naturally, this fundamental role of freedom in spiritual direction does not prevent it from being at times particularly clear and demanding. Indeed, as Benedict XVI says, “the more we deepen our personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, the more we realize that He calls us to holiness through definite choices, by which our life responds to his love”¹¹⁶. From this point of view, spiritual direction clearly requires fortitude in truth on the part of the one who spiritually assists others. This is reflected, for example, in a letter St Josemaría wrote in 1938 regarding a recent conversation he had with a person who was vacillating on his vocational path: “I got to the bottom of the truth—a system I plan to follow. Previously I didn’t do this because of some human consideration (good manners, politeness), or a supernatural one (charity), and maybe a little fear of prolonging a bad time. But now I am convinced that true courtesy and true charity demand getting to the very heart of the matter, no matter how difficult this is”¹¹⁷.

One does not look to spiritual direction for specific solutions in professional matters. What Vatican Council II taught applies here in an analogous way: “For guidance and spiritual strength let them turn to the clergy; but let them realize that their pastors will not always be so expert as to have a ready answer to every problem (even every grave problem) that arises; this is not the role of the clergy: it is rather up to the laymen to shoulder their responsibilities under the guidance of Christian wisdom and with eager attention to the teaching authority of the Church”¹¹⁸. Professional questions and the like should not be brought up in spiritual direction, except out of desire to obtain guidance, not on these questions as such, but on the way of living one’s Christianity in the circumstances in which he finds himself at the time. Therefore, specific or “technical” questions should not be dealt with in spiritual direction; nor can any professional secrets ever be revealed in spiritual direction.

In conclusion, spiritual direction does not infringe upon the authorities competent in the professional, civil or educational spheres. It does, indeed, enlighten the whole of one’s life, but

¹¹⁵ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, no. 93.

¹¹⁶ *Verbum Domini*, no. 152.

¹¹⁷ ST JOSEMARÍA, *Carta a Juan Jiménez Vargas*, Oct 13, 1938, in ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei. The Life of Josemaría Escrivá, II*, Scepter Press, Inc., New York 2003, pp. 235-236.

¹¹⁸ *GS*, 43.

only in relation to the Christian orientation of one's conscience in the fulfillment of God's will. There is always the danger, of course, of going astray, either by defect or excess. This might be the defect of "acting as if spiritual direction referred almost exclusively to practices of piety and the virtue of religion"¹¹⁹. This would imply excluding the sincere desire of sanctifying professional work and ordinary circumstances of one's life, as well as the equally sincere eagerness of evangelizing through one's example, and friendship with others. Or it might be the opposite, excessive attitude: "this true interest for Christian life should be limited to enlightening and helping others within the sphere of the Christian virtues. The spiritual director does not have to intervene in the organization of one's family, nor meddle with professional problems. His help is doctrinal: it affects the Christian formation of the interior dispositions from which arise decisions and changes of life"¹²⁰.

* * *

St Augustine makes this beautiful comment on the mystery of the Presentation of the Child in the Temple: "*Senex puerum portabat, puer autem senem regebat*"¹²¹. The old man was carrying the Child, but it was the Child who was really sustaining the old man". Likewise, we can better understand what the truly Christian sentiments are in the one guiding other souls. Far from feeling crushed by the responsibility involved in helping others spiritually, he sees the growth of Jesus in souls, and tries to help them realize how much they are loved by God the Father, and to fall in love with Christ. His task includes helping them to place their hearts in God, and in apostolate: he feels then that Christ's yoke is gentle and his burden light (cf. *Mt* 11:30); for this yoke is the love the Holy Spirit infuses in the heart; and this love, in turn, is the source of hope (cf. *Rom* 5:5).

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¹¹⁹ GUSTAVE THILS, *cit.*, p. 538.

¹²⁰ GUSTAVE THILS, *cit.*, p. 539.

¹²¹ ST AUGUSTINE, *Sermo* 320 (*alias de Tempore 20 de Nativitate*): PL 39, 1657, 2.