

# Spiritual accompaniment in various circumstances

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October 2010

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## 1. Introduction

In giving spiritual direction, it is important to always keep present that both the point of departure and the final goal is the universal call to holiness. In this regard, Paul VI said: “One should not be surprised at the fact that in dealing with the mystery of the Church, the Second Vatican Council placed great emphasis on holiness, to which all other notes of the Church are intimately united, and it insistently invited all Christians, whatever their social condition and class, to the fullness of Christian life and the perfection of charity. This call to holiness should be considered a most special characteristic of the Council’s *magisterium* and as its ultimate aim.”<sup>1</sup>

John Paul II, in his turn, wrote: “The Second Vatican Council has significantly spoken on the universal call to holiness. It is possible to say that this call to holiness is precisely the basic charge

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<sup>1</sup> Paul VI, Motu proprio *Sanctitas clarior*, March 19, 1969. AAS (1969), pp. 149-150.

entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council which intended to bring a renewal of Christian life based on the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> The same Roman Pontiff stressed: “*Holiness* is precisely one of the essential points—indeed, the first—in the program I outlined for the beginning of the new millennium.”<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, each person should be guided towards a prayer that is trusting and filial, which is always a sincere and simple conversation with our Father God, speaking and listening to the inspirations of grace in the depths of one’s heart. It is good to teach people to meditate upon and contemplate the life of Jesus Christ. If the person is not taught to pray, spiritual direction loses its meaning. Hence, this is a topic that should be brought up regularly. A very important point for progressing on the path of prayer is frequent confession, preferably with the same person with whom one receives spiritual direction, if he is a priest. At first it may be a bit awkward for those being directed, but as they come to understand the value of this sacrament more fully, it becomes steadily easier.

Similarly one should take into account that becoming conformed to Christ—which is what holiness consists in—means becoming identified with Him not only in personal dispositions referring to one’s own interior life and conduct, but also sharing in Christ’s eagerness to save and draw all souls to God. This eagerness should be shown in an ongoing testimony to the faith through the example of one’s own life and words. The Second Vatican Council teaches: “For the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate ... Indeed, the organic union in this body and the structure of the members are so compact that the member who fails to make his proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useful neither to the Church nor to himself.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, right from the first moment an effort should be made to broaden the vision of those being guided, helping them see that progress along the path of union with God necessarily entails being aware of

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, no. 16.

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, Homily, February 2, 2001: *L’Osservatore Romano*, February 4, 2001, p. 7. Cf. idem Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*, January 6, 2001, nos. 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem*, no. 2.

one's responsibility to bring many other souls to our Lord, especially among one's family members and co-workers.

One also needs to foster in each person a parallel development of the various aspects of an integral formation: spiritual, doctrinal (knowledge of the teachings of the faith), human (the human values in personal and social life), professional (an ongoing formation, not only to prepare for a particular profession but also to carry it out ever more competently).<sup>5</sup> Each of these aspects is important; if one is lacking, the entire spiritual edifice becomes unstable. However, we want to emphasize here doctrinal formation, which requires that the spiritual director frequently make practical suggestions by recommending books well-suited to the circumstances and capacity of each person. For this purpose, one should have at hand a list of books from which to recommend suitable reading for each person, according to the environment in which he lives and his personal circumstances: age, previous formation, intellectual ability, etc.

In carrying out the task of assisting a soul on its journey towards God, one should never forget that the person giving advice is neither the model nor the modeler: the model is Jesus Christ, and the modeler is the Holy Spirit, through the action of grace. The person carrying out spiritual direction is only an instrument in God's hands, who offers people advice for them sincerely to consider in their prayer what God is asking of them at that moment, see the points for themselves and generously decide to put them into practice. One should never forget that grace doesn't act by leaps and bounds, but rather in a gradual way as a person responds to its impulses. Hence, spiritual direction consists in accompanying people throughout this spiritual journey, step by step keeping pace with grace, without haste, whilst, full of understanding, making demands on them.

It goes with saying that one must always respect people's freedom, helping them acquire solid moral criteria, and thereby enabling them to act with personal freedom and responsibility. "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

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. John Paul II, post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, no. 61.

develop men with their own Christian standards. This requires maturity, firm convictions, sufficient doctrinal knowledge, a refined spirit and an educated will.”<sup>6</sup>

The Holy Spirit’s action in each soul can’t be compared to an automobile factory assembly line; rather his work in souls is that of a master artist. The moment may come when one needs to help those receiving spiritual direction, especially young people, to discover their vocation—to the priesthood, to the consecrated life, to marriage, to apostolic celibacy, etc. But this is just the beginning. Each person’s vocation—God’s plan for each soul—takes on ever clearer features during the course of one’s life through the circumstances in which it unfolds and correspondence to grace. Benedict XVI teaches: “Each person finds his good by adherence to God’s plan for him, in order to realize it fully: in this plan, he finds his truth, and through adherence to this truth he becomes free.”<sup>7</sup>

The person who imparts spiritual direction should thoroughly understand the souls who are confided to his care and know them one by one, with their mistakes, weaknesses and failings, but also with their virtues and abilities, which they have to channel so they can respond to what God is asking of them. Consequently, one should keep in mind that directing and accompanying souls along their spiritual path cannot simply be reduced to listening and giving a few words of advice. Rather one needs to ask God for light in order to discover what he wants from each soul in a given moment and thus advise the person accordingly. Hence, like Aaron in his vestments,<sup>8</sup> he should carry on his shoulders and in his heart all the persons who come to him for guidance—praying for them and sacrificing himself on their behalf.

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<sup>6</sup> St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, June 29, 2009, no. 1.

<sup>8</sup> “And you shall take two onyx stones, and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel, six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth. As a jeweler engraves signets, so shall you engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel; you shall enclose them in settings of gold filigree. And you shall set the two stones upon the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel; and Aaron shall bear their names before the LORD upon his two shoulders for remembrance.” Exod 28: 9-12, 17-29.

Spiritual direction should always be given in an encouraging and positive spirit, stressing growing in virtue more than overcoming defects; doing so with optimism, relying on God's grace, which is never lacking, and on the good will of the person receiving guidance.

In summary, one needs to get to know people as well as possible, so as to help them in their particular circumstances, learning to apply general norms—with charity and understanding—in accord with each person's needs, always keeping very much in mind that the work of spiritual direction is a supernatural undertaking, and so not a matter of practicing psychology. In this way, one will be in a position to foresee how souls will react and prepare them accordingly.

What follows are some specific behavioral traits which people normally possess by reason of their age, sex, situation, etc., and which can be helpful in directing them spiritually.

## **2. Spiritual direction of young people**

### ***a) Childhood***

We understand childhood here to mean the period of life from birth to the onset of puberty, with an upper-age limit of approximately 12 years. Before reaching the use of reason, children are unaware of the moral dimension of their actions: they take things as good or bad according to the judgment of the grown-ups who either reward or punish them for what they have done. After the age of approximately 7 or 8 (or even earlier), children begin to grasp moral principles and gradually become aware of the (objective) moral dimension of their actions and their own consequent moral responsibility.<sup>9</sup> They begin to understand that actions are either good or evil depending upon the moral

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<sup>9</sup> Anyone assisting young children to grow in their spiritual life should keep in mind that through the sacrament of Penance their conscience can be formed to help them distinguish between mistakes and moral guilt, between defects and sin, a confusion they are prone to. Even though their consciences are not yet fully formed, children can usually grasp, more or less clearly, the intrinsic goodness or evil of specific actions, and therefore one should explain to them the reasons why these actions are either good or evil. One will also need to prudently evaluate the lies, acts of disobedience, etc. of children to see if they are really sins, thereby helping them to correctly form their conscience in these matters.

object, and also gradually grasp the importance of the end or intention as another determining factor of morality.<sup>10</sup>

In presenting the child with a moral explanation, parents and teachers should try to ensure that it is within the child's mental reach, but also that it is logical and not simply based on taking the easy way out or justifying the authority of adults – as this could lead the child to feel misunderstood or treated unjustly.

At this stage the work of spiritual direction is basically one of giving advice. Ordinarily, in these chats there is no need to give many reasons; it's sufficient that what one says is reasonable. A simple explanation for the advice given is usually enough. It is important not to lose the child's trust, and therefore, as a practical point, it is also good to try to remember the specific resolutions for struggle that have been suggested.

These conversations should be short (ten minutes is enough), with brief and specific suggestions for strengthening the human virtues that are beginning to form. Since youngsters at this stage are more active than reflexive, one needs to emphasize things like affection for their parents and siblings, being loyal to classmates, struggling against laziness in every area of their life—study, personal hygiene, rising punctually, etc.—and other virtues such as sincerity, fortitude and constancy, generosity, being demanding on oneself, etc. And in doing so, *always* offering them a supernatural reason adapted to their capacity to understand—e.g., an apostolic intention, the missions, etc.—so that they are helped to discover the supernatural world and the life of piety.

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<sup>10</sup> Regarding the behavior of children, the following should be kept in mind: before the age of 7, a child does not really tell lies, and so these “lies” should not be judged with the same criteria as for adults. Children often don't say the truth because they wish to cause amazement or admiration, or their fertile imagination takes over, or they speak in jest or simply to avoid danger or punishment. If the child's lying is something frequent, other causes for this behavior should be considered, such as a possible adjustment disorder. Similarly acts of disobedience can arise for various reasons: at times because adults excessively restrain the child's spontaneity, as happens when the mother or father is “over-protective,” thus spurring the child to rebel against this excessive control.

It is good to also talk to the parents about this topic: the importance of family prayer, helping the younger children to participate according to their age; teaching children—above all, by their example—to pray and have recourse to God. It is a great help to children when their parents remind them to say their regular prayers (in the morning, at night, etc.), teaching them to use simple reminders so as not to forget: for example, using a picture of our Lady in their bedroom as a reminder to say their prayers. Children should be taught to pray with simplicity and piety, recalling that God is our Father and that when we pray we are talking with Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Guardian Angels, etc.

The role of parents in teaching Christian doctrine to their children is clearly fundamental, and can even include helping them to study the Catechism. Clearly, this is all the more important if this aspect of their formation is neglected or presented incorrectly at school.

With respect to the virtue of purity, one should be very prudent. Before the age of ten or eleven, it is better not to bring up the subject, unless there seems to be a good reason to do otherwise.<sup>11</sup>

### ***b) Puberty and adolescence***

Puberty is the stage of development following upon childhood. The most important physiological changes depend on the onset of the sexual functions and include the appearance of the secondary sexual characteristics. Along with this come psychological changes. The boy, with increase in physical strength, also grows in awareness of his masculinity, in bravery, daring, etc.; this is accompanied by a certain anxiety and insecurity regarding the development he is undergoing and the paths the world is opening up to him, along with a marked lack of character stability. In girls puberty takes on another hue. The beginning of menstruation and its accompanying psychological changes often lead to feelings of rejection, moments of rebelliousness, or depression. Girls at this age often

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<sup>11</sup> The difficulties with this virtue in children most often appear in the area of actions, done at times as a game, or through the promptings of an older person, or by imitating things they have seen, or out of curiosity; this may take place with children of their own sex (the significance of this is quite different from when one is an adult), their playmates or relatives. At this age it is possible to prevent the bad habits that these actions can give rise to.

become more reserved and shy, and begin keeping their own “secrets.” Normally this stage is easily overcome.

Puberty leads to adolescence, whose most common trait is a tendency to extreme polarization. For example, young people are prone to selfishness, while also being capable of making sacrifices and committing themselves energetically to an ideal, but also without the maturity and deep love found in older persons. Adolescents create impassioned relationships that lack consistency, which dissolve as quickly as they are created. Very often they find it difficult to take on a lifelong commitment and to remain faithful to it. They throw themselves into social relationships, while maintaining a desire to be alone. They sometimes seem caught up in materialism, but are also open to great ideals. They easily jump from the most naive optimism to an equally unfounded pessimism.

Many positive qualities found in young people—magnanimity, detachment, optimism, a big heart—have to be tested with the passage of time. Sometimes young people are able to rise above material goods simply because they don’t yet know the effort involved in obtaining them, or they are trusting and optimistic because as of yet they haven’t suffered any setbacks, or they have great hopes for the future because life seems filled with limitless possibilities. “Young people are always capable of getting enthusiastic about great undertakings, high ideals, and anything that is genuine.”<sup>12</sup>

At times adolescents try to place themselves on the same level as their elders at the same time feeling in some way different from them; they seek both to surprise and outstrip them by changing the world. Hence, their plans are filled with generous desires and altruistic goals, but can also be disquieting because of their irresponsible megalomania and selfishness. Often one finds self-renunciation for the sake of humanity combined with a very pronounced selfishness.

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<sup>12</sup> St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 101. The opposite often happens with adults, who usually encounter greater difficulties in exercising magnanimity, optimism, detachment, etc., often due to negative experiences in this regard.



Therefore it would be a mistake to view adolescence as defined solely by the appearance of the sexual instinct, although young people do also need guidance in this area . Adolescence is the time when love is discovered, both as the capacity for self-giving and as a feeling, but this discovery is part of a whole broad range of ideals.

From the very outset, one needs to inculcate in young people a great love for sincerity, teaching them never to be ashamed to make known whatever is bothering them, although it may be difficult to do so.

The struggle in matters of purity should be presented in a positive but realistic light. It is normal to experience temptations that one doesn't want and that at times are embarrassing,<sup>13</sup> but God's grace always helps a person to overcome them, if one uses the appropriate means: prayer, mortification in guarding one's eyes and not entertaining unhealthy thoughts. The sin is not in having temptations (so long as one has not provoked or sought them), but rather in consenting to them. In any case, one should be attentive (once spiritual direction has acquired a certain stability) so as to help people, at the right time, face up to any events or situations in the past that they may have tried to forget, but that could have left their mark and be the cause of strong leanings or temptations.

During this period of time, one shouldn't be worried about any apparent outrages or lack of equilibrium in the adolescent behavior: working life restores the balance , once the ups and downs of adolescence are over, and marks the definitive entry into adulthood.

In this stage of development parents should be especially understanding with respect to the attitudes of their children, which are often passing. They should never forget that "it is perfectly

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<sup>13</sup> This might be the case, for example, when a person experiences a strong affective attraction towards a person of the same sex, which in the great majority of cases is not a sign of anything abnormal. In these situations, one should calm the person down, making clear to them that this is not a sign of anything abnormal and advising them that they try not to give this attraction any importance; rather they should strive to deal in the same way with all of their companions, showing no preference for one person over another. Obviously, if there should be a clearly disordered tendency, because it gives rise to specific actions or results in disproportionate reactions to normal stimuli, and if there are signs of psychological instability, they should be advised to consult a competent physician with sound ideas.

understandable and natural that young and older people should see things differently. This has always been the case. The surprising thing would be if a teenager were to think just as an adult does. We all felt a tendency to rebel against our elders when we began to form our own judgment autonomously.”<sup>14</sup> What is important is that parents pay attention to their adolescent’s deeper underlying problems and formation.

In spiritual direction, it is important to lay a solid foundation, ensuring that young people assimilate very well the principles of the spiritual life. Thus one needs to transmit clear, simple and practical truths about the life of grace, the virtue of humility, the need to cooperate with God’s grace, sin, the Christian struggle, the commandments of God’s Law, the sacraments (their value, their need and the conditions to receive them fruitfully), the life of prayer, piety, and the central features of Christian life: divine filiation, charity, sincerity, work, apostolate.

From the outset, adolescents should be given the supernatural means needed to conquer in the ascetical struggle (prayer, frequenting the sacraments, etc.), and to cultivate the supernatural and human virtues. They need to be told about working seriously, taking Christ as the model, helping them to channel their idealism and eagerness to change things, and teaching them the value of work and its importance in the Christian life and for solving many human problems. Therefore, young people need to be taught a strong sense of responsibility, helping them to see the serious obligation they have to study and to work, and to sanctify themselves in carrying out this basic duty. Thus one will foster in them the growth of human virtues, which is necessary as a basis for cultivating the supernatural virtues.

It is good to make clear that the purpose of spiritual direction is precisely to help people acquire the genuine freedom, which cannot be found by turning one’s back on God.

At this time when they are advancing in other areas of knowledge, young people should also be shown the need to deepen their understanding of the faith, suggesting books suited to their circumstances. They need to attain upright standards so they can act with genuine freedom and

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<sup>14</sup> St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 100.

personal responsibility, aware of their dependence on God. The spiritual director should also foster in them a great love for sincerity and truth in all areas of their life and in their conversations with him. These are virtues towards which they feel particularly drawn, although often they are unable to distinguish authentic expressions of them.

One should always bear in mind the goal towards which the efforts of all Christians should be directed: knowing and loving God. “I am very glad to see how Christian piety takes root among young people today, as it did forty years ago: when they see it lived sincerely in the lives of others; when they understand that prayer is speaking with God, not anonymously, but personally, as a father with a friend, in a heart to heart conversation; when we try to make them hear deep in their souls the words with which Jesus Christ himself invites them to a confidential encounter: *vos autem dixi amicos*—‘I have called you friends’ (Jn 15:15); when a strong appeal is made to their Faith, so that they see that our Lord is ‘the same yesterday and today and forever’ (Heb 13:8).”<sup>15</sup>

In the same vein, they need to come to see the supernatural value of serving others out of love for God; thus they are helped to overcome the possible self-centeredness—more or less unwitting—often found in young people, and come to see the genuine path of solidarity with others, which cannot just be a matter of words. As St. Josemaria insisted: “I myself measure the sincerity of concern for others in terms of works of service.”<sup>16</sup>

The human ideals of young people have to be raised to the supernatural level, helping them understand that they are God’s instruments and have to grow as well as they can in their interior life.

They need a spirit of sacrifice in order to achieve the supernatural goal put before them as well as other human ideals which lead to that goal—always with the hope and optimism of finding God in the various paths that life offers them. Thus it is good to lead them from what is *external* (following a timetable, their studies, etc.) to what is *internal* (loving God, Christian fraternity, etc.), even though

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 102.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 75

they may not be explicitly aware of this process. Nevertheless, by striving for specific goals — sometimes with short-term objectives —their Christian life will steadily mature.

For this reason, one needs to take advantage of all the good qualities of young people in order to instill in them a strong supernatural ideal, and, building on this foundation, help them to see the value of human affairs as the place of encounter with God.

### **3. Spiritual direction of adults (I)**

#### *a) General considerations*

Strictly speaking, maturity can't be identified with a specific age (even though it is usually reached with the passage of time), nor with the attainment of exclusively human accomplishments in some particular area. Considered in its full scope, maturity is the result of the full and harmonious development of a person's entire potential. Hence, the notion of maturity must include the supernatural virtues—the theological and moral virtues that accompany divine grace—as well as the human virtues.

A mature person is able objectively to judge events and persons with supernatural outlook, serenely and with restraint; maturity enables one to love and act freely and responsibly with upright criterion. Supernatural outlook ensures that decisions are taken in accord with the order willed by God, and thus will lead to the unity of life that is a primary trait of maturity: integrating everything in one's life around what is central and of permanent value. Maturity brings with it measure, serenity, fortitude and a sense of responsibility.

Other signs of maturity are: the ability to adapt to varying circumstances; being able to give way and compromise in matters that are incidental or insignificant; and, vice-versa, the fortitude to firmly uphold convictions based on enduring truths and upright aims, often in the face of fashionable opinions and passing platitudes. A mature person possesses an inner equilibrium, an ordered and harmonious “affectivity” in personal relationships, and is able always to act freely and responsibly.

With age comes a capacity for serene, reflective judgment. A mature person sees himself realistically, admits his limitations, and is able to distinguish the merely possible from what is already effectively accomplished. At the same time, he is able to judge events more deeply and objectively: he knows what he wants and what he is capable of. From there is born the spiritual and emotional balance—an *affective maturity*—that channels the natural inclinations putting them at the service of the will. He becomes capable of willing and acting freely and responsibly, accepting the consequences of his actions.

A mature and well-formed personality unites and integrates the multiple experiences of life, an integration reinforced by grace. Maturity brings with it a healthy objectivity, far removed from the sentimentality that often confuses true happiness with material well-being.

Although the basic problems of adolescence may have been overcome, adult years have their own dangers. By neglecting the effort to grow in it, the virtue of generosity can be partly lost, and open the way to selfishness and comfort-seeking in its various forms. For example, it can become more difficult to accept the personal advice received as something practical and realistic with regards to overcoming one's defects, although one readily accepts it at a theoretical level. One also needs constantly to grow in an appreciation of the supernatural meaning of what one does, even though it passes unnoticed and lacks human brilliance.

The problems of adulthood tend to be more real and objective than those of youth, both in family matters and in the social and professional spheres.

Perhaps the most serious case is that of the "adult acting like a child." If this is the case, then, in spiritual direction, one has to confront the person with the inescapable need to work seriously (often this alone will resolve the underlying problem), and also see if there are other possible causes or problems from his earlier life (faulty formation in the use of one's freedom and responsibility, shyness, etc.), which have given rise to this abnormal state. In these cases, besides having recourse to prayer and mortification, the person directed needs to be helped to face up to himself sincerely and to look at his relationship with God, and with his family and friends, as well as considering how he carries out his

professional work. In general, he should be advised to get out himself and of the tiny world he has built up around himself and be generously concerned about the good and happiness of others.

*b) Certain situations that may arise*

When a person has begun along the path of prayer, there often comes a moment when one experiences a certain “dryness.” The “discoveries” and “lights” received in prayer become more sporadic and a phase of seeming monotony and little appeal is entered into. One needs to reassure someone in this situation that this is normal and that they should persevere in their efforts, not giving it too much importance. What is important is to continue in their dialogue with God, who always hears us. Perhaps a book can be of help to them in this situation, providing material for their conversation with God. Some older persons may even say that they are “losing their faith,” as they put it, because they no longer experience in their prayer, either vocal or mental, the fervor and interest they formerly had. One needs to reassure them, often repeating the same idea a number of times, that their faith hasn’t lessened, just their emotional response, for which they are not to blame. They should be encouraged to keep up their practices of piety, with the certainty that their prayer is of great value before God when, with good will, they strive to use the means to speak with Him and avoid, as far as possible, any distractions.

It may also happen that someone expresses concern about having doubts of faith. For example, a person is troubled by the thought that God allows unjust situations to occur in the world, or the suffering of a person dearly loved, or some of the Church’s moral teachings begin to seem unyielding, even though he doesn’t reject them. In these cases, one needs to reassure the person who poses these “doubts” and help him see that even though intellectually he does not fully comprehend these matters, his faith is not thereby weakened, and nor should he become obsessed with them. It is enough that he accept with simplicity of heart the content of the faith, as the Church teaches it, and tries not to keep going back over these thoughts.

It can also happen that a person begins to reconsider all his previous life when, after effort to make his way in life he has at about the age of thirty got a job and set himself up. Generally, things

which have an influence in this situation are the fact that one has finally achieved personal autonomy, the clash between the ideals one has cherished with actual reality, and especially a fully developed capacity for criticism that is no longer restrained by the authority or rules to which it had formerly submitted. This ability to criticise may first show itself in comparing oneself to others, in overrating the achievements of one's professional colleagues, giving rise to resentment and envy. Another possible scenario is that of self-criticism, where a person analyzes and weighs up the moral and social principles hitherto accepted. If properly channeled, this can lead to a greater sense of responsibility, but it could also have a negative effect if not nipped in the bud.

Around the age of forty, a moment of crisis can also occur. In men, this is usually more psychological than physiological. In women it is accompanied by obvious physiological signs, although there is also a psychological element. There may appear what St. Josemaria termed "mystical wishful thinking" (*mísitica ojalatera*), "made up of useless day dreams and empty ideals: If only I hadn't married, if only I did not have this job, if only I had better health, or was younger, or had more time!"<sup>17</sup> There may also be some character changes, shown perhaps in an excessive concern for one's health and a certain loss of interest in the work one has been carrying out up to that point. There's a sense of being at a turning point: one begins to realize that up to now one had been growing both physically and mentally, but now one starts to experience a feeling of human decline.

The desire to experience what seems to be slipping away can also appear now, with temptations against chastity that hadn't been present before; or past temptations may reappear, in a new, more warped form.

Besides these negative features, there are others of a positive nature. In this stage of life, one acquires a more balanced and serene judgment; events are judged with greater depth and objectivity.

A specific danger for retired men (women more easily find ways to keep busy in household chores) is finding themselves with nothing to do, thinking that life no longer holds a challenge for them

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<sup>17</sup> St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 88. Cf. no. 116.

and filling their days, for example, by watching television. The feeling that they have done their duty and now have nothing more to contribute easily leads to selfishness and taking things easy, and a weary approach to prayer. In these cases they may also stop guarding their sight or entertain thoughts against chastity, justifying it as not being very important, since at their age and in their situation they are not doing anything bad (in the sense of carrying out external actions). Besides helping them form their conscience, people in this situation need to be helped to see that their lives have not ceased being useful and that they can still do a lot. They should be encouraged to find ways to give meaning to each day, using their time for their own good and that of others.

It should be clear that the situations described above do not necessarily have to occur, and in fact in many cases they don't. In a mature and well-formed personality one finds a unity and integration of life's multiple experiences—an integration strongly reinforced when supernatural outlook is present.

### ***c) Special problems that come with aging***

The menopause is a physiological process in women occurring somewhere around the ages 45-50; it is characterized by changes in the feminine organism, with the cessation of ovulation and menstruation. It is also accompanied by bothersome side effects: fatigue, various pains, irritability, tendency to depression and melancholy, etc. There is a diminution of a certain sort of bodily functions, combined with certain bodily signs of "virilization." With the importance women give to their physical appearance, this fact has special importance.

Married women can experience a sense of inferiority with respect to their husbands, since they are no longer able to bear children, while in men the ability to procreate lasts many more years than in women.

The problems caused by the menopause are usually transitory. Although they may at times require medical treatment, ordinarily they can be overcome by ascetical means, rest and some short-term medication. Normally, a woman adapts to her new situation, albeit after a period during which she is particularly sensitive and unfriendly towards her usual environment.



On the other hand, this stage in a woman's life also possesses a very positive meaning: the greater maturity achieved at this age allows her to fulfill better other goals and ideals.

In men, the decline of physical powers is not as marked, but everyone entering this stage in life will need to adapt to this new situation. It should be given a positive meaning: that of a mature life, more thoughtful and serene, with the advantage of experience.

Besides showing great understanding and respect, one also has to be demanding with persons in this situation, while encouraging them and giving supernatural advice to those who pass through any of these difficulties.

#### **4. Spiritual direction of adults (II) specific guidelines**

##### ***a) Engaged people***<sup>18</sup>

Courtship is part of the path leading to holiness for many people, and therefore shouldn't be seen as simply something transient. Those who are engaged are called to seek holiness in their affectionate, respectful dealings with one another, as two persons who are preparing to unite their lives indissolubly and who will become, respectively, the father and mother of the children born from their union. The advice given to them in spiritual direction should guide them towards seeking the good and happiness of the other person, often yielding in their own tastes and preferences. Each should be thinking about the other, as a preparation for the moment when, if they do end up marrying, their thoughts and desires unite as one, so they can speak of the "ours" of their union and the offspring they receive.

From this perspective—and perhaps as something they are coming across for the first time—they may need to be guided in areas related to the virtue of chastity in their dealings with one another.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. also, M. Diaz, *Noviazgo y matrimonio*, at [www.collationes.org](http://www.collationes.org)

In order to develop upright moral criteria here, they need to be told, first of all, that manifestations of mutual trust and affection between persons of the opposite sex cannot be based exclusively on the feelings which unite them, but must also respect the objective relationship existing between them. Consequently, just as there are expressions of love which belong between spouses, and others that are suitable for brothers and sisters, so there are also distinct ways of expressing affection resulting from simple acquaintanceship, or personal friendship, or from engagement to marriage.

Specifically, there are forms of expressing affection that follow licitly upon becoming engaged to marry which would not be morally justified before engagement, for in that case these would constitute—more or less consciously and explicitly, more or less gravely—a provocation of a sexual nature. In dealing with professional colleagues of the opposite sex, or classmates, or a group of friends who know one another or are getting to know one another better, it is obvious that the appropriate external manifestations of confidence are those which accord with good manners and courtesy, but these are in no way the same or similar to those belonging to persons who have already made a reciprocal promise to marry.

A common lack of good moral judgment in this regard is justifying what, in some places, is called “flirting” or “playing at courtship.” This involves affectionate dealings between a man and woman who have no intention of forming a stable relationship, but who act as if they did intend such a commitment. Clearly, the irresponsibility that characterizes such relationships leads those involved to laying aside any moral norm at all. Moreover, if this leads to lustful actions that are directly willed, there can be no question of slight matter. It’s not a question of a passing indiscretion without serious consequences, but of serious sins against the virtue of chastity.

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<sup>19</sup> There is much confusion today regarding the moral criteria governing the relationships between unmarried young people of the opposite sex, and not just among young people themselves, but also among their parents and other persons that are involved in their formation. Even in the case of good Christians, it can happen that the pressure of the environment leads them to become accustomed to ways of acting that are opposed to the moral law.

When two people are engaged to be married, by its very nature this pledge is not the same throughout the whole of the engagement, but rather matures and strengthens over time. This is a gradual process with various phases more or less formally distinguishable. For example, there is an obvious difference between persons who, for whatever reason, realize that a significant period of time must pass, perhaps years, before they can get married, and those who are in proximate preparation to marry. Therefore, the external conduct cannot be the same in each phase.

Although present-day circumstances result in many engagements being quite lengthy, Christian prudence has always counseled that the length of the engagement before marriage should be relatively short. This does not mean that the couple should not get to know one another deeply, but rather that this can be achieved by getting to know one another well through their mutual friendship before actually becoming engaged. Therefore, during this period of time, the length of which can vary, the manifestations of affection should be guided by the norms appropriate for friendship in general, and not by those for persons committed to contracting marriage.

Often, especially in cases of persons who are quite young, the boy and girl want to make a pledge of this sort very quickly, since they confuse the subjective conviction of the seriousness of their intentions with the objective reality of the situation in which they find themselves. In these cases it can happen that, even they do not want to behave in a way that could be a proximate occasion of sin, they mistakenly think that given the firmness of their decision they are free to express their mutual trust and affection in ways that are more intimate than those proper to a solid friendship. Showing such signs of affection when they foresee that this situation will be prolonged is a serious imprudence, since they get used to a sort of intimacy that exposes them to grave temptations and that, in itself, sullies the purity of their relationship and often leads to a dimming of conscience. “Those who are engaged to marry are called to live chastity in continence. They should see in this time of testing a discovery of mutual respect, an apprenticeship in fidelity, and the hope of receiving one another from God. They should reserve for marriage the expressions of affection that belong to married love. They will help each other grow in chastity.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2350.

***b) Married people<sup>21</sup>***

“It is important for married people to acquire a clear sense of the dignity of their vocation. They must know that they have been called by God not only to human love but also to a divine love, through their human love. It is important for them to realize that they have been chosen from all eternity to cooperate with the creative power of God by having and then bringing up children. Our Lord asks them to make their home and their entire family life a testimony of all the Christian virtues.”<sup>22</sup>

Married people need to be helped to always grasp more deeply the meaning of their vocation to marriage. They should be aware that the family is a privileged environment for their own sanctification and that the best way of using their time is to dedicate it to their family. Often they will return home tired, but they should always be aware that this time spent with their family is one of the most important moments in their day and one which needs a greater dedication. They need to share in the daily lives and problems of their spouse and children, thus creating a united, cheerful Christian home. “In this way they practice the virtue of charity in all things. They learn to smile and forget about themselves in order to pay attention to others. Husband and wife will listen to each other and to their children, showing them that they are really loved and understood. They will forget about the unimportant little frictions that selfishness could magnify out of proportion. They will do lovingly all the small acts of service that make up their daily life together. The aim is this: to sanctify family life, while creating at the same time a true family atmosphere.”<sup>23</sup> It is good to encourage spouses to meditate often on the life of the Holy Family in Nazareth.

Every family member needs all the other members. It may happen that a parent works a lot—possibly too many hours—in order to provide a material well-being which often is excessive and

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. also, M. Diaz, *Noviazgo y matrimonio*, at [www.collationes.org](http://www.collationes.org).

<sup>22</sup> St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 93.

<sup>23</sup> St. Josemaria, Marriage, a Christian Vocation, in *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 23.

deformative, to the detriment of what is essential: living together as a family. Children need and want to have a father and a mother, more than a big check to cover superfluous expenses. The concern of devoting the necessary time to one's family should frequently be brought up in spiritual direction.

Spouses need to love one another—and their children—with each one's defects. No one can try to force their own tastes and preferences on the others, shutting oneself up in the selfishness of one's own world. Truly loving others involves accepting them as they are, without complaining, which would be a sign of a failure to love.

The ability to procreate ceases earlier in a woman than in a man, with a lessening in the desire for conjugal union. The wife may cease asking for this union, and even suggest to her husband that they entirely refrain from marital intercourse. This is a very sensitive topic, in which the spiritual director's role must be carried out with great prudence. Often the wife or husband will not readily bring up this matter, and respect for the person's intimacy means asking about this matter only when it is deemed strictly necessary in light of what is brought up by the person receiving spiritual direction. Conjugal intercourse must always be open to life, but this is not its only purpose, since it is a solid foundation upon which married life rests. As St. Josemaria said: "I can assure all married couples that they need not be afraid of showing affection for each other."<sup>24</sup> One should also keep in mind that, in the man, this urge lasts much longer and, if he feels rejection or disinterest on the part of his wife, he can be exposed to the temptation to seek compensation in some other way. St. Josemaria adds: "Remember all the sayings about women who should take care to look pretty. Your duty is, and will always be, to take as good care of your appearance as you did before you were married—and it is a duty of justice, because you belong to your husband. And husbands should not forget that they belong to their wives, and that as long as they live they have the obligation to show the same affection as a young man who has just fallen in love."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 25

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, no. 26

Although it is common nowadays for the wife as well as the husband to work outside the home, the husband needs to take into account, according to the circumstances of each country, the sacrifice involved in his wife's care for the home: all the work required to maintain their home often leaves little time for rest or for developing good and desirable cultural interests. The husband cannot forget that the care of the children—in many respects—falls upon his wife, who frequently has to put up with unjust requests on the part of one or another of the children. Besides, being the father of a family can't be reduced to merely the economic factor; the husband should concern himself with all the other aspects of the home: family life, the raising of the children (which has to be his *first "business"* and cannot remain the exclusive concern of his wife or the school); ensuring that his wife and children get the needed rest, etc. For example, the husband cannot consider it beneath him to help his wife in the household chores, much less so if they have several children and no domestic help.

The husband has to realize that "love for his wife as mother of their children and love for the children themselves are for the man the natural way of understanding and fulfilling his own fatherhood."<sup>26</sup> He should devote time to each family member, showing his love for them with deeds: "Above all where social and cultural conditions so easily encourage a father to be less concerned with his family or at any rate less involved in the work of education, efforts must be made to restore socially the conviction that the place and task of the father in and for the family is of unique and irreplaceable importance. As experience teaches, the absence of a father causes psychological and moral imbalance and notable difficulties in family relationships."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the husband should see his professional work as a means to attain holiness and to imbue the social order with a Christian meaning, and the way to support his family, never as a springboard for his personal ambition to the detriment of dedication to his home.

In spiritual direction this advice of St. Josemaria should be stressed: "I constantly tell those who have been called by God to form a home to love one another always, to love each other with the love of their youth. Any one who thinks that love ends when the worries and difficulties that life brings with it

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<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, November 22, 1981, no. 25.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*

begin, has a poor idea of marriage, which is a sacrament and an ideal and a vocation. It is precisely then that love grows strong.”<sup>28</sup>

At times it is good to alert wives to the possible danger of excessively idealizing their husbands: his abilities, the way he takes the initiative, etc., since with the passing of the years, as this inaccurate image fades, this can negatively affect her.

A wife should share in the professional concerns of her husband (which can often be the source of his grumpiness or tiredness) in order to encourage him by her understanding and help. She should strive to “win over” his heart each day by her personal appearance, her affection, her care in preparing meals, and in other details of the home.

One can’t ignore the fact that there are married couples to whom God doesn’t send children. The husband and wife must be helped to see that God is asking them to continue loving one another with the same affection, without becoming dejected; and that since they will have more time at their disposal, they should dedicate themselves, to the extent that they can, to activities for the benefit of other souls.

### ***c) Celibate people***

Here we are considering adult celibate persons who find themselves in this situation for various reasons. Some by their own choice, although not for any supernatural reason, for example: to care for their parents or other relatives. On other occasions, circumstances neither sought nor desired have prevented them from finding a marriage partner. There are also some celibate persons who have remained unmarried because they lacked the qualities needed to face the demands of conjugal life: they are overly shy, withdrawn or self-centered, poorly suited for living together with someone else, etc.

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<sup>28</sup> St. Josemaria, *Conversations*, no. 91.

In the first of the above cases, many unmarried men and women have given a positive meaning to their lives, dedicating themselves generously and with a supernatural outlook to apostolic endeavors.

One needs to help those who have remained celibate to see that their circumstances open up to them great opportunities for assisting others, and provide the spiritual means needed so that they accept their situation with supernatural outlook.

It is good to remember that when a person's *affectivity* (emotional life) does not receive a full response from others (the longing for love is inherent in all men and women), then this can become a fundamental problem, and it needs to be channeled in a positive way. The demands of chastity for those who have not embraced celibacy for supernatural reasons can be especially difficult, more so, perhaps, in the case of men. Hence the need to lead these persons, little by little, towards the ascetical practices and life of piety that will help them grasp the value of chastity.

#### ***d) Intellectuals and non-intellectuals***

A person with an intellectual background will find it easier to benefit from the deeper doctrinal aspects of the interior life. Generally, such persons will need to receive doctrine in an organic and systematic fashion, and will sometimes be prone to making things more complicated than they really are, disdaining clear and simple explanations.

The non-intellectual person is usually more direct and simple, but, as a counterbalance, may also be lacking in flexibility and tend to be overly rigid; in this case, one may need to teach them to avoid useless efforts.

The one giving spiritual direction has to adapt himself to each person's mentality, without attempting to alter or change it, as long as it is not an obstacle to the person's formation.



### *e) Professionals*<sup>29</sup>

Every human activity entails a moral dimension. In the professional realm, this gives rise to a specific professional ethics, which any person of good will, and in particular a Christian, always needs to observe faithfully and consistently. These ethical norms have an essentially positive character, for they are an intrinsic necessity for carrying out the work itself properly, and therefore for its becoming a means of sanctification. No one should see in these ethical norms an obstacle to professional activity, as though there were a dichotomy between ethical norms—which a Christian, with the light of faith, can know with special certainty—and carrying out one’s profession in a competent and fully human way. “If you want your professional activity to be consistent with your faith,” John Paul II told a group of business people, “don’t be content with the fact that ‘things are going well,’ that your business is productive and efficient.”<sup>30</sup> The *human* value of work does not consist only in its technical efficiency (in achieving goals, or solving problems), nor can it be attained putting aside ethical norms.

The loss of the Christian meaning of life is leading many people today to set aside these norms in their professional activity, to the point that many forms of immoral professional conduct are becoming widespread. An upright person cannot allow himself to be carried along by the environment, and feel justified in acting in like manner, not even with the excuse that he must protect himself from being left behind or put at a disadvantage in the exercise of his profession. On the contrary, he must maintain an upright conduct, which means, as the Church’s Magisterium teaches, that “Having acquired the absolutely necessary skill and experience, they should observe the right order in their earthly activities in faithfulness to Christ and his Gospel.”<sup>31</sup> By putting into practice the norms of professional ethics while teaching others to do likewise, within a unity of life, one contributes effectively to the Christianization of society.

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. also, M. Schlag, *Some aspects of spiritual direction related to life in society*, at [www.collationes.org](http://www.collationes.org).

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, *Discourse*, November 7, 1982.

<sup>31</sup> Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 72.

To exercise the norms of professional ethics in one's own work, one first needs to know them well. To resolve problems that arise in this field, it's not enough to let oneself be guided by a vague "common sense". "The education of moral conscience ... thus becomes a pressing requirement that cannot be renounced."<sup>32</sup> A serious desire of forming one's conscience is needed, using the means to acquire the corresponding moral principles, together with a deep knowledge of the teachings of the *Magisterium* (which is the authentic interpreter also of the requirements of the natural law), and an earnest struggle to practice the virtues needed for fulfilling one's duties as perfectly as possible.

Even with this solid formation, it often happens that in the course of one's work, moral problems arise whose solution is unclear, or where one's own judgment may be clouded. For example: in judging whether a specific economic deal is licit, or about the duties in justice and charity towards one's employees; or in some cases of how to make reparation for harm done; or in areas of scientific research in which the dignity of the human person is at stake and even human life itself, etc. In these and many other matters, one often has the *obligation to seek advice*. This is a clear norm of prudence that stems from the obligation to always act with a upright conscience. One should not forget that the morality of one's actions is not always in agreement with their legality or the fact that civil law imposes no penalty on such actions.

At times it will be necessary to go against the tide when, in a specific professional activity, certain common ways of acting are clearly immoral, which a person striving to live in accord with the natural moral law, and even more so a good Christian, could never accept. But one also needs to avoid a scrupulous conscience: real problems of conscience should be resolved by studying them and, when necessary, asking for advice.

Obviously, advice should be sought from persons with a good moral understanding and competence in the specific issues involved. When consulting these matters, one should remember the obligation, on the part of both parties, to strictly observe the moral norms governing professional confidentiality (for example, the person seeking advice may present his case in purely hypothetical

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<sup>32</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, no. 8.

terms, similar to the real case, if he is duty bound not to reveal specific facts; while the person consulted has, on his part, the strict obligation to never reveal the fact and content of what was consulted, without the prior permission of the person seeking advice).

When anyone in spiritual direction seeks advice in these matters, they must keep in mind (and often it is good to expressly remind them of this) that the advice given refers *exclusively to a moral evaluation* of the problem, so as to assist in forming a right judgment, and can never be viewed as meddling in questions open to free discussion. After having consulted, each person needs to consider the advice received carefully in conscience and in God's presence, and then act on his own responsibility. In other words, in no case can seeking advice be seen as transferring the responsibility for one's own actions onto the person giving spiritual direction.

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