
✠ **What is Spiritual Direction?**

Spiritual direction is an interpersonal relationship in which one person helps another to reflect on his, or her, experiences in light of the Gospel and Christian wisdom. Through this process individuals are led and encouraged to discover their unique call in life.

✠ **What is the Role of a Spiritual Director?**

A spiritual director is one who willingly walks this faith journey with another. A spiritual director listens, encourages, challenges and prays with the individual who freely shares the movements of the Spirit in his life.

Not everyone is in need of spiritual direction in every phase of life. But it is a helpful means of discernment, especially when an individual is seeking to discover the will of God in his life. A time of special direction may be when a person is searching to discover how to live out his, or her, Christian call to service.

✠ **How do I find a Spiritual Director?**

Though spiritual direction can and does occur within every community in the Church, it is not always easy to find a spiritual director. Here are some general hints:

- Talk to your parish priest. He could give you the names of qualified priests, religious, or

lay people in the diocese whom you could contact.

- Retreat centers, college Newman Centers, and ministries to young adults are primary places to receive support and a list of individuals engaged in spiritual direction.
- Offices of continuing education for priests, deacon formation programs, seminaries, and renewal centers for religious may offer additional names.

✠ **What should I look for in Spiritual Direction?**

A spiritual director can help you to be more aware of and respond to God's revelation as you experience it effectively – that is, in your emotions, not just in your mind. Thus, spiritual direction deals not only with the intellect, but the heart as well. In this sense, it is concerned with the whole person.

A spiritual director can help you express your struggles, pain, joys and gratitude, and to share these with God; to notice God's presence in your life and your prayers; to savor, relive, and respond to your experience of God; and finally, to notice interior changes and the effects these changes have on your relationships and your life. Such a task is not easy, even though God is present and active in spiritual direction and, indeed, is the primary spiritual director.

✠ **What should my relationship be with my Director?**

For you to share openly about intimate relationships such as those you have with the people and the God you love, you must have a solid relationship with your spiritual director. The following five qualities can help you to solidify that relationship:

1. COMPANIONSHIP. You meet your spiritual director as a companion, not as a teacher, a master, or a problem-solver. As a midwife facilitates the birth of a child, so a spiritual director accompanies you in the growth of your relationship with God.

2. EMPATHY. As a companion, a spiritual director relates to you with empathy. In fact, authors on spiritual direction speak of “deep empathy.” By this they mean the spiritual director engages wholeheartedly in your experience, striving to enter your world as if it is his or her own.

This empathetic presence means the director allows your struggles, joys, hopes, and experiences of God to touch him or her effectively. To do that, among other things, a spiritual director listens actively with compassion, not passively with detachment.

3. CARE. A good spiritual director cares for you deeply and shows it. The director's love, as God's love, can heal. Almost always such caring will free you to share your spiritual life more openly, for the director's care evokes trust and confidence from you. From the beginning you need to have the feeling that your director

considers what you are sharing to be precious and sacred. As your meetings continue, the feeling of love and reverence should deepen.

4. NATURALNESS. Look for a spiritual director who can laugh or cry spontaneously when something you share calls for such a response. If you sense your director is not natural, not relaxed, it will no doubt become a roadblock to the free sharing necessary for fruitful spiritual direction.

5. COMMITMENT. A director's commitment to you and to your relationship is essential. There are going to be ups and downs in a spiritual direction relationship. These are most likely to occur as you make changes and as you grow which, remember, is the goal of your encounters. For successful spiritual direction, you must know your director will stand with you in times of such stress.

The more deeply these five qualities of relationship – *companionship, empathy, care, naturalness, and commitment* – are present in spiritual direction, the more likely it will achieve its primary purpose: helping you grow in a personal relationship with a loving God. Don't overlook the fact that you also have responsibilities – to be open, honest, and committed to your own growth.

✠ **What atmosphere should I expect in Spiritual Direction?**

Your spiritual director strives to create an environment where you can notice more clearly God's communication to you

and your reaction to it. Primarily, the spiritual director will do this in two ways: by fostering a contemplative atmosphere and by using an evocative approach.

1. CONTEMPLATIVE ATMOSPHERE.

Your spiritual director will seek to create an atmosphere where you can look at, become absorbed in, relive, and respond to your experiences of God. In doing this, the director will try to help you focus on how God is present in your life and prayer and not on how you think God should be present or will be in the future.

For example, a director might ask, “When you pray, who are you conscious of – God as Father, Creator, Friend, Jesus, Holy Spirit?” Or, “How does God seem to be present with you now in your life?” The director will invite you to look at what is actually happening and to spend time reflecting on it.

2. EVOCATIVE APPROACH. You can expect your director to use an evocative approach rather than a didactic approach. Your director will strive to draw out what is happening in your relationship with God. The idea here is that the director is trying to allow God to stir your mind and heart instead of instructing you about God and spiritual matters.

A spiritual director taking a didactic approach might teach you about God as a loving God. A director taking an evocative approach will help you to be open to the experience of God’s personal love for you. Think of the spiritual director as a stage-hand helping to set the stage for God’s activity to take place.

Through an evocative approach your spiritual director allows you to move at your own pace. Further, this approach enables the director to help you notice and feel your interior reactions to God’s communications and to share these feelings with God. To a person who has suffered a painful loss, a director using the evocative approach might say, “How do you feel as you sense God wanting to be involved in your sorrow? If the person responds, “I feel comfortable and grateful,” the director might continue, “Did you think of sharing your gratitude with God?” In this way, the director evokes a dialogue between the person and God that can continue in the person’s prayer.

† A Sacred Gift.

Spiritual directors offer a sacred gift by being a caring companion and fostering a contemplative presence. If spiritual direction is done well, you will receive the support you need to pay attention to and respond to God who is already present and active in your life. What’s more, it’s very likely that your relationship with God will grow. And that’s a very good thing.

SOURCES:

L. Patrick Carroll and Katherine M. Dyckman, “The Emergence of Spiritual Direction,” *PRAYING: Spirituality for Everyday Living*, March-April 1989, pp. 5-8.

Maureen Conroy, “What to look for in Your Spiritual Director,” *PRAYING: Spirituality for Everyday Living*, January-February 1990, pp. 9-11.

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Spiritual Direction: Questions & Answers

Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart, and give me right faith, certain hope, and perfect charity, wisdom and understanding, Lord, that I may carry out your holy and true command.

St. Francis’ Prayer to Discern God’s Will
said before the San Damiano Crucifix

