

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: PATHWAYS TOWARD SANCTITY

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

We continue our dialogue with Jesus, invoking the help of the Holy Spirit, who happens to be our spiritual director par excellence. Being human means that we can always improve. To give perhaps a simplistic example, the objective of a robin is to function as a robin, fabricate a nest, train her young to leave the nest— but the training is not sitting in a classroom or watching a video but rather, as those little chicks- robin chicks get older, the mother kind of has a bit of surveillance over them and they, little by little, learn to fly. The best flyers- robin-flyers are not the ones who have the best instructors. It's all programmed. Every robin makes a real good robin's nest. They're all the same. They fly the same. They chirp the same. They find food in the same way.

But humans are totally different. They're some vestiges of instinct: preservation, avoiding danger, etc. But for the most part, we need to be instructed and to be educated because we don't function on instinct, we function through knowledge and our knowledge needs to be transmitted to us, whether it's interacting with others—we call that manners, graciousness, etiquette—whether it's learning how to play a musical instrument or playing a sport. Though we may have a strong inclination for these different skills or different pursuits, we need to be trained and instructed— that's the human condition.

Jesus, who was like us in every way but sin, needed to be instructed. It's a mystery. He's God but he's totally human which means he needed to be instructed and he needed to improve his skills, perhaps even his interaction with others even though he is the Incarnation of perfection. It's part of being human, that we're perfectible. And we need input from outside to learn different skills and to grow as persons and especially to grow in our imitation of Jesus Christ. So, yes, the desire is key, but just as these star athletes or actors, actresses, they- they want it badly, they want to excel in that sport or in that particular professional area, but they need training. As talented as they may be, they need instruction, they need training, they need coaching. And the more professional the sport becomes or more professional endeavors in the performing arts become, the more close training is required.

We take our cue from the Gospel— twelve men, 120 people, women disciples as well, required a threshold of time. Three years the Lord was giving special attention to his Apostles and his disciples instructing, correcting, giving them good example, instilling hope, etc. I need to be instructed in how to incarnate the words of Jesus and the life of Jesus into my own particular situation and circumstances. And so, I need to be fashioned by the Holy Spirit by following the instructions of Christ— I am the way, and the truth, and the life. All four gospels, including the rest of the New Testament, but especially those four gospels, are an instruction manual, a handbook on how to become a saint. The instructions are there and they can be downloaded by everyone. They can meet every particular circumstance, every particular culture, every individual.

By analogy, we could look at someone pursuing holiness, sanctity, to an orchestra who provide symphony performances. Those are quite a musical experience to hear a symphony orchestra playing beautiful classical music. And what you hear is music that has many components to it but you have a melody, you have a theme, and it- it's characterized by a whole scope- whole array of different instruments, whether it's the bassoon, a French horn, a trumpet, the tuba, timpani, the violin, bass violin, piano— we can go on and on. And each part of that orchestra requires coaching, instruction, correction. And, at the same time, as they perform, their eyes are on the conductor. And the more they mold their musical performance to the gestures of the conductor, the more beautiful is the music.

For those who are not musically inclined or not into the performing arts, we'll go to the other extreme, a football team. What's the objective of football team? To put points on the board, to score points, whether it's field goals or touchdowns. And there you have a symphony of football— you have blockers, you have wide receiver, you have a running back, you have a fullback to open up holes so that the running back could pass through that hole and gain yardage, you have a quarterback who organizes the game and initiates plays and throws passes and hands off the ball or even runs with the ball at times, you have wide receivers who catch passes, and you have a whole diversity of defensive players, some on the line, defensive lineman, other defensive players covering the pass, others making tackles and covering the pass like the linebackers, etc. And every position has a coach as well. And the whole- the goal is to win the game, to put points on the board- on the on the board.

Our spiritual life is similar because we also need to see well, how do I become a saint? What must I do? Yes, prayer, penance, charity. But how do I live that? How do I pray in my particular situation? How do I learn to pray? Yes, it's the Holy Spirit, but in concert with my efforts, with my knowledge of the spiritual life, what's the goal? To love with the heart of Christ. The popes have used the phrase, to be an expert in humanity, to understand people and to really love people unconditionally, regardless of their situation, circumstances. Well, how do I do that? I know I should, but I need training, I need instruction; I need standards of reference.

And maybe the first response we could have as we pray about learning to become holy, taking our guidance on how to do it, and maybe my reaction is, well, I need a spiritual director. And- and yes, ideally we need spiritual direction in order to concretize the gospel in my particular circumstances, but that is not always possible. Sometimes we don't come across someone who can give us spiritual direction. But there's more spiritual direction than that meets the eye.

The Holy Spirit, first of all, the first body of guidance is those words of Christ, that life of Christ. And I'm always referring to the gospel and counting on the Holy Spirit. For example, Jesus' friendship with Lazarus. The sisters refer to Lazarus upon contacting Jesus when Lazarus was sick, "The one whom you love is sick." We fast forward when the Lord approached the gravesite of Lazarus. Jesus wept, and the reaction was see how much he loved him.

And I- okay, I look at that prayerfully and, I get asked the question, and it's not a question of making- or making ourselves squirm or being on a guilt trip, but am I known as someone who loves? Can someone refer to my friend as the one whom I love? Spouse? Child? Sibling? Colleague? And yes, ultimately, that should be the case with me, that those who observed my behavior, those who are my friends, my family members, on some level can refer to me- I'm the one who Nancy loves or Bobby loves. And when a loved one or a friend or colleague is suffering, that we can identify and understand that suffering and they could respond, look how much he or she loves me.

An example... Our Lord says, "The greatest in the Kingdom is the one who serves most." And I could simply reflect with the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, am I seeking greatness in the eyes of God by being a great servant? It could be returning a phone call, an email, answering a door, working in a soup kitchen, helping in the parish, being on a committee, always family first, washing the dishes, getting, if you will, our uniform dirty in my work around the house. So, there's a lot there. We have access to spiritual direction more than we realize, right off the gospel. And part of my prayer life is to listen to the Lord. And listening doesn't mean just hearing but listening means implementing.

Another form of spiritual direction is through spiritual reading, especially reading the lives of the saints. The more contemporary the better because these saints lived during our time period. And I am thinking of a member of Opus Dei who was beatified, a contemporary of St. Josemaria. Her name is Bl. Guadalupe. And, she didn't, at least not to my knowledge, I'm morally certain she did not have the stigmata, she did not bi-locate. Well, these are gifts given by God so we don't poke fun at them. But, our lot, the lot of virtually everybody is to be in the ordinary thick of things. And she taught chemistry. There was a time she did domestic work. She worked at various headquarters of Opus Dei, whether in Spain or Mexico and Rome. Her passion or professional passion was chemistry. She taught it, did research, and she was beatified. And reading her- her life is a wonderful source of spiritual direction.

We all have different temperaments, but the- but joy is a prominent characteristic of the life of Christ, and in the life of Bl. Guadalupe, and all the rest of the saints as well, she was fun to be with. She was joyful and her joy was contagious. I mean, she wasn't a clown. She wasn't always giggling, but she was always very upbeat with people and she loved people so much that being with people would raise her spirits. She was an excellent listener. She was genuinely interested in the lives of her friends- whether they were objectively interesting or not that was irrelevant. She was always interested. And she'd become sorrowful with their sorrows and elated upon hearing of their successes. And through her friendship, through her example, she facilitated conversions, conversions in the form of people going to confession after not being in confession for many years or a few years, and that would produce an enormous joy. Okay, I could learn from that.

The way she prayed... she was so immersed in her prayer, she was so focused. We do the best we can. But this is her story, that if the phone rang, in which was near the chapel in this particular center of Opus Dei in Spain, she wouldn't hear the phone ring. And once she got reprimanded for not answering the phone because nobody else was in the house. And in those days, you couldn't leave voicemail. In those days, you would always answer the phone if it rang. And she didn't hear it. Why? She was so concentrated on her prayer and she was very attracted to praying before the Blessed Sacrament. She loved Eucharistic Adoration.

And so, that's also a form of spiritual direction. I'm being directed by the saint, himself or herself, by their witness. And there's always a lot to learn from all the saints, even though they may not share our particular circumstances or our particular vocation. So, that's one source of spiritual guidance.

I need that- the guidance of the Holy Spirit, vis-à-vis, whether it's the inspired Word of God, whether the guidance comes from the teachings of the Church, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the life of a saint... I do need that constant guidance- guidance to form my conscience and to adjust my attitudes, my sentiments, so that they conform more and more faithfully to the life of Jesus.

Concretely, we could all use another person, a confessor, a good friend we can trust who is also pursuing holiness, to give us direction. And, is that direction at the same level as the teachings of the Church or the Word of God? No. But with our goodwill and our desires to be holy, the Holy Spirit will work through that ordinary channel. And a spiritual director or the confessor doesn't tell us what to do unless it's an obvious piece of advice that connects with sin, you know, as a way of avoiding it. But anyway, we, in general, that spiritual direction needs to be considered by the directee to see, well, is this the Lord's will for me? Many times, it is. But that has to be discerned because we're not obligated but we should make that act of faith that there's a channel that the Holy Spirit is going to use and once I give it consideration, I should embrace it. Is there a severe moral

obligation? No, but I'm trying to be a saint and I'm making that act of faith that the Lord is going to use these channels. And as I consider it, if it makes sense to me, if I see the point, then I go for it.

And there's a lot of reasons for this. Number one, even if the person giving us direction were a deaf mute, and we didn't know that, by just disclosing my inner self, I'm already receiving grace. We quote St. Peter, "God gives grace to the humble and resists the proud." I don't go to spiritual direction to get a merit badge. I do go there to grow in humility and to learn how to re-direct my life so that it be in sync with the life of Jesus. I need that channel, and in a certain sense, if I'm going to spiritual direction, in a way it's a form of prayer because I'm trying to discern God's will, giving this- that friend or that priest, that confessor input.

So number one, that I be honest and tell it like it is. I mean, there's a difference between saying, well, I need to work harder as opposed to, well, I have a heavy workload, but I'm taking a siesta three hours every afternoon and so I'm not getting to everything. So, there's a difference between I'm not working as hard as I should- indeed, you're not- and I'm taking a three hour siesta.

There's a difference between saying, listen, I really got to get on top of my game when it comes to chastity. I could do better in my chastity. Well, that's probably an honest piece of input. But it would be- we'd get more out of it by saying, well, I am watching movies that are R-rated and I'm having problems. Alright, well, there's a difference there. Now, the spiritual director could probably say, well, a lot of times R stands for raunchy. Those are just examples.

I also need to open up. I may make a mountain out of a molehill. And just by airing out my heart and soul, the mountain is reduced to a molehill, if that. Or, I may have the tendency to give myself too many passes, or rationalize, come down hard on my family members or friends, you know. They take what I say the wrong way or they perceive that I'm angry and they- we need someone to tell us, hey, they're right, you're in denial. You're not being honest with yourself. And that's immensely helpful.

And I need direction on how to become that expert in humanity. The director, spiritual director, is not going to tell us, you know, what to say to our friends or what to say to our family members, but to direct so that, little by little, in perhaps a clumsy way, an imperfect way, they say that our family, our friends, are picking up that I have the heart of Christ. And that by my love, not by my ability to debate or by my knowledge, but by my love, I pass for a disciple of Christ.

Anyway, we invoke our role model, as we usually do, at the end of our meditations, the Blessed Mother, who also received instruction from the angel Gabriel and discerned- she didn't say yes immediately,. She said yes once she made the message her own, once she had enough knowledge of

the message, enough understanding and clarification, she gave herself completely. She is our role model. We ask for her prayer of intercession so that we have a source of formation and that we have the faith and strength to embrace it.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations you've communicated to me in this meditation. I ask your help in putting them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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