

Spiritual Direction



A.M. Behm

What is spiritual direction?

Spiritual direction has changed through the ages. We know that already in the fourth century people sought the counsel of the Desert Mothers and Fathers. Religious orders were founded - let us note in particular the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Men and woman religious benefitted from the direction provided by their religious leaders. Lay people also sought the moral guidance of priests in the confessional. But with the advent of Vatican II came the directed retreats and spiritual direction took on a new approach which dealt with the whole person - spiritual and human.

Today we could define spiritual direction as a ministry and a relationship in which one believer accompanies another. It is a very privileged relationship. It centers on the experiences of God in the prayer and daily life of the directee. It has to do with the whole person and the entire human journey of that person. One-on-one conversation with a spiritual companion, in an atmosphere of trust and reverence, allows the directee to tell his/her story (some stories are a joy to tell and others are painful and even frightening to verbalize). This telling of our stories leads the person to a greater awareness of God's presence in all of life.

To properly receive spiritual direction people must have one of two attitudes: 1) a desire to begin to grow in a relationship with God or already have begun a personal relationship with God 2) A desire to foster (to nourish) that relationship. Not satisfied with religious practices, they feel that more can happen in their spiritual lives. Yet these practices (liturgies, education in Scripture and prayer, discernments/decisions, retreat experiences, spiritual reading, another person's spiritual sharing) all these can awaken a desire to have a spiritual guide or director.

What direction is not...

- Direction is not for learning different prayer forms, although the director may suggest ways to pray to foster a directee's relationship with God.
- It is not a problem solving situation, although life struggles will continually arise which need to be talked out in depth and brought into conscious dialogue with God.

What do people bring to spiritual direction?

- Loss/grief: marriage, career, suicide, illness, failures personal, financial, etc...
- Struggles
- Discouragement

- Prayer experiences
- Desire to grow in relationships with self, others, God
- Prayer life
- Seeking God
- Anger/forgiveness, other feelings

How to prepare?

- Where am I in my life right now?
- What am I looking for in my life right now?
- What are my feelings: fears, anxieties, disappointments, frustrations, anger...
- What are my hopes?
- What are my struggles?
- How am I handling stress?
- When am I most myself? Do I know who my self is?
- When am I least myself?
- Do I pray regularly? How? When?
- Who is God for me?

What is the difference between spiritual direction and counseling?

How are they different if we talk about the same things? They appear to be quite similar. Both deal with a person's life experience. Both processes move toward an attitude change, an improved outlook on life, inner peace, resolution of crisis or conflict, inner healing integration and wholeness. The relationship of mutual trust is essential in both. Resistance occurs in both. Both processes extend over a period of time.

The basic difference between spiritual direction and counselling is contemplation, that is, attentiveness and absorption in God. Direction seeks to help people discover God's presence in the content of the sharing.

(the above are excerpts from Maureen Conroy's book "Growing in love and freedom")

Who cares for the care-giver?

Depending on the ministry you engage in as a pastoral associate, a volunteer, a member of a parish committee, you may experience stress, frustration, conflict, etc...that will disturb your inner peace. Who do you talk to? Who can help you to discern how to deal with this? What is the movement or the spirit in this situation?

Confidentiality - Spiritual directors are trained to treat all sharing with the utmost respect and confidentiality. This helps to create an atmosphere of trust and safety.

Agenda - The spiritual director has no agenda. The director cannot be thinking, analyzing or planning a solution. In the spiritual direction process the Spirit inspires the solution from within the directee. The director facilitates the openness to the Spirit by his/her listening skills.