

Spiritual Direction Today

What role does spiritual direction have in the changing practices within the Church? How has renewal affected the need for spiritual direction? What influence has psychology had on the relationship between director and client? Fr. Ernest E. Larkin, O.Carm., Associate Professor of Spiritual Theology at The Catholic University of America, suggests answers to these questions and in a practical way attempts to bridge the gap between traditional spiritual direction and psychological counseling. A graduate of Carmelite seminaries (ordained in 1946), The Catholic University of America, and the University of St. Thomas Aquinas "Angelicum" (S.T.D. in 1954), Fr. Larkin actively participated in numerous seminars on renewal, contributed articles to professional journals of theology and canon law, and delivered principal addresses to religious groups, including the Conference of Major Superiors of Men Religious and the Sister Formation Conference.

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A few years ago, Daniel Callahan noted the growing sophistication of Catholic life in America and the increased specialization of priestly ministry: "Where once the priest was looked upon for wisdom on the whole gamut of life's problems, he is now expected only to provide guidance on the more narrowly 'spiritual' problems."¹

This observation seems accurate, both as a statement of fact and an acceptable working principle for the ministry. But what precisely are "the more narrowly 'spiritual' problems"? And what kind of guidance is the priest supposed to supply?

When spirituality meant a vertical union with God through prayer and self-denial, the area of the spirit was clear. One went to a spiritual director to test the spirits with regard to prayer life, to insure faithfulness, forestall illusion, and guarantee a just measure of human effort and self-denial. Occasionally a moral question might come up, or a problem in human relations. Today, however, spirituality means the total of human life in its social and secular as well as its religious dimensions. The role of spiritual direction tends to become at once more diffuse and less specific. Discernment of spirits remains its key functions. In addition the spiritual director is to help identify the

presence of the Holy Spirit in the religious experiences, in the personal behavior, and in the social life of his client; that is, the presence of God is sought in human reality and in the human quality of man's life.

This newer approach tends to develop a more wholesome Christian life and actually gives a broader scope to spiritual direction. Nonetheless, fewer Christians, inside and outside religious houses and seminaries, are seeking spiritual direction. One reason is the loss of confidence in spiritual direction. Another is a feeling that its role has been preempted by modern discoveries in psychological counseling. Similar reasoning suggests that priests are following outdated and even harmful methods to help people find themselves and God. It seems at least as true today as it was six years ago when Callahan's book was published that "the layman is taking his moral questions to a family counselor, his personal problems to an analyst, and his social problems to the politician."² Or if this listing seems too, specific, professional counseling or perhaps the small peer group with a priest or a psychologist in charge seems to have replaced old fashioned spiritual direction as the normal source of support and guidance.

The emancipation of the Catholic layman—and of religious and priests as

well—has tended to make any outside guidance seem superfluous. Vatican II tells the layman to look to priests for “spiritual light and nourishment” but not necessarily for concrete solutions to their problems; the laity as responsible adults are to appraise their own situations and apply appropriate Christian principles.³ Does this mean that the ministry of the word is to remain on the high level of principle and theory alone? This would certainly hinder effective preaching. It would also destroy personalized spiritual direction. Christian adulthood is not compromised by helping relationships as long as they are not overdependent. The document on *Priestly Ministry* vindicates the pastoral right and duty of priests to help the faithful find their own truth, their unique vocation and development in love and freedom in the Holy Spirit.⁴ It encourages the traditional concept of spiritual direction in which individuals look for insight into their problems, support for their efforts, and confirmation of their choices and way of life.

Spiritual direction is a bad word in the minds of some ultra-contemporary Christians because it seems to threaten autonomy. They limit their view of the spiritual director to a person who “directs”; that is, they see him making the decisions and telling the subject what to do. Actually this is a warped idea of spiritual direction. In the best Catholic tradition the spiritual director is neither moralist nor preacher. He is a friend of the Bridegroom. And he is a friend to the one who comes to him in search of Christ. His basic task is to reflect his own achieved relationship with Christ, not in an overt, direct fashion, but as a witness of God’s ways. He helps the other to sort out thoughts and feelings, hopes and aspirations, experiences and relationships. In this way he participates in the delicate task of discernment of spirits. Thus he is not the decision-maker, or the “director of conscience.” The decision-maker role was foisted on him when people were unable or unwilling to make their own

prudential decisions. It lacks authentic tradition.

How will the caricature of the spiritual director as an infallible answer box to cue one in on God’s Will be replaced? The answer has many elements to be evaluated. Spiritual direction properly understood bears a closer affinity to a counseling relationship or to spiritual friendship than to a teacher-pupil or superior-subject relationship. It adds the dimension of explicit faith to counseling and a special nuance to spiritual friendship. Spiritual direction is a counseling process, whose goal is not merely human or psychological well-being but friendship with Christ. Like all counseling relationships its basic component is the interpersonal relationship itself: in this case, both parties to the relationship are faith-oriented and faith-directed. Modern counseling principles and skills, on the one hand, are not a foreign inclusion. Nor, on the other hand, do the sophisticated techniques of modern counseling render spiritual direction an anachronism.

The trend away from a “decision-maker” style of spiritual direction toward contemporary substitutes is not unhealthy to Christian growth, provided faith continues to be asserted and applied in the relationship. To the contrary, unless spiritual direction is updated with the insights of the behavioral sciences and modern conditions, it does not deserve to stay in competition as a helping relationship. But we must retain the identity of spiritual direction. Priests must not lose confidence in their unique contribution. They are not psychotherapists; they are not even counselors in, the technical sense, unless they have received special training. They are rather religious ministers whose vocation is to be vehicles of healing and reconciliation. They are catalysts and intermediaries of divine friendship. A recent stimulating article in *Psychology Today* notes with gratitude the number of priests and ministers working in counseling today but deplores the abdication of their true role of the religious ministry.⁵

Too many stress purely therapeutic counseling; they neglect the spiritual dimension of life, which is their proper vocation. Their particular contribution must be in terms of the “extra-human,” the transcendent—that aspect in the human which is beyond the human. Concretely, this means relationship with God.

The use of group discussion and interaction is a case in point. A few years ago Canon Jacques Leclercq stated categorically that the peer group had replaced the individual director in spiritual formation.⁶ One-to-one direction, at least in the decadent form he described it, had seen its day and was followed only by marginal persons outside the main stream. Discussion, interaction, the democratic process—this was the way to sound personal decisions. The priest was no longer to be an authority figure; he is, instead, the sacrament of God’s presence in the group. Today we also recognize the contribution of group interaction to improved sensitivity into one’s own and others’ feelings, hence to relating to others in a deeper, more authentic way.

Does this approach apply to everyone? Not necessarily. Different needs must be treated differently.

The pooling of many heads and hearts taps added resources for spiritual development. The success of apostolic groups like Christian Family Movement, Young Christian Students, or the popularity of sensitivity groups, the spread of all kinds of formation groups, especially in seminaries and religious houses, attest to this fact. For some the small group may be the answer to all the needs in the realm of spiritual direction. For others the group action is an introduction and preparation for personalized spiritual direction. The small group seems particularly adapted to developing an objective spirituality for different milieux. It also seems to initiate a practical spirituality for beginners. From this viewpoint, it resembles the rules for the discernment of spirits of the first week of the

Spiritual Exercises (nn. 314-327), which are intended to stabilize one’s conversion and to establish basic patterns and guidelines. A more personalized response to the Spirit can be built on this foundation, and this response is directed by the rules of the second week of St. Ignatius’ *Exercises*.

Psychological counseling is likewise a propaedeutic to life in the Spirit. By clarifying meanings and values counseling attempts to resolve emotional conflicts. It is a twentieth-century means of bringing order and integration into one’s affective life; this task had been traditionally assigned to asceticism. By removing obstacles and by disposing for the Spirit, counseling is especially indicated for beginners, who are presumed to have more problems with maturity than the more experienced Christians. It is tempting to draw a neat distinction between “spiritual counseling” (i.e., the helping relationship for beginners) and “spiritual direction” (i.e., the same interpersonal relationship adapted for incipient contemplatives and those experiencing the passive purifications). A few years ago James Walsh, S.J., the editor of *The Way*, created a furor by suggesting this kind of restrictive notion of spiritual direction.⁷ This approach contains questionable pastoral implications: It isolates counseling from the faith dimension; it tends to stifle growth and faith in the beginner; it leads toward compartmentalizing both person and function. On the contrary, the thrust should be toward unity and wholeness. Today a purely theocentric orientation that typified old-fashioned spiritual direction cannot be sustained. Likewise, a merely therapeutic approach, such as the professional counselor might take, is too limited. Van Kaam suggests instead “religious counseling” as a new term for the relationship we are striving to develop among beginners and the advanced alike. Its goal is to integrate the personal and social aspects of one’s life with the religious dimension.⁸ Faith and love of God are to find expression, not merely in an “advanced,”

gnostic elite, but in all Christians. Today the call of the Spirit is to a more human, this-worldly, down-to-earth holiness.

In this age of transition everyone is called to evaluate the many aspects of his heritage. Spiritual direction must not be left out of this renewal. It needs re-formulation in terms of its original charismatic identity. It must meet the needs and conditions of the world today. This article suggests that spiritual direction can learn from the behavioral sciences. It also insists spiritual direction must not sell out to them. The New Testament *diakonia*, as Harvey Cox has pointed out, is a ministry of healing and

reconciling. The Good Samaritan exemplifies this position. The basic tools for healing the wounds and pain of both the psyche and the soul are the same: they are an accepting, understanding, warm, interpersonal relationship. D'Arcy-Kennedy write: "What makes good spiritual direction effective is basically what makes good counseling effective."⁹ Priests will become effective spiritual directors largely in proportion to their ability to enter into and maintain deep and authentic human relationships. Their own friendship with Christ, however, will be the primary source for constructive, authentic human relationships.

Bibliography

Chapter IV of the *Decree on Priestly Formation* (note 21 contains references to pertinent papal statements) and Chapter III of the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* stress the importance of spiritual direction for growth and development of the vocation to the priesthood. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* offers historically-oriented presentations: K. A. Wall, "Direction, Spiritual," Vol. IV, pp. 887-890; J. Pegon, "Discernment of Spirits," Vol. IV, pp. 893-95; D. Dee, "Manifestation of Conscience," Vol. IX, pp. 160-62. Jean Laplace, S.J., in *The Direction of Conscience* (Eng. trans. Guinness; New York: Herder and Herder, 1967) acknowledges the contributions of psychology and the need for a charisma in a contemporary approach to spiritual direction. C. Bouchaud treats a more specific problem in "The Spiritual Director of a Subject in Psychotherapy," *Insight*, Vol. VI (Winter, 1968), 38-42. Another approach can be found in Q. Hakenewerth's "Group Methods in Spiritual Direction," *Review for Religious*, Vol. XXVII (January, 1968), 71-79. Not directly related to spiritual direction but clearly showing the reasoning behind the shifting emphasis in methodology is Andrew Greeley's "Changing Styles of Catholic Spirituality," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, Vol. LXVII (April, 1967), 557-65. A. van Kaam, C.S.Sp., besides the source noted in the article above, refers to the new role of the spiritual director in *Religion and Personality* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964).

¹ Daniel Callahan, *The Mind of the Catholic Layman* (New York: Scribner's, 1963), 127.

² *Ibid.* This statement is a quotation from a layman in a letter written to Callahan by Joseph H. Fichter, S.J.

³ *The Church in the Modern World*, n. 43.

⁴ *The Ministry and Life of Priests*, n. 6.

⁵ Ludwig B. Lefebvre, "Human and Extra-human Partnership," in *Psychology Today* 2 (November, 1968), 46-49, 62-63.

⁶ Jacques Leclercq, "The Priest Today," in *Review for Religious*, 22 (1963), 157-171.

⁷ James Walsh, S.J., "The Need for Direction," in *The Way*, 2 (July, 1962), 163-165.

⁸ A. van Kaam, "Religious Anthropology—Religious Counseling," in *Insight*, Winter 4 (1966) n. 3, pp. 1-7.

⁹ Paul F. D'Arcy, M.M., and Eugene C. Kennedy, M.M., in *The Genius of the Apostolate* (New York: Sheed, 1965), 102-103.