



What to Expect in Christian Spiritual Direction

Thomas Hart

Many people today want to grow in the spiritual life. Among other things, they wonder, "Should I seek and find a spiritual director to help me on my way?" But that soon generates other questions. What exactly is spiritual direction, how do you go about it, and what is supposed to come of it?

As a spiritual director, and one who has taught and supervised spiritual directors over many years, I would like to offer some answers to those questions. But I would like to do it in a particular way. Rather than talk about spiritual direction in the abstract, or about spiritual directors in the third person, I would prefer to take an I-Thou approach to the matter. I would like to speak in my own person, and talk to you about what we would do if you came to me for spiritual direction. This immediacy will, I hope, not only offer you a fairly accurate picture of what most spiritual directors do but also give you some feel for the I-Thou encounter, which spiritual direction actually is.

Let me begin with a sketch of what sort of persons we spiritual directors are and how we got into this role. Then I will describe the first session as it usually unfolds, so you might have a clearer sense of how to begin. Finally, I will lay out the ongoing process of spiritual direction over time and offer some thoughts on what spiritual growth, which is our goal, might look like in real life.

You will recognize that my own roots and perspectives are Christian. But persons of all spiritual traditions are in search of the divine, and I believe that what I set forth here could easily be used as a guide for an aspirant or a spiritual director from another background.

The Spiritual Director

I am like you, a spiritual seeker. I have not arrived; I am still very much on the way. I seek a livelier sense of God

in my life, a closer relationship, a more perfect alignment with God's purposes. I would like to be God's instrument in the world and help to build God's reign. I pray but would like to pray better. I try to follow God's leadings as best I can discern them, but I could certainly follow them more generously. I have some virtues, my friends tell me, but I still struggle with a lot of behavior I wish I could do away with. A few people have ventured to call me wise, but I am not so sure, and in any case I am certainly fallible. In our meetings, I may not tell you all this, but you can presume it.

How did I become a spiritual director? I suppose it is something like discovering that you have a good voice or a good sense of humor. Directly or indirectly, people tell

you. From way back, it seems, people have trusted me with their personal stories. And they have sought my feedback on important happenings in their lives or asked for my thoughts on crucial decisions. They seem to feel I have something for them. Most of them know I take the spiritual life seriously, and they seem to want to tap into that. And I have to say that helping others in these ways has

been satisfying to me. More than once I have been encouraged to make spiritual direction my life work. "You're a great listener. You should do this full-time." Bolstered by these indications of a gift and an aptitude, perhaps even a calling, I went to school, studied theology and spirituality, and got training in basic counseling skills. If I was going to do this in a more formal way, I reasoned, I wanted to be sure my foundations were solid, and it seemed wise to be credentialed as well. So that is how I got here.

What exactly would my role be in your life if I were your spiritual director? Well, you might think of me as a companion, a more experienced brother or sister, walking with you on a journey of discovery and growth. I offer both guidance and support. Perhaps you could think of me as a mentor. The spiritual journey is long, and there are hazards. In this, as in most matters human, it is not

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good for us to be alone. Alone, we can so easily get caught up in the tangle of our own minds, keep going over the same ground without reaching any conclusion, miss whole sides of a matter, imagine things that are not there or at least merit little consideration. I will help you sort. I will give you feedback. I will offer suggestions. I will point you to other resources. I will care about you, encourage you, and, as best I can, help you find what you seek.

You will find me above all a careful listener. You will do much more of the talking than I do. This is, after all, about you and your life, not about me. Just as I listen for the voice of God in my own life, I will be listening for it in yours. We will be companions and co-listeners for that voice.

I will not tell you what you ought to do. I do not know what you ought to do in the important matters of your



life. Your endowments, circumstances, choices, and destiny are uniquely yours. Your real spiritual director is the Holy One, who has been in your life from the beginning and is always quietly prompting you. "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Cor 3:16). You are already living the spiritual life. If it were not so, you would not have sought me out. So mine will always be an auxiliary, not a leading, role. I may suggest, but ultimately it is the Holy One who draws you and you who make the free response.

Saint Ignatius Loyola, who created the great retreat format known as the Spiritual Exercises, insists that the person guiding someone through a retreat should "remain in equilibrium, to allow the Creator to act immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord." The same applies to spiritual direction over time, and it is my operative principle. So if you ever feel that I am pushing you, for example, into a particular mode of praying, or a particular lifestyle, please tell me, because I am overplaying my part.

Getting Started

The process of spiritual direction unfolds gradually over time. It is a series of conversations, each usually an hour or so, perhaps once a month. To enjoy its benefits, you have to give it time. I need to get to know you and your world. You need to get to know me, too, so you can gradually develop trust and open up more. All of this can only develop organically.

So how do we begin? I will lead the way. Let me ask you some questions. Tell me what brings you in. Tell me what you are hoping for from our relationship. Tell me something about your present life situation. Whom do you live with? How are your studies or your work going? What else do you do? Who are your friends? How is your health? Now let us go back a bit. What sort of family do you come from? How are your relationships with them now? And can you trace your spiritual journey for me, at least in broad strokes, from the beginning to the present?

You will notice that I mostly listen, sometimes inquir-

ing further for clarification or elaboration, inviting you to unfold. It will be a while before I have very much useful feedback for you. But you are probably already observing that you become clearer in your own mind just by having to put your experience into words for another person. This will always be an important benefit of our sessions, even when I say little back to you. I hope you are also feeling, as we talk, my nonjudgmental acceptance, my respect for you, my interest, and my support.

Well, I have asked you a great many questions today. It is only fair that you have a chance, too. What do you want to ask me?

It is quite possible that we will not be able to cover all this in the first session. But we can easily pick up where

we left off in our next. At the end of this first session, we will have to talk about some practical matters, too, such as scheduling. I may also ask how you are feeling about our time together today.

The Ongoing Process

Once we have laid the foundations, how do we proceed from month to month? What

do we talk about? Let me suggest an orientation.

There is no part of your life that is irrelevant to our work together. Your whole life is your spiritual life; God is in every part of it. So it would be a mistake to confine the realm of our discourse to such topics as prayer, failings, vocation, temptations, ministry, church. Your life is much broader than these concerns, and issues of equal or greater spiritual significance lie outside these domains. For example, what do you most enjoy in life? What are your ongoing struggles? What do you think about a lot during the day? What do you dream about at night? How do you feel about yourself? What gets you down? How do you experience your sexuality? How are the important relationships in your life going? How do you see the world? God is in all of this, gifting, guiding, delighting, challenging you, presenting you with opportunities to mature, deepen, and broaden. God is, in fact, continually creating you through all your experience, and you are the indispensable co-creator. Everything that is going on in

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your life is grist for that mysterious, open-ended creative process.

Let me suggest a guiding principle that might help you answer the question, "What should I talk about when I meet with you next?" It is this: Wherever the action is in your life is where God is most involved with you. That is where you are making the choices that determine what you are becoming as a person. So that should be our focus. Are you struggling, for example, in a particular relationship right now? Are you battling an addiction? Are you especially lonely or discontented at this time? Are you at peace, grateful, happy? These are some of the places where the action is, and so they are where God is especially interactive with you. These are the kinds of matters we need to keep exploring, always seeking their spiritual significance. About some of them we will talk again and again. Naturally, our focus will also shift over time.

Suppose you tell me that you are having a difficult time caring for an aging parent or that you have just learned that you are going to be laid off your job. Suppose you just got a cancer diagnosis or someone very dear to you has. Suppose you have fallen in love. Suppose you are immensely challenged right now by the relentless demands of work and family. This is where the action is, right? In all of these situations, my question to you will be: Where is God in all this? Or, to put it another way, what do you suppose the call of God is to you in this situation? What gift might God be offering you here, or what might God be giving you an opportunity to learn or develop here? When we look for these things together, we can usually find them. For example, as you care for your aging mother, you are undoubtedly being called to generosity and to patience. Are you perhaps also being called to something you might overlook—a proportionate care of yourself so that you do not burn out or become resentful? That might be even harder for you to learn than generosity. Perhaps in the distress of your unemployment there are also some hidden gifts—the gift of a break, for instance, from years and years of work, and the gift of an opportunity to stand back in a way the daily grind does not allow and think about possible new directions. Mixed in with these is probably a call to trust God will keep providing for you even though you cannot imagine how. If you have found a new love, it is time for enjoyment and gratitude, for God is a wonderful gift-giver. There will also be opportunities to grow in authenticity and responsibility as you learn more about how to love (and how to be loved) well. This should give some idea of the spiritual dimension of all these different experiences. It is our task to mine them for their riches.

It is, of course, to God that you want to open yourself more and more through the process of spiritual direction, and so I will check from time to time to make sure that you have a favorable context for the development of that core relationship. A fertile context has sever-



al components. Regular prayer or meditation is essential. A steady diet of spiritual reading, at once comforting and challenging, such as the Bible itself, is another key component. A surrounding community of fellow seekers is a crucial assist, as the spiritual journey can be lonely at times, especially when so many other people seem to be living for quite different values. Service to others is an integral part of Christian discipleship and a natural outgrowth of a strong inner life. It also stimulates the inner life, because sustaining generosity over time is not easy.

I would be happy to pray with you in our sessions if you wish. For some people, that is very important; others would rather spend the whole hour discussing issues. I might call for some prayer together in a session if I feel so moved. Whether we pray together or not, I know that you pray on an ongoing basis, and you can be assured that I do too—among other things, for you and for the fruitfulness of our relationship. Whether we pray together much or not, we can be confident that God is with us in our sessions, for “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18:20).

You may have other requests for me. Some people like me to give them a scripture passage or two to pray over during the month. Some like to go away with a particular assignment, some task that will help them build on what we have talked about. Some like to spend the last five minutes of the session naming and briefly reflecting on what was most important for them today. Sometimes they ask me to sum it up as I saw it—and my take on what seemed important can surprise them, as it might be quite a different view from theirs. I am certainly open to any requests you might have.

This is an instance of a very important larger point. You and I are both responsible for how well our time together goes. If you are unhappy about something, please do not keep it to yourself. Let me know. If you think I misunderstand, if I am not giving enough feedback, if I make a poor suggestion, if you feel we are not really connecting, please tell me so we can look at it together. This may be difficult for you to do, but it can be so helpful to us both. I want to grow by reason of our encounter, too, and I want above all that our time together be maximally useful to you. I can take negative feedback. We will both learn something from examining what is not going well between us, and usually we can make the necessary adjustments. Or we might come to the conclusion that we are just not a good match and you should move on to someone else. But let us talk about it and close out, if that seems right, in a way that is healthy for both of us. If you just go away disappointed and never come back, it leaves us both hurting.

If a good relationship develops between us, you may want

*Whether
we pray
together or not,
I know that you
pray on an
ongoing basis,
and you
can be assured
that I do too
—among
other things,
for you
and for the
fruitfulness
of our
relationship.*



to keep coming indefinitely for open-ended spiritual growth. It is always helpful to take stock of what is going on in your life and of what God may be quietly up to with you. Our meetings occasion that. Like most people, you will probably experience the value of a sounding board for all that is coursing through your consciousness and welcome whatever feedback a caring listener might have for you. I will do more than listen. I will, as best I can, reflect you back to yourself, ask questions that arise in me as I hear your narrative, offer what feedback naturally occurs to me, and share the impressions that solidify in me over time if I think they would be useful to you. I say we might continue this indefinitely, but it is quite possible that either of us might begin to feel at some point that I have probably given you all I have to give you, and you would gain more now by going to someone new.

Growth in the Spiritual Life

It is growth in the spiritual life that you are seeking. But what does that mean? By what signs might we recognize it?

In his letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul writes of what he calls "the fruit of the Spirit." He is speaking of the personal transformation that gradually takes place in us if we choose to be led by the Spirit of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal 5:22-23)

It is difficult to imagine a spiritual person in any tradition who would not affirm the central importance of these virtues. All the great spiritual traditions hold them up as ideals. They can be viewed as a set of traits that mark the authentically spiritual person, and they might even be expanded: truthfulness, hopefulness, acceptance of self and others, compassion, nonviolence, generosity, humility, forgiveness, simplicity of life, service to others, prayerfulness. Even those who would not identify themselves as spiritual would doubtless say they admire people who exhibit such qualities and deep down would like to be this kind of person themselves.

So how can you tell if you are making spiritual progress? Well, are you becoming more hopeful, more serene? Simpler in your lifestyle? More generous toward others?

More accepting of each person as is? Readier to forgive? Are you more concerned to relieve human suffering and make life better for others? Are you growing more grounded in the gracious Mystery, from whom and for whom you live? Are you less anxious, less controlling, more trusting? This is the spiritual life. This is the practice of holy living. How profoundly challenging it is. It is a love affair with God, a venture of open-ended growth, the project of a lifetime.

In Summary

I hope you now have a better idea of what happens in spiritual direction. I might summarize what I have said this way. Nothing is quite so rewarding or so at the heart of what we are made for as the spiritual quest. But nothing we attempt is quite so daunting, either. That is where the spiritual director comes in, companion and guide on the spiritual journey. We are inherently social beings, needing one another for survival and growth in every area of life. That is especially true in pursuing a spiritual life. If you want to grow spiritually, then meeting regularly with me, or someone like me, will be helpful to you in many ways. It will keep the spiritual life in the forefront of your consciousness. It will make you a little more accountable. It will give you an opportunity to take stock of your life regularly, looking for how God, ever comforting and challenging, moves you toward growth. When we meet, we will look together for God's activity in all the areas of your life, especially where the action is right now. Whatever we focus on in any given session, you can rely on me to listen to you with care and to give you my honest responses. At the very least, I will offer you another seeker's perspective. At best, I may prove to be an invaluable spiritual companion. ■

Note

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