

THE NECESSITY OF REGULAR SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FOR PRIESTS AND SEMINARIANS IN OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD

By

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Introduction

A Priest is a spiritual leader. Same applies to Seminarians especially during pastoral year or apostolic work. People look up to Priests and Seminarians for direction, for prayers and counselling. Apart from the normal Seminary structure where everyone is assigned to a particular Spiritual director who guides the seminarian spiritually for a full session or throughout the course of his seminary formation, there is need for regular Spiritual direction for Priests and Seminarians especially after Priestly Ordination and during holidays. This spiritual direction is very necessary especially in our contemporary world filled with a lot of challenges.

What is Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual direction is the help given by one Christian to another, which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication, to grow in intimacy with

this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.

In other words, Spiritual direction is a loving dialogue involving interpersonal relationship between two friends, the director and the directee, who journey together towards Christian perfection and freedom with the aid of discernment and prayer.¹ This implies that Spiritual Direction aims at helping the directee to hear what God is saying to him in prayer and in life experience and to help the directee to discover and respond to God's plan for him as it unfolds. In the context of this paper, the focus is on the person's actual experience of God in his daily activities.

Misconceptions about Spiritual Direction

Sometimes people misunderstand Spiritual direction to be counselling, giving advice or teaching. Spiritual Direction is different from counselling which is more problem-centered and deals primarily with the observable and behavioral aspects of human person. Counselling aims to give the person greater freedom through natural self-knowledge. It centers more on the interaction of the two people involved. With the focus on the "Counselee".

It is true that some counselling strategies or approaches may often come into the Spiritual direction but it is not the main focus. Spiritual Direction is also different from giving advice and teaching though at times they may be part of the Spiritual direction process.

Kinds of Spiritual Direction

- 1. Regular Spiritual Direction:** This is a programmed Spiritual Direction that takes place at regular intervals. The Directee is expected to meet with the Spiritual director at regular intervals. Here,

the Director journeys with the Directee for a longer time.

- 2. Occasional Spiritual Direction:** This consists in rendering Spiritual direction to a person in passing. For example giving Spiritual Direction to someone during a bus journey or meeting with somebody at a special occasion and giving the person Spiritual direction.
- 3. Collective Spiritual Direction:** This is the Spiritual direction given to different groups. For example Priests of the same diocese or congregation as a group, seminarians in the same class or group.

To guide the group efficiently, the Spiritual director must have an exact idea of the nature of the vocation and charism of the group.²

Biblical Root of Spiritual Direction

Examples are very clear in the Scripture about Spiritual direction. Both Old and New Testament.

Old Testament and Examples of Spiritual Direction

Eli and Samuel: 1 Samuel 3:1 – 21

Eli was a Spiritual director to young Samuel and he gave him proper Spiritual direction to discern the voice of God. When Samuel adhered to the instructions given to him, he was able to discern the voice of God.

Prophets like Nathan: 2 Samuel 12: 1 – 15

Nathan guided King David Spiritually telling him the truth about this mistakes. Here, we note that the Spiritual Director should tell the directee the truth the way they are, even if it displeases the directee. He/she needs to know the real truth.

Elijah and Elisha: 1 Kings 19: 19 – 21

Elijah mentored Elisha, passing on Spiritual legacy. This guided him and made him do the right things as directed by God.

New Testament and Examples of Spiritual Direction

In the New Testament, the example of the meeting of Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3: 1 – 21, with the Samaritan woman at the well, John 4: 1 – 42 and in ongoing formation of Peter to the other disciples are all examples of Spiritual direction. The Spiritual director is like John the Baptist when he said to the two disciples “Behold the lamb of God” and pointed out Jesus to them, John 1:36. Spiritual direction is also seen in Paul mentoring Timothy and Titus (1 Timothy 1:2, Titus 1:4). The Job of the Spiritual director is to point out Jesus to the directee in the directee’s own experience so that he will experience Jesus himself and respond to him like the two disciples in the Gospel. Each person is on a personal journey with God and God is the real Spiritual Director guiding and leading each one in a unique way.

Church Documents and Teachings on Spiritual Direction

(i) Vatican II documents such as *Lumen Gentium* and *Dei Verbum* lay foundations for the spiritual life and the discerning of God’s will, which are core to Spiritual Direction. (ii) *Gaudium et spes* also explores how Christians live out their faith in a changing world. It encourages individuals to recognize and respond to the “signs of times” in the context of the gospel, a process aided by Spiritual Direction. (iii) The canon law grants the faithful the right to choose their spiritual director. Canon 239 paragraph 2 noted that in every seminary, there is to be at least one

spiritual director, though the students are also free to approach other priests who have been deputed to this work by the bishop.

(iv) *Vita consecrata* by Pope John Paul II highlights Spiritual direction as a crucial support for consecrated persons in their vocation and mission. (v) *Evangelii Gaudium* by Pope Francis discusses Spiritual direction as a necessary “art of accompaniment” and stresses the importance of deep listening and closeness for spiritual encounter.³

Who is a Spiritual Director?

A Spiritual Director is someone with whom you can talk with confidentially, about your prayer and Spiritual life. Conversations with a Spiritual Director includes everything about your life. Your work, your family, your relationships, your joys, your sorrows, your weaknesses, your limitations, your hidden struggles, your excitement and your despair. The main aim of all the conversations should be to notice God’s presence and to experience God. Hence, a Spiritual director helps you to explore the darkness of self – doubt, confusion, and fear so that you are able to be free of what blocks you from God’s loving presence. The Spiritual Director will listen and support you and may gently suggest to you ways of praying and specific content of prayer.

The conversation between you and a Spiritual Director takes place in a prayerful atmosphere where both you and the director acknowledge the movement of the Spirit in every aspect of your life. It is this focus on your relationship with God that distinguishes Spiritual Direction from Psychological counselling or therapy. As a matter of fact, It is good to keep in mind that the real Director is the Holy Spirit. Given this, the primary relationship is between

the Holy Spirit and the directee, and the secondary relationship is between the director and directee.⁴

According to Jordan Aumann, he noted that normally a Spiritual Director should be a Priest. He gave reasons for this. First, the Priest usually has both theoretical and practical knowledge required for the direction of souls. Secondly, the function of the Spiritual director is closely related to the office of the confessor. A third reason is the grace of Priesthood.⁵ However, it is possible that in a particular case Spiritual Direction could be given by a prudent and experienced person who is not a Priest. There is simple testimony in the history of the Church to justify such direction because of the peculiar circumstances. For example, some of the hermits in the desert and the primitive monks who were not Priests give Spiritual direction. Also we see direction given by St. Catherine of Siena and St. Teresa of Avila.⁶

The Duties of a Spiritual Director

Due to the intimate nature of Spiritual direction, the relationship and personal dynamics between the director and the directee is paramount and must be comfortable for each. The duty of the Spiritual director is enormous and at the same time challenging. Some of these duties include:

1. To know the Directee

It is necessary that the director knows the directee. The director should have a profound knowledge of the person he is to direct. He has to know the person's character, temperament, good and bad inclinations, defects, likes and dislikes. He should have a knowledge of the individuals past life, at least along general lines, so that he will know the principal temptations to which the soul is subjected, means to overcome these temptations, the graces received from God, the

progress in virtue and by what means, the individual's present dispositions, the intensity of the desire to strive for perfection, the sacrifices the individual is willing to make in order to attain sanctity and the obstacles and difficulties at the present time. Nothing should be put in writing, either by the director or the directee during session. All information should be given orally.

2. To offer guidance

A Spiritual guide is someone who helps you attend to God's presence in your life. You might come to Spiritual guidance to reflect deeply on your experiences or to integrate Spirituality into your daily life. Spiritual guidance is helpful at times of transition, loss or disillusionment. The Spiritual Director is expected to accompany the person under his guidance, thus making it possible for the individual to solve his or her own problems and difficulties whenever possible.

3. To encourage the Directee

A Spiritual director should always try to encourage the directee in his formation. If they are tired and become discouraged, the director should lift them up and make them see that discouragement of their failure can be more harmful to their Spiritual life than the failure itself.⁷

4. To guide the Spiritual life of the Directee

The Directee should not take any important step in his or her Spiritual journey without discussing such with the Spiritual Director. The plan of life, the method of prayer, the practice of piety, the practice of mortification, the work of the apostolate, the material of the examination of conscience, all can be controlled by the Spiritual Director as the need arises.

5. To observe Secrecy

The Spiritual director is obligated to observe absolute secrecy in regard to confidential issues he has received from the persons he directs, not only because many of these things are in some way connected with the internal forum, but also because the office of the Spiritual director obligates him to natural secrecy.

The Relevance of Spiritual Direction

1. Spiritual Direction helps the directee to know what God is telling him/her about the issue at hand as he shares his/her experience with a Spiritual Director.
2. It helps to face trouble, difficulty or painful feelings with ease.
3. It helps one to understand himself and God better and experience the presence of God in his life.
4. It helps one to better dispose himself to the will of God and be more prayerful.
5. It helps one to understand the life he is living and be focused on his vocation.
6. It helps one to unload his worries on God.
7. It helps to clear the darkness in one's life and set priorities right.
8. It lightens the burden a person is carrying.
9. It helps one to be focused on holiness of life and deepens the trust and confidence one has with God.
10. It helps a person to see the face of God in his neighbor and have a good and sound relationship with his neighbor.

Obstacles to Spiritual Direction

1. The Directee needs to have trust and confidence in the director. If this is not present, the Directee cannot open up.

2. The Director needs to keep issues of direction secret. If this is not guaranteed, it becomes an obstacle in the way of the Directee to making himself/ herself available.
3. The Directee needs to be truthful and sincere during direction. If not, it becomes a serious obstacle to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who actually directs a person.
4. Pretense on the part of the directee can become a big obstacle in a bid to throw light on the issue at hand.
5. In Seminary setting and houses of formation, a Spiritual director should be different from other Formators, he should be a man of few words and according to canon 240 paragraph 2, he cannot vote when others are deciding about the admission of students to orders or their dismissal from the seminary. If not it becomes a block in the way of the directee opening up.
6. The Directee needs to make the Spiritual Director his best friend. Avoid too much formalities /Seriousness. The Spiritual Director should not be judgmental and he must try as much as possible to be free with the directee.
7. The Spiritual Director should also possess certain qualities, virtues and holiness of life in order to encourage the directee.

The Necessity of Regular Spiritual Direction for Priests and Seminarians of our Time

Haven known the general understanding of Spiritual Direction and who a Spiritual Director is, there is no doubt that regular Spiritual Direction is very necessary for Priests and Seminarians especially in our contemporary world filled with so many distractions arising from our

environment, internet and fellow humans. Below are some of the necessity of regular spiritual direction for priests & Seminarians.

1. Regular Spiritual Direction creates room for accountability.

During our lifetime, we need on a regular basis to be accountable to some other person. Approximately once a month or at least every couple of month we need to reveal to that person how well we have carried out the resolutions of amendment that were mutually agreed upon, our Spiritual journey, prayer life, struggles, weakness and strength.⁸

Sometimes, after Priestly Ordination, Priests are no longer accountable to anyone with regards their Spiritual life. Some may hardly go for confession except during diocesan yearly retreat and monthly recollections. When you have your personal spiritual director you are accountable to, you visit at intervals and discuss Spiritual matters with him.

Again, look at what is happening on social media, regarding Priests and religious, you will agree with me that some of these things can be controlled when Priests have Spiritual Directors to always call them to order. Sometimes, you see Priests who are into ministry making some statements that are uncalled for and uncatholic, or Priests and religious who want to trend doing so many strange things on the social media. These things can be controlled if Priests have Spiritual Directors they visit at interval and are accountable to.

2. Regular Spiritual Direction creates room for objectivity

As humans, we are inclined to be biased to our own favor. Sometimes when Priests have issues with their

bishop or superior, or when Priests have issues with fellow Priests or Seminarian have issues with Priests or fellow Seminarians outside the Seminary, we tend to be biased and want to justify ourselves. Regular Spiritual Direction helps to have a third party who can look at our conduct from a more objective and less subjective point of view. Our Spiritual Director will usually be able to see where we are deceiving ourselves and point to us the blind spots in our conscience. The truth is that an open and honest discussion between the directee and the director has a better chance of arriving at truth than if we trusted only on our own insights.

3. Regular Spiritual Direction creates room for encouragement

It is not easy to be a Priest. It is also not easy to be a Seminarian. Living alone, facing the life of celibacy, poverty and obedience with its challenges, the trials and temptations is not easy. When travelling our journey of faith alone it is easy to become discouraged and tired of our frequent falls and mistakes. It is a great help to have a trusted Spiritual Director who will encourage us in times of failure. The more mature and experienced the Spiritual Director is, the more we will trust their judgment and accept their encouragement. To keep going in this life, we need frequent affirmation.⁹

4. Regular Spiritual Direction challenges us to work harder

When we regularly have encounter with our Spiritual director, it will challenge us to work harder to develop the full potential of good that is present in us. Many psychologists claim that the average person develops only about 20 percent of one's potential for good. If we ever hope to actualize the remaining 80 percent of our

undeveloped potentials, we need someone to challenge us as well as encourage us. We need a Spiritual Director who is courageous enough to confront us with the self-deception that we so easily adopt when dealing with our faults and failures. This confrontation needs to be done with great love by someone we are convinced is genuinely concerned about our welfare.

5. Regular Spiritual Direction creates room for Spiritual growth.

Regular Spiritual Direction encourages our Spiritual growth by enhancing and enriching our prayer life and contemplation, helping us discern the will of God and gain clarity on our life's journey and helping us gain interior freedom that comes from interior silence. When you go for Spiritual Direction as at when due, you are able to know where you are making effort spiritually and where you need to improve.

6. Regular Spiritual Direction helps a Priest to manage his private life.

Priests live private lives. People hardly know of the hidden struggles of a Priest. Sometimes we hear about Priests leaving the Priesthood, committing scandals, being blackmailed and suffering from depression. It may be difficult for a Priest to open-up to his diocesan Bishop, superior or even a fellow Priest about his secrets and personal struggles. One way to manage the private life of a Priest is for him to have a trusted Spiritual Director who he can freely and sincerely speak to about his weaknesses

Recommendations

Priesthood in our world today is facing a lot of challenges. In order to manage these challenges and build up the spiritual life of the Priest, every diocesan bishop and

superiors of different congregations should encourage every priest in the diocese and congregation to have his personal spiritual director he can trust, confide in and go to him for spiritual direction at any time. If possible, the names of each spiritual director of the priest should be submitted to the chancery. Such spiritual directors can be called upon to account for their directee should anything come up. For instance, if a priest suddenly leaves the priesthood, his spiritual director who has been journeying with him should be able to explain what led to it without divulging confidential secrets. Even the Spiritual director should have his own director.

Again, Seminarians are also encouraged to choose their own personal spiritual director and go for direction during holidays, pastoral year or apostolic work. These spiritual directors can be priests of the same diocese, priests of other diocese, priests from different congregations or priests from the monastery. The choice should be made by the directee himself.

In conclusion, when we are in the Seminary, we have opportunity for regular Spiritual Direction and confessions. As a result of these, our Spiritual life is always built up. Whatever happens to our Spiritual life after Priestly Ordination and during holidays depends on our personal effort. There is need for us to have our personal spiritual director and go for regular spiritual direction so that we can always build up our spiritual life.

Endnotes

¹Bishop F. Antonisamy: *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*. Mumbai: St.Pauls, 1999, P.171

²Bishop F. Antonisamy: *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*. p. 178.

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<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/ausiencies/2023/documents/20230104-udienza-generale.html>

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⁴ Paschal – Paul Okeke, *In search of deeper Spirituality (Exploring the dynamics of Spiritual Direction)*Awka: De Mercury Bright Printing & Publishing Co. 2024, Pp. 34-35

⁵Aumann, Jordan, *Spiritual Theology*(Bloomsbury Continuum, 1980) 380.

⁶Aumann, Jordan, *Spiritual Theology*,380

⁷ Joseph de Guibert, *The Theology of Spiritual life* (Eastford, CT. Martino fine Books, 2021), P. 388

⁸Paschal – Paul Okeke, *In search of deeper Spirituality*,p. 28.

⁹Paschal – Paul Okeke, *In search of deeper Spirituality*,p. 28.