

Spiritual Direction for Priests

Priestly Identity and Ministry

At the Holy Eucharist the priest offers the sacrifice of Christ. The laymen offers himself to Christ and has this offering taken up into the sacrifice that the priest is offering. In this way the whole Christ is offered to the Father, head and body. At its essence this is why priest and laity gather at the altar on Sunday, salvation is being mediated through the ministrations of the priest and all who gather desire to be joined to Christ the Savior. Even though we experience the Sunday Mass as "ordinary", "routine" and perhaps even mundane, it is in fact Holy. It is the place of encounter between the church and God. The priest desires to keep the truth of this holy conspiracy always in his heart. The circumstances of being busy, sin, finitude and limit all conspire to take this consciousness from him but in his heart he *wants to remember...he wants to remain* in this holy conspiracy throughout his ministry.

Doing the holy work of a priest, however, is not primarily the work of the priest. The holy work of bringing people into communion with God *is Christ's own work which is* extended to the priest at the altar and in the confessional and in the other sacraments as well. The work of the priest, per se, is to *remain vulnerable to Christ, to be a man of prayer*. Yes, Christ will take care of the sacraments and their effects as the priest cooperates with Him in the intentions of the Church. But the priest must take care of the doorway of *his own heart*. There is to be synergy between the work of Christ in the priest's ministry and the presence of Christ in the priest's heart. For this communion between ministry and heart to remain and deepen priests must be faithful to their sacramental duty and to the duty of personally receiving God's love in prayer. To sever these two duties is to locate the origins of priestly stress, anxiety and worse: alienation from God and parishioners.

What is Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual Direction is one of the more useful spiritual tools we have to assist a priest to dwell in the synergy between ministry and his personal communion with God. Spiritual direction was mandated during seminary formation. Once out of formation a priest has to find his own director. This raises the question of finding a competent one. When spiritual direction is recommended as a norm for one's prayer life finding such a director is the universal frustration. Some relief is found after ordination because the priest can simply seek out competence, as he is no longer required to have a priest as director, as was the case in formation.

But what is the evidence you have found a competent director once regular direction begins? There is only one criterion: the priest notices his intimacy with the Holy Trinity deepening. Of course from this measure many things follow: better self-knowledge, a developing moral life, vibrancy in affectivity is experienced, a more sensitive penitential heart is cultivated, empathy toward fellow clergy is recognized, and a love for parishioners is ignited anew. In other words, in a man with a sound mind and emotional life, spiritual direction changes everything in one's life. It is obvious why this happens: God is everything.

Mentioning being of sound mind and heart is crucial because spiritual direction is not therapeutic counseling. In fact stubborn emotional wounds, repetitive habits caused by neurosis, severe depression or worse, can impede the goal of spiritual direction. These, and other, psycho-emotional wounds can hamper our freedom to receive love from God in prayer. Now, of course, God can miraculously reach out and heal anyone of us and circumvent therapy. But that is a miracle not the norm. If a priest is aware, or made aware by others, that some emotional wound is present in him it is best for him to enter therapy. To do so is a mark of love for the church. It may be possible to attend both therapy and direction during the same time frame but possessing the internal freedom necessary to receive God's love is the standard to meet if spiritual direction is to be effective.

For the man of sound mind and heart, however, spiritual direction will give him the "newness of life" he craves as he negotiates the normal struggles of ministry, temptation, and spiritual living. So if the goal of spiritual direction is the deepening and sustaining of one's intimacy with the Holy Trinity how does a priest seek a director to help him achieve this?

How to choose a director

First, it is good to choose a director who is Catholic. This may seem obvious but it crucial to consider because the contents of a priest's director's imagination and thought processes must be doctrinally sound and not idiosyncratic. Progress is made in intimacy with God when a director knows the true identity of the human person. Priests need to be directed by men or women whose knowledge of Catholic anthropology is deep and real. To entrust our prayer life to an ideologue, one who is liberal or conservative, is to entrust one's soul to partiality and not truth. You want to place yourself before a director who has a sound grasp of the true dignity of the human person as known in doctrine and revealed in scripture. In this way he or she is listening to you with an authentic standard in their heart, guiding you with questions and observations that leave you in the light, with Him, with truth. Practically speaking this means your director should have some theological training, and a life spent in books and communities that carry true expressions of man's identity before God. This may not mean that the person has to be a theologian but it most certainly means that the director has to be in love with the church, want only its good, and draws life from its teachings and sacraments.

Second, it is good to set up the parameters of the relationship in the first session. I would recommend that the director give the directee complete freedom to come and meet with an agreed upon frequency. The director should make known that this is not a contractual relationship in any fashion (unless on the rare occasion that fees are required); that the directee can end the relationship at any time without reason. The director should never ask a directee to set up another appointment. The entire relationship should be weighted toward the directee's freedom and spiritual needs not the director's emotional needs. Many priests have had their prayer lives suffer because they feel "obligated" to return to a director who cannot guide or has reached the limits of this gifts for a particular person. Of course the director is free to no longer accept a priest as his directee for any reason as well. Priests should know, however, that one of the "common sense" reasons directors end a relationship with a directee is that the directee has stopped praying and there is *no longer anything to share with the director*.

How to prepare for direction

If this is a major reason a director might end a relationship with a directee then it is now obvious that the major preparation needed to attend a direction session is to begin, sustain and or struggle to remain in your own prayer life. To seek out direction without a prayer life would be like a bachelor seeking out marriage counseling. Without a relationship there is nothing to talk about. Of course one can seek out a director if the priest wants to start or re-start a prayer life. If, on one's own, a priest has been praying the Liturgy of the hours regularly, giving himself and the congregation a sufficient time of silence to receive God's love after receiving Holy Communion at Mass (minutes not seconds), spending some time before the Blessed Sacrament in adoration, praying the scripture in *lectio divina* style, possibly keeping a journal, then you are ready to seek a director. If you have not prayed the liturgy of the hours for years, have not engaged in *lectio* or adoration of late, and race through the silent periods of your mass **BUT *desire to start your personal prayer life again*** then you are ready to seek a director. If you began prayer and succeed intermittently and have sustained the on again off again lifestyle of prayer **BUT NOW wish it to be sustained consistently** you are ready to seek a director.

For a priest to prepare for his first meeting with a director he may want to enter the following pattern of being before God in any prayer method he chooses. This way of being with God was developed by the *Institute for Priestly Formation* and introduces the priest to a vital component of his relationship with God: intimacy. Intimacy is achieved through emotional vulnerability and is the adhesive of any love relationship. It consists of being aware of the presence of the one you love, being interiorly present to oneself, and then sharing with the Beloved all that is within one's own heart. Remaining alienated from God and or from one's own interior life is the fastest way to isolation and emotional pain.

This way of being with God involves the following: While at adoration or engaged in scriptural prayer first **acknowledge** what the prayer is stirring within you, or what is already within you as you enter prayer. Allow any affective movements to rise and be named specifically; I am lonely, I am tired, I am grateful, I am sad, etc. Once you are present to your own interiority **relate** the contents of your heart to Christ or the Holy Spirit or the Father. Then allow what you have shared to be given to God in the silence that envelopes you. From out of the silence **receive** anything God is giving to you, most fundamentally, of course, His very self. But you might also become aware of some particular wisdom He is sharing with you, a consoling thought, a truth that was gently raised about yourself that needs attention, a fear that is keeping you from the fullness of ministry and more. You know that it was God giving you these truths because it was given clearly, simply, gently and it left you free, and more engaged with reality. After these are received from God **respond** to Him with gratitude, adoration, more prayer or some other appropriate act of love toward Him or members of your parish. This process of ARRR (acknowledge, relate, receive, and respond) can be applied to a number of prayer forms, and is especially helpful in preparing the priest for his spiritual direction session. In preparing for direction ARRR assist the priest in answering: Who am I with when I am in my heart? Many time we are with ourselves in our hearts in a judgmental way. We are perhaps with only ourselves in a manner of fear or envy, worrying about pleasing others, or measuring up to their standards. We can also be with ourselves casting judgments

against God. In ARRR we simply long to be with ourselves in truth and allow God to be with us in His love. What gives us confidence that we really are with God and with ourselves in simple truth is the act of sharing ourselves (ARRR) with Him *in faith* so as to remain with Him in love. I do not want to put on a false self, do not want to doubt Him through my unhealed pain, or unrelated grief. I simply want to be who I am in His presence and enter a surrendered conversation with Him in peace, a dialogue of humility and holding a disposition that leads me to notice the affective movements which influence my actions, judgments, moods and more.

If a priest can practice this regularly he will be well prepared for spiritual direction. If any fears arise while the priest is praying he should just note them and make sure they are shared with God and his director. Remember that prayer is the safest emotional place on earth if entered into in a healthy state of mind and heart. A priest can safely share all with God as He will only love return love, since that is His nature. He is, if you will, bound by that reality...His only response can be love.

What to bring to direction

The main thing to bring to spiritual direction is *the memory of your prayer time*. How did I pray? What was its content? What did I notice about my affective life? What did God gift to me which increased my freedom? Where was I struggling in prayer? Was there anything in my prayer that made me resist His love, resist trusting Him with more of myself? Was there anyone I needed to forgive? What new inspirations came from Him for my parish ministry? Was my prayer seemingly dry or empty of life?

It is also good to be ready to talk about priestly *celibacy, chastity struggles, friendships* and any habitual temptations to sin which the director can assist the priest to bring to God, His love being communion for freedom in action. It is helpful to mention any struggles with persons in authority, or conflicts in the parish, so that the director can help you notice where God might be working there to set you free or inspire or invite you to further spiritual or moral development.

The virtue of *courage* is vital to pray for as the priest begins and is sustained by spiritual direction. A good director will invite the priest to notice and say more about his deepest feelings, receiving the reality of these affective movements so the priest might share them with Christ. Some of these deeper thought, feelings and desires might be painful to notice and articulate but if he does in prayer, and in the presence of good director, he is rewarded with healing and freedom, insight and peace.

The process of a direction session

Normally a direction session should be held in a location where distractions are minimal. This is true so that the silence of the location may bear truth from the priest's heart to his director's heart allowing both to attentively listen. Exterior silence, and the growing silence we live within our own hearts, are conditions for good spiritual direction because in a very real way spiritual direction is prayer. It is a time for recalling the prayer a priest had in the past weeks, but it is also time for listening to God in the *direction session itself* where much intimacy is bestowed and much healing given.

A direction session is typically an hour but I would say that a better barometer for judging time is to notice when the directee's heart is full. "Yes, I am so full now with truth or love or insight that I need to

go and pray some more. This time was sufficient, I can leave now." This could occur within a half hour or less. We don't want to keep talking when the real gold has been given and the directee simply needs to admire it with the Lord. Secondly, not only should the location for direction be externally silent a director and the directee should always be free to stop talking within a spiritual direction session and allow silence to emerge. Silence, as THE way to listen to the Lord, to gather our thoughts, or to process a difficult truth that was just revealed, is the engine of direction. Along with silence intentional prayer should be welcomed as well. The director might say, "Father, at this point in the conversation let's just be with Lord for a moment and receive what he is giving us." The directee should be free to say this as well. After such prayer, again usually silent, more processing can go on. On the whole the session encompasses two friends of Christ sharing faith and noticing the powerful actions of God in the directee's prayer life. It a conversation of deep listening to one another and to the Spirit abiding in the hearts of both and among them as friends in faith.

Generally speaking, the director a priest chooses should be expert in the ways of helping him discern the movement of the Spirit. The director should be capable of recognizing the way God's Spirit operates, the fluctuations of our human moods, or even the presence of satanic temptations. Primarily the director is there to gently encourage the priest to receive what God is doing in his heart. This is prayer in its basic attire. In prayer we are always led to receive the consolation of God's love and resist any lies or desolations that undermine our faith, hope or love. Consolation is not simply a happy mood, it is the priest adhering to the indwelling Spirit leading him into a deep faith, hope and love, making it easier for him to do God's will. Desolation is a prison of isolation, leading the priest away from God and making it more difficult to do God's will. The director assists the priest in listening to the contents of his heart, distinguishing what leads him closer to God or isolates him from his love.

Besides finding assistance with the discernment of spirits a good director will teach the priest how to enter and make habitual the examination of consciousness of St Ignatius of Loyola. This is a powerful tool in our daily prayer and its fruit should be brought to direction with each visit. Simply put the Examen prayer is our daily attentiveness to where we have received God's love throughout our ministerial day and where we have resisted His love. Do we have a habit of dwelling in thoughts, feelings and desires that block our reception of divine love and consolation? Alternately, where during our day of ministry did we notice, welcome and allow to penetrate with grace the consoling love of God? If a priest would attend to these questions each evening his intimacy with God would flower.

Finally, the director ought to be able to help identify any emotional wounds that the priest carries in his heart and encourage him to open these wounds regularly to God for healing. Desolation can feed off of and hide within any emotional wounds that remain unrelated to the Sacred of Heart's great love of priests. The golden rule of all spiritual direction sessions is to speak the truth so God might reach the priest with his love. **God only lives in reality** and we must meet him where he lives for healing to reach us. Reality is the place we want to live...not alone with our pain or in isolation from truth.

Conclusion

The necessity of receiving deep love from God within prayer is crucial for all parish priests because *to receive love* from God is the very fuel he needs *to give love* to his parishioners.¹ Receiving the consoling love of God is NOT some luxury for pampered persons with time on their hands, *it is the very origin of ministry* and its sustenance. Spiritual direction can assist in keeping the flow of love between the priest and God open, clear and flowing. This flow waters the priest's life of ministry from the Source. The priest who draws life from this fountain can only bless those who await his healing presence among them. In committing himself to spiritual direction the priest commits himself to real growth in his own vocation as diocesan priest. The greatest beneficiary of a priest's deepening prayer life is not him but the people he shepherds.

Christ is the Good Shepherd who wants to lead his flock to where life can be found. This leading is accomplished through his priesthood shared in the sacrament of Holy orders. As noted at the beginning of this essay the priest "wants to remain in this holy conspiracy throughout his ministry." Commitment to personal prayer and spiritual direction is one way a pastor remains in the circulation of holiness that is Christ's own sacrificial love shared with his priests out of love for his lambs (Jn. 21:15).

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¹ See William Barry SJ, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God* (NJ: Paulist, 2004) 48-49