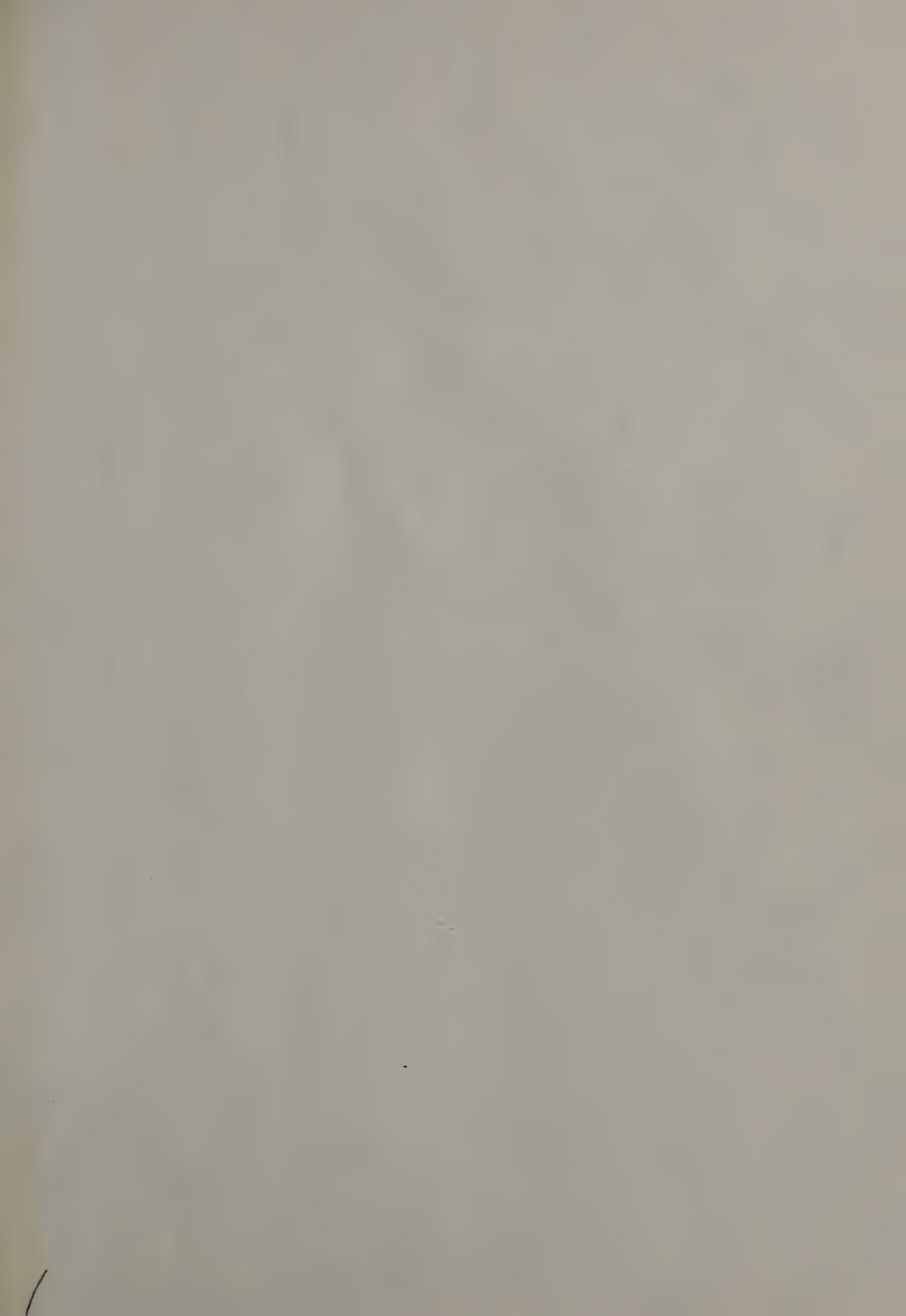




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# STUDIES

## in the Spirituality of Jesuits

Contemporary Spiritual Direction: Scope and Principles

An Introductory Essay

William J. Connolly, S.J.



Published by the American Assistency Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality,  
especially for American Jesuits working out their aggiornamento  
in the spirit of Vatican Council II

## THE AMERICAN ASSISTANCY SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

consists of a group of Jesuits from various provinces who are listed below. The members were appointed by the Fathers Provincial of the United States. The purpose of the Seminar is to study topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially American Jesuits, and to communicate the results to the members of the Assistancy. The hope is that this will lead to further discussion among all American Jesuits -- in private, or in small groups, or in community meetings. All this is done in the spirit of Vatican Council II's recommendation to religious institutes to recapture the original charismatic inspiration of their founders and to adapt it to the changed circumstances of modern times. The members of the Seminar welcome reactions or comments in regard to the topics they publish.

To achieve these purposes, especially amid today's pluralistic cultures, the Seminar must focus its direct attention sharply, frankly, and specifically on the problems, interests, and opportunities of the Jesuits of the United States. However, many of these interests are common also to Jesuits of other regions, or to other priests, religious men or women, or lay men or women. Hence the studies of the Seminar, while meant especially for American Jesuits, are not exclusively for them. Others who may find them helpful are cordially welcome to read them.

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CONTENTS

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	Page
Introduction	95
I. "SPIRITUAL DIRECTION"	98
II. SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND THE TEACHING CHURCH	100
III. THE ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR	104
IV. CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE SPIRITUAL DIRECTION	108
V. THE CONTEMPLATIVE ATTITUDE	113
VI. DIRECTION AND COUNSELING: THE DIFFERENCE	119
VII. SOME PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS	120
FOOTNOTES	123
The Books of the Institute of Jesuit Sources and Their Prices	125
The Titles Published So Far by the American Assistancy Semianr	126



# CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION; SCOPE AND PRINCIPLES

## AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

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### INTRODUCTION

"Spiritual direction" is a term in extensive use just now among knowledgeable American Catholics. Hardly a meeting takes place that touches on questions of growth and development in the Christian life without someone referring to it. People often speak of the significant effect "direction" has had on their lives. Priests, sisters, seminarians speak of it as a ministry in which they are working or might like to work in the future. Yet it is impossible to find a publication written for Americans and widely available to them that attempts to deal in the light of recent developments with the most basic questions concerning spiritual direction.<sup>1</sup> What it is, for instance, and what it is for, how it differs from pastoral counseling, its place in the Church's tradition, when it is likely to be helpful, when it is not.

It was primarily because of this lack of basic written materials that I decided to submit an introductory essay on the subject to this series. It seemed time to begin to make written materials available to people who have asked: "What exactly are they talking about?" or "We had something called that in the seminary (or the lay organization, or the convent), but this sounds different." But there was another reason too. It seemed time to shoot a buoy, to mark out central issues for reflection and discussion by people who are giving spiritual direction.

However, the decision was not made without qualms. It is too early, for one thing, to attempt a comprehensive study. New approaches that have come into existence over the last three or four years have not yet been widely and maturely tested against the experience of people's lives. Too

little comparative work and theological study has been done on these approaches. And we have learned through much bitter experience that the spiritual theology of the past cannot be accepted now without careful evaluation of the meaning of the words used, and of the cultural determinants involved in its development. Finally, there is the danger that someone with whom I am working in spiritual direction will at some point misunderstand because he will have read this article, and will think I can say to him only what I have written here.

The essay, then, will be less than definitive. It will attempt to provide provisional answers to some of the questions most frequently asked about spiritual direction and to offer a preliminary treatment of some of the fundamental issues involved in the practice of direction. It is therefore made up of expandable parts in the hope that the questions and issues touched on can be taken up later at greater length and depth, either by me or by others.

The approach used will be experiential rather than academic. Not that a conventional academic study would not be helpful; quite the contrary. Analysis and comparative work are very much needed in spiritual theology. But the questions most commonly asked about spiritual direction just now tend to stay close to concrete experience: What is it like? Did it help? How long? Under what circumstances? They fasten, not on what should be, but on what is, and how to make the most of it.

Then too, spiritual direction is itself a very concrete experience. It can profitably be subjected to analytic and comparative study, but before this is done the experience must be described in experiential terms. Otherwise we run the risk of discussing our own ideas of what might have happened and leaving unstudied the experience itself.

Two further points should be remarked concerning the perspective from which this essay is written. First, my own viewpoint and the viewpoint of the direction described will be fundamentally Ignatian rather than Carmelite, Franciscan, or Eastern, in the sense that its foci and articulation will tend to reflect more directly the expression of spiritual experience found in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius than any other traditional expression of spirituality. This fact should encourage depth

without posing an obstacle to breadth. The article will, however, leave much of the breadth of the tradition of spiritual direction unexplored. It does this, not because such exploration is unimportant, but simply because it cannot be undertaken at this moment.

Second, the essay presents the spiritual director primarily as a companion and facilitator rather than an instructor. This view of the director does not intend to deny the Church's obligation to present objective truth or her responsibility and that of all Christian communities for making authoritative decisions. Rather, it presupposes a complementarity of ministries. The dialogue with God and spiritual growth take place in a reality situation, and suffer when reality becomes confused because objective truth is not taught or necessary authoritative decisions are not made. To do his work effectively, the spiritual director needs the presence of active teachers and superiors in the Christian community. But he has another task, and cannot take theirs upon himself without diminishing the effectiveness of his own.

The essay begins with a discussion of the term "spiritual direction" and of the reactions people of our cultural milieu and Catholic theological background may have to it. It then attempts to situate the practice of spiritual direction against the background of the Church's mission and determine its function in the fostering of specifically Christian life. Taking spiritual direction as a process in which change is meant to take place, Section III discusses the nature of this change by describing the over-all role of the director in the development of the process. Section IV asks how the director decides that the process in which the directee is involved is really a process of interaction with the Lord and is developing in a healthy, integral way. Section V proposes that the most crucial single issue of direction is the development of a personal contemplative attitude which will enable the person to live as a free man or woman living, deciding, and praying in free response to the Spirit. There follow certain conclusions. In the light of the description of direction that has been proposed, the distinction between spiritual direction and counseling and other practical issues, like the choice of a director and the times when direction can be most helpful, are discussed.

## I. "SPIRITUAL DIRECTION"

"Spiritual direction" is one of the more grandiloquent terms Church ministry has inherited from the past. In our cultural environment it is also one of the more confusing. An image may best express this confusion.

Often, when I hear someone describe himself as a spiritual director, I picture an ageless, emaciated chap in a cowled robe, with his eyes cast down and his hands hidden in flowing sleeves. He sits in a whitewashed, cramped room with one small, barred window high on the wall beside him. Opposite him, wearing dun-colored traveling-dress and bonnet, sits a seventeenth-century French lady. Between them is a table bearing a skull and a guttered candle. She is describing the miseries of managing the family estate with her husband away at Court for much of the year. He is murmuring about being alone with the Alone, or dictating an horarium that will enable her to bring a measure of monastic order and piety into her life.

The image is not, of course, original. Most readers will recognize its elements, some of which have an ancestry as venerable as 2 Timothy and the Roman attacks on St. Jerome. It is useful not because it is attractive or historically accurate, but because, as caricatures will, it sums up, magnifies and focuses many of the attitudes Americans--both Catholic and Protestant--have toward spiritual direction, when they know anything about it at all. It smells of an archaic hierarchic social and religious system in which a person could be told how to live, and in detail. It suggests a distaste for life and withdrawal from it, a ponderous, intricate system of thought that makes no contact with the basic energies and drives of life, but always floats a little above them, like a cloud-world. It speaks of bored, empty people searching for "enriching" experiences and contemplative clergymen hypnotized by the adulation of the "haut monde." Its atmosphere is charged with unquestioned male domination.

Much of the difficulty, of course, is caused by the term itself. In our culture "religious" sounds alien enough, but for most of us "spiritual" instantly rubs raw our sensitivity to the precious and the artificial, and connotes thought and behavior that cannot survive contact with earth and full sun. At best it suggests a preoccupation with introspection, with

turning one's mental gaze in on one's own mental and moral life rather than outward to the world where people are in need and the peace and justice of the Kingdom must be established.

"Direction," the activity of directing someone, or the experience of being directed by someone, is similarly alien to the culture, suggesting as it does the rejection of personal responsibility and the acceptance of the authority of the one who does the directing.

Thus, the term "spiritual direction" unavoidably suggests to people of our contemporary Western culture a spiritualism and an authoritarianism that sound theology and psychology must repudiate. In all aspects of his life the human being can only act as body-spirit, and any help toward personal development that overlooks this fact is likely to be more harmful than helpful to him. In the same way sound "direction" cannot mean that one gives responsibility for his life to someone else. "My director told me to do it" can never justify a course of action. The person who receives direction must always retain personal responsibility, and the mode and content of sound direction will help him to retain and develop personal responsibility, not make it more difficult for him to do so.

Yet the term also has its uses. "Spiritual" does tell us that the basic concern of this kind of help is not with external actions as such, but with the inner life, the "heart," the personal core out of which come the good and evil that men think and do. It includes "head," but points to more than reason and more than knowledge. It also reminds us that another Spirit, the Spirit of the Lord, is involved. "Direction" does suggest something more than advice-giving and problem-solving. It implies that the person who seeks direction is going somewhere, and wants to talk to someone on the way. It implies, too, that the talk will not be casual and aimless, but apt to help him find his way.

So, although the term is liable to misunderstanding it is probably more descriptive of the experience it points to than "religious counseling," "spiritual counseling," "spiritual guidance," or "spiritual advice." It is, besides, firmly entrenched in the Catholic tradition and is more widely and spontaneously used than any term that has been proposed to replace it.

There is, however, one last difficulty that must be recognized if we are to speak realistically of spiritual direction as it is understood today. That is the distaste and misunderstanding left with many Catholics, especially priests, by an experience of compulsory direction they had in their earlier years. In seminaries particularly, the boundaries between direction and government were often not clearly marked. There have also been, in seminaries and elsewhere, experiences of direction that led to artificiality of life and prayer or to pronounced introversion. Many whose only experience of direction took place under such circumstances cannot imagine direction apart from them, and react to discussion of direction with: "Who needs *that*?"

## II. SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND THE TEACHING CHURCH

When the Church is living up to the fullness of her mandate, she is doing so not only by teaching her members to recognize God as the Creator and Redeemer He has shown Himself to be, but also by helping them to "worship in spirit and in truth." Not only does she teach them the difference between the new wine and the old, and between hearts of flesh and hearts of stone, she also helps them to prefer the new wine and to let the rhythm, tone, and direction of their lives be determined by hearts of flesh. She helps them, in other words, to respond to the initiatives God is taking now in their lives by letting those initiatives change them and by making honest and perceptive choices in response to them. Life becomes a dialogue between the Lord and themselves. He speaks to them in the preaching of the word and in the sacraments, but also in the circumstances of their individual lives, the social imperatives of their time, the needs of all God's people. And they are helped by the Church to live up to their inner and external capacities in responding to him--to Life--with assurance and joy.

One instinctive reaction to this description of the Church's task would be: "But how can the Church help a person *to let the Lord act* in his life, and to *respond*? Are not these choices that only the person himself can make?" And they are. No one can make such choices but the person himself. However, the Church can be with him to help him to recognize



God's action, help him to clarify the major issues, and avoid courses of thought and action that would lead him away from those issues without resolving them.

This "being with," if it is to be genuinely helpful, requires some ability on the person's part to recognize the situation in which he finds himself. The person or persons who live out the Church's task of "being with," will have to know the directee well enough to be personally with him, and from their own knowledge of the ways of God, they will have to encourage him to look at the Lord and wait on him, to point out how the directee can do that, and will have to be patient enough to let his recognition of the Lord and awareness of issues develop. It will be clear that the Church does all this most explicitly in that form of pastoral care known as spiritual direction. It may also be clear that where spiritual direction has genuinely helped people to develop this relationship with God, it has done so by fulfilling these functions.

It is startling, when one reflects on the matter, that help directly aimed at the personal worship of God in spirit and in truth should ever have been regarded as one of many pastoral concerns, and a somewhat esoteric concern at that. It seems rather that it should be the core from which all the Church's other pastoral care radiates. For spiritual direction, if it performs its proper task, must help a person to focus his life with awareness and honesty in response to God's loving, creative, and saving action. Unless he has had some experience of such a focusing, the Christian will treat all descriptions of interior attitudes as objective data, as meaningful--and as meaningless--as an almanac list of historic events. Systematic and moral theology, spirituality and liturgical studies and their pastoral vehicles will give him objective knowledge, but will have little to do with the crucial wants and nonnegotiable values of his life. As objects of study they may fascinate him, but as objects of study they also exist outside the growth, risk, shakiness, joy, and depression he experiences; and so they leave his heart untouched.

A spiritual direction that stems from the heart of the Christian tradition has no axes to grind, no pet theories on which its efficacy depends. It is primarily concerned with helping a person freely to place

himself before God, who will communicate Himself to him and make him more free. The focus of the direction is always on the Lord and the way He seems to relate to this person, never on ideas.<sup>2</sup>

The experience of the last two or three years in at least one metropolitan area where a prayer-focused direction has become well known affirms that it is this kind of direction that mature, experienced, active Catholics want. Spiritual jargon--terms like consolation, desolation, "the double standard"--is suspect. Bias against either personal responsibility or authority is likely to be disturbing. Fanaticism, whether of the left or of the right, is dubiously viewed. Sentimentalism is eschewed. There are no visions. There is, however, a strong desire to know and encounter God as the central Christian tradition has known and encountered Him.

In a time and place where attitudes toward the Church, and the pastoral care she provides are often in flux, the person who is growing with the help of this kind of direction frequently develops an increasing desire to know Christian teaching about God and the Christian life. He asks only that it be the kind of teaching he can relate to his experience. He also becomes increasingly amenable to other forms of pastoral care, not because he is exhorted to accept them, or even because they are suggested. His increasing aliveness simply makes him more interested. By the same token, deadness and venality in the Church's ministry may make him angry and likely to do something about his anger. A person who is being freed by the Lord is not always a comfortable companion. As Jesus was not always a comfortable companion.

It seems evident that a spiritual direction that takes the facilitation of the personal encounter with God as its proper sphere is working with the central, not a peripheral, movement of the Christian life. By what right does one do this work? There is no office or order of spiritual direction in the Church, and some of the most outstanding spiritual directors in Christian history, like Catherine of Siena and Ignatius of Loyola, either never had an office or orders, or did much of their work of direction before they held such an office.

This issue of the authority of the director was once a frequently discussed topic in spiritual theology. In a more juridically-oriented time

than ours the question that focused the discussion was; Does the directee owe obedience to the director? A sound answer in the 1940's was DeGuibert's: No, since the director as such has no juridical authority and so he cannot command obedience. But he ought to be given submission.<sup>3</sup> Now submission is an attitude that in a more hierarchically structured culture than our own did help people to worship in spirit and in truth. It worked, and so its value as an element of spiritual direction for that time cannot be rejected. For our own time, however, to expect submission of a directee would cause a reaction indeed, but hardly one that would be likely to further an authentic relationship with God.

Mutual trust, however, will develop if the direction is to be effective. The director comes to trust that the directee is committed to growth in the Lord, and the directee comes to trust that the director is committed to helping with this process in the directee's life and that, fundamentally at least, he knows what he is doing. The dispute about obedience left one fact clear: Spiritual direction was not conceived of in Christian history as a simple conversation between friends. Nor was it seen as a simple matter of getting advice from a knowledgeable person. It had something to do with the covenant community.

We can see more clearly what spiritual direction has to do with that community if we look more closely at what happens in spiritual direction. Whatever else he does or receives, the directee at least communicates with another member of the Church concerning his relationship with God. He does not hold his inner life in isolation from the people of God. He confides it to them in the person of the spiritual director. What the director most basically brings to the relationship with the directee is his membership in the Christian community and his sharing in the faith of that community. Whether or not he has special charisms, knowledge, and talents, he provides an opportunity for the directee to face his demons and thread a path through his illusions with the help of the community. Even if he says nothing, the fact that he listens enables the directee to share his experience with the community and not close that experience in upon itself, where for want of air it could become crabbed and deluded.

The more conscious the director is of the life of the Christian

community and the more knowledgeable he is about the experienced relationship of that community with the Lord and with all reality, the more helpful he is likely to be to the directee. But his authority arises basically from the fact that he shares in the faith-life of the Christian community as it experiences its dialogue with the Lord. This makes the director first of all a brother or sister of the directee and provides the basic ingredient for the informal, non-hierarchic--"just two people talking"--but creative atmosphere that seems to characterize helpful direction today.

### III. THE ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR<sup>4</sup>

To determine the components of a genuinely helpful spiritual direction, let us begin by looking at direction as help toward growth in response to the Spirit. Concretely this help will include the willing ear, may include advice, and may well result in relief from anxiety and more respectful observance of law. But its primary goal is growth, the development of lived dialogue with the Lord. Understanding spiritual direction in this way, I will suggest that there is an approach to "direction" that concentrates primarily on a person's strengths and another that concentrates primarily on his weaknesses, and that the choice between these approaches is a crucial one.

To propose the question in concrete terms: A priest in his 40's is a member of a religious community and a successful college professor. He has no worries about his professional future, but finds himself frequently at odds with communal decisions made in the house where he lives. He is irked, too, by the presence in his house of a group that meets regularly for shared prayer. These and other difficulties have led him to think of moving to another house. His present house, however, is convenient, and the prospect of a move forbidding. During his annual retreat he goes to one of the retreat-house staff to talk over these questions.

Immediately, two options open for the staff man. He can confine himself to discussing the problems as they are presented, or he can help the man to situate them in his life context by encouraging him to ask himself: "Who am I?" What do I want from life? What do I want to give to

to life?"

The problems, impasses, and difficulties represent the person's weak side. This is not to say that they are unimportant. Concentration on them rather than on the identity questions will not, however, make him a gospel person but will instead weaken his confidence and sense of identity. For there is something infinite about problems. The more we concentrate on them, the more of them there are. The danger in discussing the community problems without confronting the identity questions is that once the man has solved these problems he will be faced with new problems and will be no closer to developing a core of strength from which he can solve or avoid them.

"Who am I? What do I want?" on the other hand develops in prayer into "Who is the Lord to me? Who am I to the Lord?" The Lord's own strength and generosity come to be seen more clearly in the dialogue of prayer and come to have a deeper, more personal meaning. The person sees the Lord's love as his own strength, as accepting him in his weakness, and as calling him to creativity. He comes to identify himself as recipient of the Lord's love and generosity and to see his own freedom and creativity as given and guaranteed by the Lord.

As he faces the Lord by listening to His word and personally reacting to it, he becomes simpler, deeper, broader. The fact of letting the Lord become more real to him and of letting his deeper feelings emerge in prayer brings about this simplifying, deepening, broadening effect--a result not brought about by the mere solving of problems.

From this core a person can grow. Whenever he begins to be enmeshed in his weaknesses, he can draw again on this point from which growth takes place. He will observe that while he is in contact with it he has a sense of peace and confidence. Away from it he tends to be aimless and floundering.

If the priest with community problems can put himself before the Lord and converse with him as giver of life, freedom, healing, and spiritual sight, and can see himself called to share the experience of Jesus, he will begin to develop resources that will enable him to deal with or healthily ignore these problems, and in doing so develop strength to deal with other

problems in the future.

The strength a person discovers in prayer is not his own natural talents--his intelligence, his physical strength, his poetic or musical ability--although his discovery or rediscovery of these talents often follows on the finding of himself which takes place in prayer. His real strength is from the Lord and is seen in prayer as coming from the Lord. The Lord's love for him with all his scars and mutilations is the core of this strength; his recognition of this love of the Lord gives him the assurance to acknowledge his weakness, claim it as his own, and go to the trouble of learning to deal with it.

The key danger in encouraging a person to plunge about among his weaknesses lies in the enmeshing, fascinating effect produced on each of us by our own problems. The person may become so preoccupied with them that he will never let himself look at the Lord. Conflict situations, for instance, with the pull they exercise on his fears, angers, and guilt, can keep him so fascinated, even for years, that he never directs attention to who the Lord is for him. However, a person must be in contact with his own reality if the Lord is to be real to him, and this means he must not exclude his weaknesses from his awareness.

Eventually, as the person finds assurance in his strength-from-the-Lord, both his natural talents and his strength-from-experience will come together with his weaknesses as a new constellation in his awareness. He will see himself in a new way, with realism and hope.

His strength will show itself in creativity, increasing breadth of mind and affection, deepening reflection. A person's weakness appears in his lack of creativity, in narrowness and shallowness. We are called to a compassion that is as broad and deep as the Father's, so that any lack of breadth or depth of sympathy is a sign that we are not yet as alive as we might be.

Our strength is our link with the Lord; our weakness is our failure to receive fully from Him, our tendency to be someone we are not with Him.

Strength shows itself in a growing integration, weakness in a scattering of forces. Strength moves toward submission to the Lord, toward a willingness to do what we would prefer not to do; weakness guards itself,

takes care of itself. Signs of strength are a non-belligerent assurance, flexibility in change, interest in others, an ability to pray without great difficulty, freedom to choose distasteful courses of action, an earthy hopefulness.

The choice between emphasis on strength and emphasis on weakness is one of the elements of spiritual direction in which the director's view of his role is of crucial importance. If he sees himself primarily as a defender of law and order, he will focus on violations of law and so distract the person he is directing from the development of strength. If he is fascinated by problems, he will allow and even encourage an emphasis on them. If he likes to tell people what to do, weakness will be an opportunity for him. The director has to remain aware that because helping a person to grow offers few quick rewards to either the director or the person seeking help, he will often be tempted to try the short cut of problem-solving, telling the directee what to do, or invoking the law. If he develops and maintains the role of helping persons to grow, he will do so, with the help of much self-criticism, because he sees the enduring value of this kind of help.

Up to this point we have spoken of appealing to strength in spiritual direction in general. However, all that has been said is applicable to the giving of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, and they offer a particularly illustrative example of the principle. Unless the director encourages the exercitant, before the intellectual reflection of the Principle and Foundation, to look at the goodness of God to him and at His initiative in his life, the exercitant will find himself entangled in questions like: "I don't want to be sick. Does that mean there is something spiritually wrong with me?" or "I keep feeling guilty because I don't know whether I put the service of God before other considerations" or "I can't pray. I just go blank and get distracted."

In giving the first week of the Spiritual Exercises, the retreat director appeals to strength by suggesting to the exercitant that he not concentrate on his sins,<sup>5</sup> but rather let the Lord meet him and heal him, free him, make him alive. This healing, freeing, making alive may take some time. A waiting on the Lord will be necessary, and although this waiting

does not directly imply a length of time but a spiritual attitude, time may pass before the attitude is adopted, especially with an achievement-oriented person. It may also take time for angers, fears, guilts that lie a little below the surface of awareness to come into the prayer, for the person to become real to himself, in other words, so that he can present himself as he really is before the Lord. The result is worth the time.

A person making the Exercises often experiences, during the first week or before it, a great deal of difficulty in realizing what he does feel and does think. He may concentrate instead on what he thinks he should feel, should think. Much of the director's time will have to be given, if this is the case, to helping him to recognize and acknowledge his own reality. His strength will lie in his recognition of that reality, inadequate as it may be, and his acceptance of it. Here the freedom of the retreatant is of crucial importance, since he will often be tempted to accept the director's reality rather than seek out his own.

In the second week of the Exercises the retreatant's strength is the reality of Jesus to him and the reality of his response to Jesus. It becomes the director's task to help him patiently to face the Lord. The person's bravest resolutions, his loftiest ideals, may be his greatest enemies here; what looks best can turn out to be his most insidious illusion. The director has to help him to contemplate the Lord rather than his own ideals, engage in dialogue with him, and allow the exercitant's own truth, rather than abstract truth, to emerge.

Helping a person by appealing to his strength can involve a director in a long, meandering journey, fraught with uncertainties. Who, after all, can comfortably trust another person to see and recognize the Lord? But the journey is worth it. It enables a person to be himself with the Lord, to respond to Him as himself. From this relationship comes a new and rich creativity.

#### IV. CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

If adherence to law, good mental health, and conformity to the norms



of a community are to be seen only as secondary criteria of sound spiritual growth, what are the primary criteria? How does the director know that his work is doing more good than harm? This question is thorny for several reasons.

First of all, the goal of the spiritual life is a deepening and increasing union with God, and that union itself cannot be objectively verified. The director is thus forced to depend on criteria of spiritual growth that cannot be objectively verified either. He accepts this situation not without reluctance; for criteria that do not admit of quantitative evaluation are elusive and changeable. They look different as the director's and the directee's moods change. They cannot be tacked out and measured as can criteria like regular attendance at Mass and faithful attendance at community prayer. These are chunky, palpable criteria. But when the director has to decide whether a person is increasingly willing to be taught by the word during the liturgy or is genuinely opening his heart during his daily spiritual exercises, then he enters into territory for which there are no maps. What should he do? Stay out of that land and be satisfied with asking questions like "How many times did you miss morning meditation?" Or should he go ahead, ignoring his yearning for maps, and learn to read the less palpable indications that are the only signposts that country will tolerate? If he is going to be helpful beyond the borderlands, the beginning stages of the journey, he has no choice.

Then what criteria can he use? "But the harvest of the Spirit," Paul says in Galatians,<sup>6</sup> "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control." As interior reactions, these qualities can properly be criteria for interior states. The director's doubt in using them will center however on the fact that they are never measurable and that each of them can be mistaken for other reactions that do not indicate the action of the Spirit, and may even be contrary to that action. Relief at having made a decision can look like the peace of the Spirit, for example.<sup>7</sup> Witless enthusiasm can look like joy. Torpor sometimes resembles patience. Faced with this fact, the director is driven back to the question: How can I really know?

The practical importance of the question is clear. Without objective

criteria the director runs the risk of encouraging attitudes that may be attractive to him personally, but will ultimately impede the growth of the directee. How does one judge the spiritual value of humble dependence on the director, for instance? Some of the traditional statements on humility and obedience encourage us to think that such dependence is a sign of spiritual growth. Yet our experience often makes it clear that, in the light of the later history of the directee, what looked like development in humility and obedience was often an abdication of personal responsibility that, for the sake of growth, eventually had to be undone. What looks like growth in patience can be the result of a violent suppression of anger that will later show itself obliquely in frustration, depression, and the sense that in prayer the person faces an iron wall. If the person is ever to love, the suppression will have to be dissolved and the anger faced.

Perhaps this last example brings us closer to usable criteria. The Pauline signs as they are listed appear to be absolute and perfected. They do not appear so in experience. Instead they appear in process of development, of sometimes unsteady growth. But when their origin is the action of the Spirit, they come about not singly but together. Patience does not make its appearance long after love and joy. It appears, in at least incipient form, along with them. The growth may be unequal. Gentleness may for months be more obvious than joy. But it will never impede the growth of joy. The "harvest" appears as a unified growth, not a clutch of conflicting elements. And where there is conflict, or one is totally lacking, the director must suspect illusion.

In the last analysis, the director's ability to make use of these criteria in a concrete situation depends on his intuitive grasp of the criteria themselves and his intuitive recognition of their presence in the other person. If the director does not know, for example, that peace is more than relief from tension, he will not find it a helpful criterion when it appears in the person he is directing. If he does not have at least the beginning of an intuitive understanding of patience, he may be looking for a bouncy joy in a person whose genuine response to the Spirit at the time is a patient endurance in depression.

Breadth of outlook and empathy develop as the director comes to see

indications of the Spirit's action and response to it appear in an unexpected variety of ways.

We all have our favorite images and examples of the spiritual life. The fact that a director likes Pius X with his administrative bent better than Francis of Assisi with his lack of administrative bent need not affect the quality of his direction. But if he sees the Francises who come to him as spiritually inferior, not responding to the Spirit as they might, then he, and his directees, will be in trouble.

After the early stages of explicit spiritual growth there appears another criterion that can be at that point more helpful than the Pauline "harvest of the Spirit," and that, when it makes its appearance, can always complement the Pauline criteria. This is the experience of Jesus. Every Christian shares that experience, some consciously, most unconsciously.<sup>8</sup> It shows itself in the ability to live by one's own conviction despite opposition to those convictions, in a breadth of empathy that transcends social and economic class, in a deepening trust in the Father of reality, a willingness to engage in the war against evil and to stand for justice and mercy even when one must die small deaths in defense of them, and the willingness to die those deaths and leave resurrection to the Father.

What exactly does one use criteria for? Do they describe the state a person should be in, the ideals he should be held to? If they are seen in this way, the director can easily substitute his view of the person's growth for the Spirit's action, and so exhort him into blind alleys. At the very least he will substitute abstractions for reality in his way of seeing the progress of the direction. The value of criteria seems to be simply here: they give the director himself ways of determining whether the direction is toward the Lord and His people or up the garden path. The director is always a secondary person in the dialogue between the Lord and the directee. It is not he who calls the shots. But he has a responsibility for deciding whether he believes the process of direction is leading to good or to harm. As a director grows, he will learn to fulfill this responsibility without interfering with the action of the Spirit or the response of the directee.

Because spiritual growth is basically interior, the criteria for

observing it are necessarily interior. However, if there is an interior life which in no way shows itself in external action or reaction, it will have little interest for most directors. Such could conceivably be the situation of a psychotic person, for instance, whose inner life might show itself only in distorted forms. Most directors, however, will not be working with the inner life of psychotics.

For most directors, however, precisely because the inner criteria are so plastic, some external indications are necessary. If these external indices are kept in their properly secondary place, they can be very helpful as checks for his use of the inner criteria. The whole Catholic tradition, for instance, is sturdily suspicious of the authenticity of mystical prayer when the mystic can never take time to wash the dishes. Some indication of how the person interacts with others, how he actually responds--not simply thinks he responds--to his community whether religious, clerical, or lay, can be immensely helpful as a check on the validity of the director's and his own--view of the person's inner life.

By and large, there will be a reciprocal interaction between inner life and external reality--and porous terms these have to be, for they are as identical as they are separate. Experience of spiritual direction makes us always more aware that growth in a person's inner response to the Lord of reality normally shows itself in his external life--his relationships, the texture and direction of his work, the life-choices he makes; and that when there is no outward Christian development it will be seen sooner or later that there is something askew in his inner development.

The difficulty with seeing external criteria as primary is that both the action of the Spirit and human motivation are so varied, work on so many different levels, and are so basically interior that external action by itself is almost useless as a criterion. "By their fruits you will know them," but the external fruits of the Spirit will usually be undiscernible to the director without some sense of the person's inner growth. The lay person who does not attend Mass every Sunday and the priest who leaves some of his parish duties undone may actually be more alive before the Lord than the person who is doing everything "right." If the director makes external criteria primary, he may be discouraging inner growth by

providing a schema of external standards that the directee feels he has to meet and that he feels represents the only response to God he will be called upon to make. "But I did everything they told me to do" is a very dispiriting comment on any spiritual direction in which the speaker may have participated.

Then, too, we have to expect that the action of the Spirit will often be surprising, and will override the personal presuppositions of the director. Indeed, if the directee is living in genuinely lively response to the Lord, one indication of this is the fact that his actions will sometimes surprise and even disconcert the director. If the director's criteria tend to be external, he may discount the importance of such originality and thus tend to stifle the Spirit.

It always has to be remembered that both the Pauline and the Christic criteria are in experience not so much states as processes, and that when the inner life is really alive, they will be expressions of growth, fluctuating, undulating, now leaping, now quiet. Change will not be a negative sign. The key positive sign will be the growing fullness and ripening texture of the configuration of that life as it grows toward the maturity of Christ.

Perhaps the basic theological reason for the growing popularity of teams of directors who work singly with directees but discuss their practice with one another is that in such exchanges--in such informal communities, in other words--the breadth of action of the Spirit is more likely to be recognized than it would be by an individual director working alone. The Spirit is communitarian. He seems to breach directors' individual limitations and broaden their vision more readily in such groups.

#### V. THE CONTEMPLATIVE ATTITUDE

In the Constitution on Divine Revelation, Vatican Council II describes the Christian encounter with God in these terms: "Through divine revelation, God chose to show forth and communicate Himself. . . ." In response, "man entrusts his whole self freely to God. . . ."<sup>9</sup> and "there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed

down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (cf. Lk. 2: 19, 51), through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth."<sup>10</sup>

While the language in which these statements are couched tends to refer to intellectual understanding, "God chose to communicate Himself," "man entrusts his whole self freely," and the "intimate" nature of the understanding resulting from God's self-communication clearly point to something more than a giving and receiving of rational propositions.

Since the goal of spiritual direction is a developing and deepening union with God, then the primary task of the director is to facilitate contemplation. When the directee has entered into a contemplative attitude; or when, in other words, the Lord readily becomes real for him and he readily lets himself be completely real with the Lord, the primary nature of this task becomes obvious. For prayer changes and, on the whole, stays changed. God ceases to be distant and abstract. He is closer in life, present in prayer, and has values and a will of His own. He is not a function of morality, but accepts, loves, and often challenges the imperfect person. He can be spoken to, and through the communication that takes place in prayer and life He moves to transform the person and bring him toward the maturity of Christ. So when he looks at the Lord through the images of Scripture, for example, the directee sees a Lord who is not controlled by the directee's own preferences and needs, a Lord who often walks on unknown roads and says unexpected things. The Person looked at, in other words, begins obviously to take on a life of His own, even though His autonomy will usually still be limited by the directee's subconscious preconceptions. When the Lord begins thus to be seen more clearly with this life of His own in the directee's prayer, the director usually will recognize that his own contribution will depend on his ability first of all not to interfere with the dialogue that is going on, secondly on his ability to facilitate that dialogue, that is, to encourage the directee to listen and respond from his heart.

The primacy of this task of non-interfering facilitation is easy

enough to understand when the contemplative attitude is sufficiently developed to be recognized. However, the implications of this primacy are not confined to the time of a developed contemplative attitude. They should be clear to the director throughout the process of direction. Even when the directee experiences only his own anger, fear or guilt in prayer, and does not dream of a prayer in which the Lord could begin to take on a life of His own, the director must remember what his primary task is, and help the directee to move toward the contemplation that will be. In his direction then, he must use no approach that will hamper the development of contemplation and he must introduce into the direction no elements that, however helpful they might seem at the time, will distort or confuse the contemplative attitude when it does clearly develop.<sup>11</sup>

So, for practical purposes, direction can be divided into two major phases, or kinds. The dividing line between the two is the experience of contemplation. By contemplation, I do not mean mystical prayer.<sup>12</sup> I refer rather to contemplation as it is understood in the *Spiritual Exercises*. This contemplation "consists first of all in directing one's attention to God and the action of God rather than to his own anxieties and problems. It centers, in the story of the rich young man, on the attitudes of Jesus rather than on one's own failure or success in responding to His invitation; in the account of the storm at sea, on the confidence and power of the Lord rather than on one's own fears; in Mark's description of the Last Supper, on the action of Jesus rather than on the difficulties I may have in accepting transubstantiation. It is not introspection, or rational analogies or flights of imagination, but an attitude that allows the actions of God to become personally real to me, and allows all corners and depths of myself to be exposed and open to His action."<sup>13</sup>

The contemplative experience will take different forms in different persons, and different forms in the same person at different times. The common element in all these forms is the experience, however dim, of the Lord's reality. He may become awesome and daunting, or loving and inviting, or enigmatic and disconcerting. He will often be seen as healing, making whole. Often, too, He will be present but waiting for the person to take the step that must be taken if he is to be free. When the

person has been sufficiently freed from anxieties, angers, and other fixations to be able to care about the Lord's love for His people, He will be seen as inviting the person to share in His mission, to care for His people as He cares, to go the journey that He goes, sharing both its light and its darkness. Through all these ways in which He shows Himself, the common element is His reality. He is not an idea to be thought about, a set of values to be considered, an image to be handled by the imagination. The person has the sense that he is not controlling the way the Lord seems to him. Someone else is setting its direction, deciding its events. The person does not look for helpful thoughts, work up feelings, or concoct images. He simply looks at the Lord as He appears in Scripture or in his own experience, puts himself before Him as he is, with his own present experience, and lets happen what will happen.

There is nothing fixed or unchangeable about contemplation or about the attitude toward life, the Lord, His people, and oneself that gradually develops from the experience of contemplative prayer. The person in whom this attitude is developing may still sometimes balk at the need to expose a disagreeable attitude to the Lord and withdraw into thinking about it or worrying about it; but if he is well into the development of the contemplative attitude he knows when he is withdrawing from dialogue, or can recognize it with relative ease.

He may well not find prayer easy, either. "Contemplative" often suggests repose to us, but contemplative prayer can be a wrestling-match, too, and when, in such bouts, a person backs away from encounter, he may find that the Lord seems vague or distant. The important thing is that he knows from experience that dialogue is available to him should he be willing to have it.

It is to be repeated here that the contemplative experience we are talking about is neither ethereal nor "extraordinary." It is as earthy as muddy boots, and as much involved with life. Its very earthiness and involvement with everyday life are indications of its authenticity. The anti-contemplative bias is so strong in the American Church, however, that when contemplation is described many readers inevitably think: "Real life is too complex and difficult for a lot of people so he's encouraging them



to withdraw into the world of the mind, where reality is simpler and easier to control." This is precisely not so of contemplation as I am describing it. The person with an active vocation becomes more wholly, deeply, and passionately involved in the Lord's concern for His people, and in their needs. The only element likely to be lost to the active life through contemplation is egocentricity.

The contemplative experience constitutes a dividing line in spiritual direction not because direction becomes easier once contemplation has begun, but because it becomes different. It may also become more demanding. When a person stops trying to make reality what he would like it to be and lets himself encounter reality as it chooses to be, the Spirit of the Lord is not the only spirit that can act in that new, more free atmosphere, and the director will be called on to help him develop ways of telling the difference between the benign and the destructive influences that affect him. The person has now become less fixed in his egocentricity and less bogged down by it. But his desire to have life play the servant to him does not cease to lay claim on him. It becomes more volatile and more subtle, and consistently appears as an angel of light.

If the director has from the beginning of the direction seen his task as facilitating contemplation, his task now will probably not be excessively complicated by problems of dependence and confusion of goals. These problems will have been dealt with earlier, when it first became clear to the directee that the director's primary role was facilitative rather than instructional. "Why don't you take more initiative?" "Why don't you tell me what to do?" "Why don't you give me a structure to work with?" "Why don't you say more?" he may have been asked during the early meetings. Such questions, spoken or not, would have given the director opportunities to point out that responsibility for the directee's dialogue with the Lord lies with the Lord and the directee, not with the director. If the director took those opportunities then and waited for the directee to make some attempt to pay attention to the word and ask the Lord to act, the direction is not likely to get bogged down, at this new point, in uncertainty about what is coming from the Lord and what is coming from the director, or in difficulties in distinguishing between what the directee

really experiences and what he merely thinks he should experience. If, however, the director early in the process of direction explicitly, implicitly, even subliminally told the directee that he expected him to be a certain kind of person with a certain kind of relationship with God, and this expectation was not confronted and interred, then the experience of the directee during the contemplative phase is likely to be needlessly confusing at best, and at worst deeply misleading. If such confusion begins, the director may have no recourse except to try to form a new relationship with the directee or to refer him to another director.

What then can the director implicitly ask of the directee without running the risk of interfering with the contemplative process? It seems to me that he can ask only a development of freedom, that is, that the directee move toward greater freedom to let the Lord be Himself with him and to be himself with the Lord. If he asks anything else--that the person reach a certain level of prayer, that he become or remain a religious or a priest, even that at this time he be a good person--he does so at the risk of confusing his own expectations with those of the Spirit, and so interfering with His action. If, however, he implicitly asks only for freedom, and allows it to develop at the person's and the Lord's own pace, this expectation provides an encouraging and challenging atmosphere for the direction without presupposing particular results.

This is a pragmatic expectation. The director does not ask the directee to be more free than the directee wants to be. But he sees growth in freedom as the necessary atmosphere of direction. If the directee does not want more freedom at this point in his life, he must at least exercise his freedom by terminating the direction, either breaking contact entirely or replacing direction with something else: the occasional willing ear or advice-giving session, for instance.

If this atmosphere of growing freedom is present, and is seen to be all that the director asks, the direction will not go stagnant, and should avoid the danger of programming. It should, in other words, help the person to open himself alertly and willingly to the living unpredictable God rather than to any finite plan of life and prayer.

## VI. DIRECTION AND COUNSELING: THE DIFFERENCE

At first glance spiritual direction and counseling look alike. Both bring two people together to talk over a more or less extended period of time. In both the talk is about the life of the person who has come for help. Both usually begin with the same questions: "How do I make this decision?" "How can I be happier?" "How do I deal with this problem?"

The similarity also goes deeper. Both contemporary counseling on life-questions and contemporary direction often look to changes in attitude for the solution of problems, eschew authoritarianism, and strive for free decisions. Both favor development and process rather than abrupt, probably precipitate change, the growth process rather than momentarily right answers. Both, too, require mutual trust, a trust that will enable the person looking for help to unfold between himself and the counselor or director his life as he really experiences it rather than as he would like to experience it.

Where then is the difference between counseling and direction? It seems to lie precisely in the experience of contemplation. In counseling insight, healing, and new directions result basically from the relationship between counselor and client. In direction they result basically from the directee's relationship with the Lord. The counselor does everything he can to protect and promote the integrity and freedom of his relationship with his client. The director does all he can to protect and promote the integrity and freedom of the person's receptivity to and response to the Lord.

This point of vital difference has many consequences. There will be much talk in direction, for example, about the person's life, his goals and lack of goals. His fears, angers, guilts, hopes and ambitions will often be discussed as they would be in counseling. But in direction these discussions will be aimed at helping the person to open himself to a further and unique relationship, that with Reality, or the Lord of Reality, however He is most fully seen at the moment. It is in that relationship with the Lord that the looked-for healing, clarity, and direction of life will be found. Discussion of feelings and details of life will tend, therefore, to become

briefier and less frequent as the direction goes on, and discussion of what is happening in prayer, in key life-choices, and in over-all attitudes will become longer. As direction progresses, too, what the Lord is asking in prayer and life-events becomes more absorbing. What the director knows about Jesus Christ, his Father, and the Spirit of Jesus steadily become more important than what he knows about human feelings and interaction, although the two areas of knowledge will never become totally separated. Joy that is more than the joy of human fulfillment, peace that is beyond understanding, struggles for prizes that cannot be evaluated in human terms require more and more the focus of attention.

#### VII. SOME PRACTICAL CONCLUSIONS

In light of the preceding discussion, who is likely to profit by spiritual direction, and when? And who is likely to be a helpful director?

There are innumerable Christians living sound, productive lives who, as far as one can see, have no desire and no need for spiritual direction as this essay describes it. God is for them a largely unquestioned object of intellectual assent. They are content to see him as the catechism or the CCD program has taught them to see him, live as their religious education has taught them, participate in the Church's life, and sometimes pray. They apparently do not want or need another level of experience of God just now, and to ask another level of them would be to meddle with their lives and perhaps to interfere with the action of the Spirit, who leads them where he chooses. In their number are priests, religious, and lay people of both sexes and all ages.

There are also the adventurers, many of whom would never think of describing themselves as such. They are emotionally healthy enough to settle on and cultivate their own patch of earth but somehow they cannot be content with that small, though perhaps deep and rich, measure of life. Other desires and other hopes keep breaking through. A dream calls them or a restlessness prods them. They are not content.

Not all adventurers are called to a spiritual journey. Some seem satisfied with a journey that carries them beyond their former cultural and

psychic limits but that has no explicit God-centered dimension. But there are others who come, readily or eventually, to know that it is a journey with the Lord that is attracting them. These are the people for whom spiritual direction can be very helpful. The director recognizes them by the "movements" of attraction to the dream, and the restlessness they experience, the attention, either positive or negative, they give to prayer and other elements of the spiritual journey, and by the fact that they look to these elements as dimensions of a fuller life, not as substitutes for life.

At what times in a person's life is he likely to find spiritual direction helpful? In general, when his spiritual limits cause a person enough dissatisfaction to make him seriously consider moving beyond them, then he is likely to find direction a help. The best practical indication that direction will be a help at a particular time, though, is a firm, knowledgeable decision to engage in it. This can usually happen only after a discussion with a director and often happens only after he has met several times with him.

He may have inquired about direction because he was compelled, bored, or curious. After three or four meetings he knows that if he continues he will pray, discuss what happens when he prays, take responsibility for his experience in life and prayer, and thus become involved in a growth process. If he does not seriously want such a growth process, he will begin to cancel appointments. If, knowing now what direction means, he makes a decision to continue, he will probably find the experience helpful.

The person's decision is also the best practical indication of the length of time to be spent in direction. A person mature enough and interested enough to profit by a prayer-and-movement-oriented direction will know when he wants to discontinue frequent meetings and when or whether he wants to begin again. A director who freely uses a "Call me when you'd find it helpful" approach when a time of movement seems to be over will find that such a person will know when to resume direction.

There may, of course, be occasions when a person will want to see a director when no notable movement is occurring in his life. He may want to discuss an issue with someone who knows him well, for instance. But in general the most helpful meetings will be prompted by events, internal or

external, that may indicate a shift, development, or movement to another level in the relationship with God.

There may also be no need for resumption. The person who makes a spiritual journey may spend months and years on broad plateaus where the Spirit guides along straight paths and there is no difficulty in recognizing his leading. Good direction should tend to lessen the need for direction, should build the person's confidence in his own ability to recognize the leading of the Spirit. Good direction should also eliminate resistance to good direction, so that the person would not hesitate to seek it when he felt it would be helpful.

Who is likely to be a helpful director? The choice of a director depends primarily on what one is looking for in direction.

If a person is looking for spiritual growth and the journey with the Lord, he will try to find a director who believes in growth and the journey, shows some signs of having tried them himself, and has the experience, strength, and knowledge to "be with" another person and yet let that person be freely himself or herself before God.<sup>14</sup> The director will have to be, then, a man or woman who can listen carefully and perceptively, who can "be with" the directee without sitting in his lap or cringing against the opposite wall, who will not be put off by the anger, fear, and hesitation that inevitably arise in the directee, particularly as he begins his journey. And he will have to be a person who, as the journey goes on, can help the directee to let himself be aware of his strength-in-the-Lord and let that strength move him, who can help him to rely on the deepest and most valid criteria of Christian growth, and who can allow him and encourage him to respond in his own way to the transforming and directive action of God.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 The reader will find the following books and publications very helpful: (1) the article on "Direction spirituelle," by Edouard des Places et al., in *Dictionnaire de spiritualite ascétique et mystique* (Paris, 1957), tome III, cols. 1002-1214; (2) Jean Laplace, S.J., *The Direction of Conscience* (New York, 1967); (3) the article "Spiritual Direction," by Friedrich Wulf, S.J., in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology* (New York, 1970), VI, 165-167; (4) Joseph de Guibert, S.J., *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice* (St. Louis, 1972), index, s.v. "Spiritual direction."
- 2 See William J. Connolly, S.J., "Contemplation and Social Consciousness in the Context of the Directed Retreat: An Experiential Approach." An address at the 8th National Workshop on the Spiritual Exercises, Cincinnati, August 25-28, 1974, and published by The Program to Adapt the Spiritual Exercises, 144 Grand Street, Jersey City, New Jersey 07302.
- 3 Joseph de Guibert, S.J., *Leçons de théologie spirituelle* (Toulouse, 1946), I, 352-360.
- 4 This Section III first appeared as "Appealing to Strength in Spiritual Direction," in the *Review for Religious*, XXXII (1973), 1060-1063. It is reprinted here, with slight changes, and with grateful acknowledgement to the Editor.
- 5 This does not mean, of course, that the exercitant need not acknowledge and repent of his sins. But the focus of his attention should not be on his sins, but rather on the dialogue with the Lord.
- 6 Galatians 5:22, in *The New English Bible* (New York, 1971).
- 7 See Ladislav Orsy, S.J., "Toward a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, V, no. 5 (Oct., 1973) St. Louis: Assistancy Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality, esp. pp. 173-175.
- 8 David M. Stanley, S.J., "Contemplation of the Gospels, Ignatius Loyola, and the Contemporary Christian," *Theological Studies*, XXIX (1968), 417-443.
- 9 On Divine Revelation, nos. 6 and 5, on pp. 114 and 113 in *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: America Press, 1966).
- 10 *Ibid.*, no. 8, on p. 116.
- 11 The contemplative attitude can be said to begin with the first interior recognition of God as Personal Reality, though the directee may for some time not pay much attention to what He may be for him or be saying to him. Clear development of this attitude would not, then, mark the appearance of new entity, but a new stage of growth.
- 12 Nor do I mean to exclude mystical prayer. Ignatius' own experience is sufficient indication that Ignatian prayer can open out to mystical experience.

- 13 William J. Connolly, S.J., *op. cit.*, p. 2.
- 14 William J. Connolly, S.J., "Freedom and Prayer in Directed Retreats," *Review for Religious*, XXXII (1973), 1358-1364.



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