

## Continuing Formation for Spiritual Directors

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*"Directors should reflect that they themselves are not the chief agent, guide, and movers of souls, but the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, who is never neglectful of souls, and they themselves are instruments for directing souls to perfection through faith and the law of God, according to the spirit given by God to each one." (Living Flame of Love, 3:46)*

Saint John of the Cross sets very high standards for those in the ministry of spiritual direction. In the spiritual classic *Living Flame of Love*, he dedicates a significant amount of his writing to the qualities and practices that directors must have if they want to be effective in their ministry. The teaching, advice, and guidance that Saint John offers are built upon the fundamental truth he articulates in the text above. "The principal guide is the Holy Spirit"; spiritual directors, therefore, are "instruments." To be faithful instruments, directors must be in tune with the Holy Spirit at work in those whom they direct, precisely so they can "observe the road along which God is leading" those individuals. The alternative is quite serious, according to John; directors would begin "to accommodate souls to their own method and condition." Following the guidance of the Holy Spirit would fade into the background for both the director and those being directed. The challenge for directors, then, is to be faithful instruments.

This article will focus on some elements necessary for staying in tune as instruments of the Spirit; that is, the basic components for our continuing formation as spiritual directors. Among the many strengths of the programs designed for the certification of spiritual directors is their comprehensive curriculum, covering the many and varied dimensions of this important ministry. However, not all programs provide for continuing formation after certification. Although spiritual directors usually develop their own personal and academic disciplines for maintaining and enhancing competence, they often express the desire for opportunities to receive more formal input from scripture scholars, theologians, psychologists, and anthropologists. Such input can be a valuable resource, supplementing their own attentiveness to emerging trends in the theories and theologies of human and spiritual development.

Continuing formation for spiritual directors is a convergence of areas that touches the whole of human and spiritual life. The following reflections identify four components of such a formation and invite further discussion, exploration, and elaboration.

### HEALTHY LIVING IN A HECTIC WORLD

"Spiritual directors are people too." On a first and casual reading, we could quickly dismiss that as a statement of the obvious, a point that can be assumed without additional explanation. Given the sublime and sacred nature of the ministry of journeying with others on their spiritual path and of being attentive to their growth, it is possible for us to neglect dedicating sufficient attention, time, and energy to our own continuing development as human beings. This personal component of continuing formation encompasses our overall health as spiritual directors. It includes our attentiveness to every dimension of self-care: physical, emotional, relational, sociocultural, and spiritual.

**"As spiritual directors, we should draw easily from our own experience of striving to live healthy, whole, and holy"**

The ministry of spiritual direction surely calls us to be mentors for those we serve. But there is an aspect of this ministry in which we must also be models. In journeying with others, in supporting and guiding them, we should be able to draw easily from our own experience of striving to live in a way that is healthy, whole, and holy. The apostolic usefulness of that experience will be tenuous if we are consistently negligent regarding our continued growth in one or several areas of our personal life. We must have some strategies to assure our attentiveness to such selfcare. Also, we must identify those persons and mechanisms likely to challenge us if we become negligent in one or more of those areas.

Our continuing formation, as spiritual directors and as persons who desire to grow in life, must assist us in cultivating healthy living in a hectic world. For many of us, spiritual direction is not our only ministry; indeed, it may be but one among many responsibilities that we have. We often deal with exactly the same pressures and tendencies to lose balance that confront those we serve. Our active willingness and actual work to address whatever may need attention in our own life provide a sound base from which we can encourage and support others in their efforts to fashion healthy, whole, and holy lives.

Our primary focus in ministry as spiritual directors ever remains the ways and works of the Lord in the lives of those we serve. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the considerable influence that our personal life can and often does have on our perspective and interpretation of what is shared by others in the context of spiritual direction. If we fail to address or choose not to acknowledge significant issues in our life, then the din of those issues within us may become louder than anything brought to the direction session by those we serve, however intense their concerns may be.

Healthy living in a hectic world must mark our personal life and our efforts to be true instruments for directing souls. The effectiveness of our ministry as spiritual directors cannot be summed up solely by the skills and expertise we possess and use for the benefit of others. That effectiveness is gauged also by the quality of life we place before our directees each time we meet. It is a matter of integrity.

### **SPIRITUAL LIVING IN A SATISFIED WORLD**

Precisely because our ministry calls for more than the implementation of our skills and expertise, we must recognize and embrace our need for resources greater than our own. In particular, we need a sound and sustained relationship with the Lord. On a first and casual reading, this statement too may seem obvious. Yet we need to be reminded occasionally that our relationship with the Lord is not self-sustaining; it requires our presence and attention, a commitment of our time and energy. The spiritual component of our continuing formation includes all aspects of the discipline we establish for nurturing our love relationship with the Lord.

Through the ministry of spiritual direction, we have the privilege of learning much about the spiritual life as it is experienced from day to day in the lives of those we serve. For us, this ministry can be a school of practical and experiential spirituality. We journey with others as they practice and experience their relationship with the Lord in everyday life. Still, we cannot use what we learn to displace our own need for spiritual direction or spiritual companionship. We cannot assume that the clarity and objectivity with which we may support and guide others will be as consistent and certain when we examine our own spiritual journey.

**"Our continuing formation as spiritual directors should assist us in developing and sustaining a thoughtful attitude and approach to life and ministry"**

Our continuing formation, both as spiritual directors and as persons who desire to maintain a sincere and sustained relationship with the Lord, must assist us in cultivating spiritual living in a satisfied world. Even in the midst of our ministry with others, we must work to keep alive within ourselves a profound hunger for spiritual growth, a desire to know what the Lord is asking of us on our own journey. We cannot allow self-satisfaction to replace passion and so draw us into complacency. As we assist others in sustaining and strengthening their spiritual discipline, we must also seek sustenance and strength for our own spiritual life.

Issues related to our own spiritual growth and development are not always significantly different from the issues we address with those we serve in direction. If we are not appropriately attentive to our own concerns or able to maintain a realistic perspective on our continued growth, then we may compromise the quality of support we offer to others

regarding similar concerns. The focus of direction sessions can gradually shift from the issues and concerns of others to those that are unresolved or unaddressed in our own life.

Spiritual living in a satisfied world must mark our prayer life and our desire to be holy instruments for directing souls. The quality of our ministry is affected, at least in part, by our willingness to examine and explore our own journey, without being satisfied that we know and understand all the nuances of God's ways and works in our life. It is a matter of humility.

### **THOUGHTFUL LIVING IN A TECHNOLOGICAL WORLD**

Spiritual direction is not a static ministry. It is not a collection of information and techniques that, once mastered, remains unaltered, as if set in cement. Spiritual direction is a ministry in evolution — dynamic by nature, ever responsive to and interactive with the experiences of those we serve. It must adapt, and we must adapt with it if we are to be effective. Spiritual direction is influenced by current and emerging intellectual, social, cultural, political, theological, and ecclesial events and trends precisely because the people we serve are affected by them. The professional component of our continuing formation challenges us to maintain a sufficient familiarity with the world around us if we are to be a genuine support for those who come to us.

We cannot know or determine in advance all the issues and concerns that might emerge in our meetings with those we serve; they will be as many and varied as the personalities, experiences, and interests of the individuals themselves. It is imperative that we have some fluency in and familiarity with human and faith development, scripture, theology, psychology, spirituality, ethics, liturgy, and ecumenism. Such fluency does not mean that we must become a veritable compendium of human and religious knowledge. More important, we must be familiar with and have access to resources that can provide us with the appropriate and applicable information for the benefit of those we serve.

Our continuing formation, as spiritual directors and as professionals, must assist us in cultivating thoughtful living in a technological world. We must nurture our human capacity for reflection and discernment, for resolution and decision. However technical, extensive, and useful the resources at our disposal, their value and meaning are not independent of their relevance to and usefulness for understanding human experience and, in particular, human growth. Thoughtful living recognizes the importance of those resources for supporting the quality of ministry we provide. Above all, though, it recognizes the responsibility we bear for nurturing our continued growth as professionals and as people who desire and seek to be united to God.

The people we encounter in spiritual direction live and work with the sophisticated technology that touches almost every aspect of life. Of course, we too are affected by that same technology. The conveniences it provides tend to create a dependence within us, making it hard for us to imagine daily life and routine without access to it. We may even use our dependence on technology as an excuse to dispense with ordinary human interaction. Nevertheless, the truth remains that significant and sustained spiritual growth requires personal interaction. It is through and with others that we ordinarily see and respond to God's presence and activity in our world, especially in daily life. Our ministry as spiritual directors challenges us to model such interaction in our own life.

Thoughtful living in a technological world must mark our professional life and our commitment to be instruments for directing souls, to be fully human and truly holy in the company of others and with their support. In ministry as in life, we must know how to tap that greatest of resources: the One who dwells within us and in whose image and likeness we were created. It is a matter of sincerity.

### **PASTORAL LIVING IN A PRAGMATIC WORLD**

There is no single and summary category into which we could place all those we serve in spiritual direction. Those who come to us represent the full spectrum of characters and cultures, personalities and perspectives, blessings and burdens. They bring with them, from

their personal and spiritual lives, a wide range of past and present experiences, future hopes and expectations. They hold a diversity of sacred beliefs and maintain a broad scope of religious practices. We cannot feign complete familiarity with all this; to proceed casually as if we do have full knowledge would be to ignore the true uniqueness and dignity of those who share their lives with us in spiritual direction. We are not alone in this ministry. We have access to colleagues who can assist us with their insights and recommendations, even as we may be called upon to assist them. The practical component of our continuing formation encourages us to seek appropriate assistance when necessary.

Seeking such assistance does not compromise the essentially private and personal character of spiritual direction. Rather, it reflects an awareness that as ministers, we need the practical support of others — especially those in our faith community and others who are skilled spiritual directors. The search for appropriate assistance recognizes and acknowledges that a priority for our ministry is the discernment and determination of the directions in which the Spirit is leading and moving within another person's life. With that discernment and determination, the person makes decisions that can be of tremendous importance in life. We are not alone and isolated when we guide others in the process of making such decisions; we do not rely solely on our own resources. Truly, this is the Lord's work, in us and through us. We must be ever sensitive and attentive to that work. We must also obtain assistance when necessary, both by seeking supervision and by networking with others whom we can call upon for referrals.

**"Charity is the standard we must use to determine the quality of our responsiveness to others"**

Our continuing formation, as spiritual directors and as ministers, must assist us in cultivating pastoral living in a pragmatic world. Our capacity for listening and responding to those with whom we work in direction must be regularly refined and sharpened. In general, our ministry involves one-on-one encounters. There are surely other configurations in which spiritual direction takes place, but the usual arrangement is for the director to work with one individual at a time. Very quickly, we learn how unique individuals are in their relationship with God and in their need for continued growth and development. The pragmatism that often drives the ways in which society gauges accomplishment might cause such individual encounters to seem inefficient. A one-size-fits-all, assembly line approach might seem preferable in the interest of time and economy of effort.

The personal nature and pastoral practice of our ministry stand in sharp contrast to such tenets. The Spirit does not work in generic ways, precisely because its work is from within the person's unique history and personality, gifts and responsibilities. Our ministry must follow the Spirit's lead in this, so that spiritual direction never becomes blind or deaf to the individuality of the person. To follow that lead, however, we must be ever attuned to the varying nuances of the Spirit's presence and activity within ourselves. We must develop and nurture the eyes and ears — and heart — to note the Spirit in our own lives. Our experience, skills, and maturation as directors will give us the eyes, ears, and heart to attend to the Spirit at work in the lives of those we serve.

Pastoral living in a pragmatic world must mark our ways and means as spiritual directors, as well as our hope and desire to be instruments for directing souls. In ministry, we work with people made in God's image and likeness — individuals who are gifts of God's creation. We must live and minister with a respect that truly celebrates that creation. It is a matter of charity.

#### **COMMITMENT TO THOSE WE SERVE**

Saint John of the Cross challenges us to be "instruments for directing souls." Our effectiveness in this ministry will be shaped, at least in part, by the quality of our continuing formation. Undoubtedly, the specific content of that formation will vary, depending upon our particular needs in life and ministry. Nevertheless, we can all focus on certain general areas

as we formulate a strategic plan for our growth as ministers. Our seriousness concerning that growth reflects a genuine commitment to those we serve.

Our continuing formation as spiritual directors must be designed to assist us in developing and sustaining a healthy attitude and approach to life and ministry. With integrity, we must attend to any and every dimension of our life that could compromise or counteract our effectiveness in ministry. That integrity will involve a regular evaluation of the physical, emotional, relational, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of our life. Furthermore, that evaluation must be done without assuming that whatever needs attention will become obvious. The status of our overall health may be much more nuanced than the obvious can sometimes reveal. Honesty with ourselves is the operative priority here. Subtle changes in one or several dimensions in life, if neglected or ignored, can affect our perspective in ministry, our understanding of those we serve, and our response to the needs of their unique spiritual journey.

Continuing formation must enable us to develop and sustain a spiritual attitude and approach to life and ministry. With humility, we must assure that our own spiritual discipline remains realistic and resilient in the midst of the ordinary and sometimes extraordinary activities, pressures, and responsibilities that shape our daily life. That humility involves a review of our discipline to determine if and how it may need modification. It also includes the recognition of our own need for direction as an important support for growth and development in the spiritual life. Fidelity is the operative priority here. Our ministry as spiritual directors does not immunize us against the possibility — however inadvertent — of neglecting personal prayer, spiritual reading, participation in a faith community, or any of the basic components for maintaining a vibrant relationship with the Lord. Diminishment in the importance we assign to our spiritual life can compromise our ability to accompany others on their spiritual journey and to offer them experienced guidance.

Our continuing formation as spiritual directors must be designed to assist us in developing and sustaining a thoughtful attitude and approach to life and ministry. With sincerity, we must examine the means and methods we use in formulating our responses and suggestions to those we serve. That sincerity will involve an assessment of our continuing education in terms of theology, human and faith development, and emerging trends in spirituality and spiritual direction. It also entails maintaining familiarity with issues related to the culture and context in which we minister. Sensitivity is the operative priority here. Spiritual direction does not function well if it is cast in concrete; it must be sufficiently sensitive to respond with some proficiency. The regular assessment of our skills and techniques will identify whatever refinement and reeducation may be necessary to ensure our competence in ministry. Our responsibility to those we serve requires no less.

Continuing formation must help us in cultivating a pastoral attitude and approach to life and ministry. Charity is the standard we must use to determine the quality of our responsiveness to others, for it is the heart of our ministry as spiritual directors. Charity marks the difference between assisting those we serve in building a durable relationship with the Lord, and simply talking about God as a topic of interest with them. Compassion is the operative priority here. Spiritual direction strives to support those we serve by understanding their developing experience of life and by offering appropriate strategies for strengthening their relationship with the Lord and enhancing their practice of faith. We cultivate such understanding and support by practicing our everyday ministry as directors, and by using various resources to keep pace with others in this ministry: participating in organizations for directors, reading relevant periodicals and publications, and belonging to a network of other directors and counselors for referral, supervision, and exchange of ideas. We can and do make a difference in others' lives, especially when we minister with love for the Lord and compassionate concern for others. These are significant and even identifying elements of our commitment to those we serve.

### **OBSERVE THE ROAD**

In the quote that opened this article, Saint John of the Cross characterizes spiritual directors as “instruments for directing souls.” That is already a significant challenge, given the quality of life and ministry it calls us to develop and maintain. Immediately following that challenge,

though, he articulates a pressing mandate: “The whole concern of directors should not be to accommodate souls to their own method and condition, but they should observe the road along which God is leading one; if they do not recognize it, they should leave the soul alone and not bother it.” It is intriguing that Saint John speaks of directors in this context as either recognizing the road along which others are traveling or merely being a bother to them on their journey. In the latter case, he does not hesitate to say that the director should leave the person alone. The difference lies in our ability to recognize and understand something of the Lord’s ways and works in others’ lives. This recognition and understanding are at the very core of becoming and being proficient instruments for directing souls — instruments who facilitate the Lord’s work and communicate the Spirit’s wisdom.

Integrity, humility, sincerity, and charity are the basic qualities that will guide and support us in forging a life and ministry that are healthy, spiritual, thoughtful, and pastoral. Our continuing formation, therefore, should be designed to assist us in cultivating those qualities throughout life. Those same qualities will be among the greatest gifts we can bring to others through the ministry of spiritual direction. Such gifts will keep us, and those we serve, mindful of the fundamental truth that “the principal guide is the Holy Spirit.” As spiritual directors, we have the potential and the privilege of serving others as instruments for directing souls.

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