

“TAKE CARE”
Thoughts on Choosing a Spiritual Director

“It is very important that individuals, desiring to advance in recollection and perfection, take care into whose hands they entrust themselves, for the disciple will become like the master” (*The Living Flame of Love*, 3:30). This is a most wise instruction from Saint John of the Cross and should be taken very seriously. If we recognize the value and priority of our relationship with God and if we desire to grow in that relationship, then we should choose carefully the person who will serve as our spiritual director. We will reflect and act upon the advice and suggestions that our director gives; we want to “take care into whose hands we entrust” ourselves. What follows are some thoughts to consider in choosing a director.

I begin with a well-known text in which John of the Cross speaks of the principal tasks and responsibilities of those who serve in the ministry of spiritual direction.

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

Though the main focus of this text is the director, there are important implications here for directees to consider.

“*The principal guide is the Holy Spirit.*” This is at the very heart of the theology of spiritual direction. To be attentive to the Spirit as guide, we should choose a director with whom we do not have an extensive history. A person that we know well could become a distraction to the objectivity that is necessary for a healthy direction relationship. Our focus must remain on the Spirit at work within us. If we choose a director with whom we are familiar in another context(s), human factors can emerge that compromise that objectivity. We can become hesitant or embarrassed about sharing on a deep level because we know that we will encounter the director in those other settings. And, we may see the director in a light that is not helpful to the relationship. This has the potential to create an uncomfortability that can encumber effective spiritual direction.

“*According to the spirit given by God to each one.*” Spiritual direction is not designed to be ‘one size fits all.’ It must be attentive to the unique ways in which the Spirit is guiding each of us. To maximize openness to the graces available through spiritual direction, we should choose a director with whom we do not have a personal or professional relationship. Dual relationships raise the issue of safeguarding appropriate boundaries. Personal boundaries are not only physical and emotional, they are also informational. Directees and directors who are in more than one relationship with one another may unintentionally share information outside direction; such inadvertent breaches of confidentiality can erode the trust necessary for direction. Closely related to this is the situation of a spiritual director serving for several members of a community/group to which he/she belongs. While there may be situations in which alternatives are not possible, in general, a diversity of directors from outside is preferable for the spiritual health and development of the community/group.

“*Not to accommodate souls to their own method and condition.*” Directors who have been well formed and trained are keenly aware that the potential for compromising objectivity and personal boundaries is very real. They will understand precisely why Saint John of the Cross cautions them in this regard. If that potential for compromise is present, we have the right to assume that the director will notice it and address it; or, that the director will be willing to

discuss it fully if we mention it. We must sense the director's conviction that spiritual direction is about God's work in us and not about what the director can accomplish.

In light of the above, what qualities might a directee look for in a director? First, a *humility* that invites our freedom to explore the ways of the Spirit in every dimension of life. When we do not sense that we are encouraged to take up that exploration, we need to examine the roots of that, even though it may involve questioning the health or focus of the direction relationship.

Second, a *knowledge* of the spiritual life that encourages faith in God and focus on God present and active in our life, and that nurtures confidence of being guided along the pathways of the spiritual journey. Though we may not be familiar with every kind of experience that can emerge in the spiritual life, we must have a basic trust that the director's guidance is useful and beneficial in providing us with some insight into our experience.

Third, a *concern* that promotes growth. Even though directors may ask about health or affective issues when appropriate, we must have a sense that our continuing spiritual development is at the foundation of the questions, suggestions, and recommendations we receive in direction.

Fourth, a *respect* that affirms us as persons. Spiritual direction can invite us to experiment with different prayer forms and perspectives. Still, we must experience our spiritual life as truly our own, as a graced adventure that fits our daily life and capabilities as they continue to evolve.

Fifth, an *honesty* that is willing to challenge. The preceding qualities do not negate the director's responsibility to challenge and address honestly any issues, behaviors, or practices that could be detrimental to our progress in the spiritual life. We should sense that we are welcome to ask the director for suggestions and recommendations that will facilitate the deepening of our relationship with and response to God.

Sixth, the above qualities together point to the director's *faith* which always recognizes and acknowledges that "the principal guide is the Holy Spirit." We should sense that this recognition and acknowledgment are never lost sight of in the direction relationship and that they are an expression of the director's own love and desire for God.

The director's humility, knowledge, concern, respect, honesty, and faith, however blessed and beneficial, do not exonerate us from taking responsibility for our part in the direction relationship. The topics which emerge in direction can be uncomfortable and probing. Failure to face and address those topics, at times, may not be a reflection on the director's ability, but a call to our own self-examination for any lack of self-knowledge, low self-esteem, or unwillingness to look at our life as it really is.

When speaking about those seeking a spiritual director, Saint John of the Cross makes the assumption that they are "desiring to advance in recollection and perfection." Two brief points implicit in this phrase will serve as a conclusion to these reflections. First, this desire to advance must be genuine and not merely a ploy to be noticed as 'holy.' Such a ploy is but a very thin veneer for pride. Second, the spiritual direction relationship must be at the service of that desire to advance. Anything less will not point the way toward recollection and perfection and, ultimately, union with God. Truly, then, directees must "take care into whose hands they entrust themselves." It is a matter of life, our spiritual life.

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