This article presents the practice of spiritual direction in the Roman Catholic tradition. Specific attention is given to: definition and description of spiritual direction, scriptural roots, Roman Catholic specificity, practice in the early Church and association with the beginning of Monasticism, and the impact of Vatican II. The development of different forms of spiritual direction is presented within the context of the variety of theological, philosophical, cultural, and historical biases evident throughout church history. The process of authentic spiritual transformation and the role of the spiritual director plays are described—both as it was understood historically and in terms of the present practice. Contrasts between spiritual direction and traditional psychotherapy are proposed.

To trace “spiritual direction” in the Roman Catholic Tradition is to try to harvest fields rich with produce almost beyond counting, teeming with a bounty sprung from charisms of the Holy Spirit seeded over centuries. It is a daunting task, but one that can leave us rejoicing and praising the Lord for variety, as well as for staple, and at times, exotic fruit. Blessed the one who fears not the diversity or surprises. Blessed the one who is willing and able to plunge into the harvest and revel in its feeding places. These pages are an attempt to bundle and share some of the traditions of Roman Catholic Spiritual Direction.

CATHOLIC SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION

Christian spiritual direction may be defined as the help or guidance that a person (directee) seeks and another (director) gives over a period of time in the process of growing in a loving relationship with God. This process unfolds under the continual impulse, inspiration, and action of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual direction, therefore, involves three persons: the directee, the director, and the Holy Spirit.

Effective Christian spiritual direction helps a person: (a) to understand and live out their unique relationship with God who calls and continues to interact with each of us; (b) to live this relationship as a disciple of Jesus Christ, putting on the mind and heart of Christ; (c) to know and utilize the means of nurturing and strengthening this relationship, such as methods of prayer, meditation, and asceticism; (d) to recognize, disarm, and eliminate whatever internal or external forces or sinful attitudes and behavior that diminish or destroy this relationship; and (e) to experience and live the power and fruits of this relationship by responding to Jesus’ gospel imperative of witness and mission in the Kingdom of God, present in every day life. Spiritual guidance or direction is the human/divine assistance, helping translate discipleship into a life journey of transformation. Called to be a disciple, sent to be an apostle, this is the fundamental vocation of all baptized Christians. This process of change has always benefited from the guidance of others.

Christian spiritual direction becomes specifically Roman Catholic when done within the context of the Catholic Church’s understanding of Scripture, is connected to its sacraments, and is aware of the teaching and guidelines that have protected and fostered a variety of spiritualities over the centuries of the Church’s history.

Spiritual direction is a relational process in which the director and directee develop attentiveness to the actions of the Holy Spirit in the person seeking direction. It is not a program or activity aimed at mastering mystical/ascetical theology, nor the exploration of theories about spirituality or spiritual growth, nor training in the practice of virtues or moral discipline.

Spiritual direction focuses on discovering what hinders and what promotes attentiveness and response to the Spirit’s action in this particu-
lar directee. It is not simply the skilled application of techniques and strategies mapped out for the achievement of holiness or a deeper spiritual life, although one could easily assume this by reading some of the guides or textbooks on spiritual direction. Spiritual direction is not a speculative venture, but an experiential process focused on one’s lived relationship with God. Spiritual direction is grounded in the experience of the Divine.

As one author describes it, “Religious experience is to spiritual direction what foodstuff is to cooking. Without foodstuff there can be no cooking. Without religious experience there can be no spiritual direction” (Barry & Connolly, 1982, p. 8). “Spiritual direction is not an escapist head-trip that tries to intellectualize reality, but a patient effort to recognize God in all the complexity of His presence to us, on all the levels of our being” (Carlson, 1996, p. 73). Theology, concerned with understanding, is an “eyebrows-up” process; spiritual direction, concerned with a loving response in faith, is very much an “eyebrows-down” process.

The fundamental requirement for true spiritual direction is a belief and trust that the Trinity is at work in the world and in each of us here and now. The spiritual director helps the seeker to be attentive, open, and responsive to the Spirit’s presence and constant invitation to transformation. Spiritual direction helps acquire a new way of seeing, of being aware, leading to a new way of personally responding to this self-communicating God.

Multiple and diverse spiritualities can be found in the Catholic heritage, a heritage shared by many Christians. These spiritual ways of life often came from men and women inspired, gifted, given a charism, by the Holy Spirit. From these spiritualities emerged schools, movements, religious communities focusing on a particular aspect of Christ’s life or message, stressing different theological perspectives, reflecting historical, cultural, and philosophical mindsets, as well as developments in the sciences and arts of understanding the human person. Spiritual direction often took shape in the light of these different spiritualities. There never has been, nor will there ever be, a “one-fits-all” approach or technique of spiritual direction in the Catholic Church. But the roots of all valid Christian spiritual direction cannot ignore its biblical roots.

**History of Spiritual Direction in the Catholic Church**

**Spiritual Direction in Scripture**

Is spiritual direction biblical? Without hesitation, yes! Scripture gives evidence of spiritual guidance in the time of Jesus and the earliest days of the Christian community. People were not just taught about the Way, they were helped to live the Way.

Those nights Jesus spent with Nicodemus, leading him into the mysteries of being “born again” (John 3), were times of guidance. How else describe those times “apart” when Jesus slowly revealed to his disciples how to “follow him”? It is fair to use the term spiritual direction to describe the activity of Ananias helping Paul translate his blinding insight into a whole new way of being and doing (Acts 9:10-19). Paul was a spiritual guide, drawing from his own powerful experience that had brought him to his declaration, “I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). To discover and proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Savior, to be baptized by water and anointed in the Spirit, to join a particular Christian denomination, are only the beginning, the “initiation,” into living the Way.

Paul’s pastoral letters to Philemon, Timothy, and Titus are filled with spiritual advice, guiding the recipients into responsible adult faith. “Everything in Paul, from his explanations, even dissertations on sin and nature, through his moral teachings, through his instructions on Christian discipline within the family, the Church, the community, shows his understanding of the same process that Jesus used in his ministry, the process we call in a more narrow form, spiritual direction” (Schroeder & Meyers, 1996, p. 43). “Finally brothers, we urge you and appeal to you in the Lord Jesus to make more and more progress in the kind of life that you are meant to live” (1 Thes. 4:1). For Paul it is all the question of being transformed into the image of Christ, to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27).

John’s letters unfolding the consequences of his definition of God as Love are meant to guide from truth to life. James’ letter insisting on the necessary integration and interaction of faith and works, urges the reader to be moving always from believing to living (James 1: 23-25; 2:14-17). Spiritual direction is a graced process that helps an individual to believe in, to seize, and to appropriate the reality of the hope-filled gift proclaimed by the One seated on the throne, “See, I make all things new!” (Rev. 21:5). And
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thus a practice with biblical roots passed into the life of the Christian community.

Early Practice of Spiritual Direction in the Catholic Church

As one reads the New Testament, the history of the early Church, and the directives of the Apostles and Fathers, it is evident that spiritual direction and development was once the norm for all Christians. It was the task of the apostles, priests, and pastors, to provide spiritual food and guidance for their people (Schroeder & Meyers, 1996). The members were “formed” and “guided” by their participation in the community’s sacramental and liturgical life, through mutual prayer, edification, and correction (Rossi, 1996). People were motivated and inspired by the community sharing its experience of growth in Christ and guidance by the Holy Spirit. Some of the formation included “informal admonitions by one’s parents, spouse, friends and fellow Christians” (Merton, 1960, pp. 11-12).

In the 4th century, persecution and martyrdom in the Church came to an end. Christianity was accepted and sanctioned by Emperor Constantine. This acceptance, however, robbed the Christian of the dramatic occasions to manifest his or her total gift of self to God by suffering or dying because of their faith in Christ. Yet, many desired to give powerful, living witness of their commitment to Christ. They felt that life in the world was incompatible with authentic Christian living and so turned their backs on the world (fuga mund—flee the world) and in a sense “died” to the world. They began to live austere lives of intense prayer and penance.

Many believed this isolation was necessary to be able to accept on an ongoing basis the salvation won for them by Christ. They also wanted to witness to the power of God’s hold on them. Seeking a radical kind of life, many gravitated to the desert, especially in Egypt and Syria. Some lived as hermits, others lived near one another in small gatherings, or communities. Here are the beginnings of the monastic movement in the Church. Also the seeds of future religious life were present in the burning desire these men and women had to surrender their will, their possessions, and their procreative powers to God. This total offering of self developed into the vowed profession of the religious counsels: poverty, chastity, and obedience.

As some of these men and women gained reputations for holiness, others sought them out for spiritual guidance, asking them to be their “spiritual fathers or mothers.” In such cases, these holy men and women, to some extent, replaced the bishops and presbyters who were the ordinary spiritual guides of the people. The great spiritual figures in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts were often not priests, and some were women. This predominantly lay movement was a manifestation of the charismatic dimension of the Church, the Holy Spirit powerfully at work, but at a bit of a distance from the hierarchical structure of the Church.

The spirituality born in these desert experiences was marked by austerity and starkness. To work on one’s spiritual life meant to combat against demons trying to snatch or drive the soul away from Christ. These demons were encountered in the desert, but also in the individual’s dwelling, imagination, or heart. The spiritual skill or gift most needed in this work of combat was discretion, the capacity to discern between the good and the false spirits. John calls us to this task in his first letter (1 John 4:1-6). Very few felt adequate to do this by themselves, and therefore sought help and guidance from the men and women of noted spiritual experience.

The desert fathers and mothers gave advice to the neophytes concerning prayer, fasting, work, discipline, virtues, and other skills and practices needed to discern the spirits at work in them and to be able to respond effectively. Their directives were often short statements. This material became known as the “Wisdom of the Desert.” This interaction, often rather authoritarian, between these desert guides and seekers gave shape to spiritual direction as it has been more commonly recognized in the Christian tradition. Some notable names of this period: St. Anthony of Egypt (d. 356), John Cassian (d. 435), and Evagrius Ponticus (d. 400).

Spiritualities Are Always Contextual

Before continuing to explore spiritualities and spiritual direction, it is important to understand that spiritualities are always contextual. They reflect theological, philosophical, cultural, and historical biases. Another context is the “locus.” Was this spirituality linked to monasticism, religious life, or for the laity? It will be of value to touch upon some of these biases that have influenced spiritualities in the Catholic Church up to the present day.

In the early Church, the Platonic view of the soul as imprisoned by the body can be found in many
A healthy spirituality is grounded in the task of renunciation for the sake of the development of the soul. In later centuries, more attention was given to the struggle, the combat, the civil war within each person between the body and soul, flesh and spirit. Such influences have re-emerged from time to time, as seen in Jansenism in 16th and 17th century France.

Biblical theology, however, does not deal with such dichotomies, but considers the human person as one. The division comes not in the person, or the world, in itself, but rather in the attitude or the direction and goals that infects the person or the world. In se a healthy spirituality is grounded in the Genesis assertions, “And God saw how good it was” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and “God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good” (Gen. 1:31). To some it may seem a stretch, but a healthy spirituality also keeps in mind, “let no one separate what God has joined” (Mt. 19:6).

Within the view that the body is bad and the soul is good, spiritual development became mostly concerned with the “soul.” The individual did everything possible to ignore, denigrate, or even destroy the body. Much spiritual direction thus focused on overcoming these urges, this concupiscence. This resulted in a great emphasis on asceticism and mortification in spiritual direction. Asceticism involves physical and spiritual practices aimed at conditioning individuals so that the soul may conquer and control all non-spiritual forces. There are interior ascetical practices: control of thoughts, struggle against gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, boredom, vainglory, pride, and acedia (i.e., lack of commitment to spiritual values, listlessness, unconcern, depression, a spiritual “coach-potato”). External ascetical practices would be set prayer times, fasting, bodily mortification (Muto, 2000), vigils, renouncing legitimate joys and pleasures, custody of the eyes (not of negligible value in today’s “image-saturated” culture), and other reining-in of fleshly needs, desires, and tendencies. Such a negative spirituality, however, can run the risk spelled out in the gospel story of the man who swept out one demon only to have his house invaded with seven others (Mt. 12:43-45; Lk. 11:24-26). This approach was reflected in the early Desert Fathers and Mothers and also Rules for monastic or religious life.

Asceticism has a checkered history. Initially it was renunciation for the sake of the development of the soul. In later centuries, more attention was given to meditating on the suffering Christ and the part sin played in His passion and death. At this point asceticism took on a punitive sense. The “sinful me” had to be punished and kept very humble. It is here that asceticism acquired some of its negative reputation because of exaggerated practices such as flagellation, wearing “hair-shirts,” putting on a spiked glove every night as did Henry Suso, wearing a chain embedded in one’s body as did John of the Cross, and even some body mutilation. Much of this activity hinted at hatred of the body. Perhaps the roots of the “no pain, no gain” school of spirituality are here.

A good spiritual director warns against and even prohibits the extremes, but does encourage healthy ascetical practices. Good guidance helps people maintain a balance between fervor that could turn into unhealthy exaggerations and laxity that sabotages or destroys spiritual foundations.

If the theological focus is on works, on gaining one’s salvation rather than accepting the salvation gained for us by Christ, then spirituality is also skewed. In this perspective, the focus becomes “saving one’s soul,” and the result is often the burden of many spiritual activities, devotions, and works to be accomplished. This can even give rise spiritual competitiveness, which has not always been foreign to monastic and religious life, nor to small groups or coteries in the Church. Any direction that focuses on our efforts rather than on the Spirit at work in us, steers one in the wrong direction. There is the risk of adopting a semi-Pelagian, Avis Rent-a-Car mentality in the spiritual life—“We Try Harder” (Wallace, 1996).

Classic monastic and religious Rules provided the foundation for much spiritual direction. Among these were: the Rule of St. Augustine (d. 430), the oldest surviving rule for the religious in the West,
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and the Rule of St. Benedict (d. 543). Benedict is considered the Father of Western Monasticism and his Rule is the basis of many monastic communities, including the Trappists and the Rule of the Carmelites (1200s).

Early Patristic theology was articulated reflections on one’s faith, on one’s experience of God in and through the Scriptures. Entering the Middle Ages, theology became more a speculative sciences. The spiritual life also became the object of scientific scrutiny. Manuals of ascetical or mystical theology and books on the “science of the saints,” made their appearance. The spiritual life was analyzed. “Maps” and “stages” of spiritual development were described and used by spiritual directors, unfortunately, often in a very Procrustean way.

Pockets of reactions always exist in the Church and to counteract some of the too abstract or speculative content of theology and spirituality, mystical movements arose which placed the focus more on the “experience” of God, Jesus, and the Spirit. Mystical writings flowed more from hearts bursting with the experience of divine love and feverishly setting the imagination in motion. The ravishing experience of God’s presence and love or the near-death sense of God’s absence and silence, both became subjects of spiritual writings.

Spiritual directors often turned to these writings to understand spiritual experiences. These works also can help guide the seekers to a more contemplative and affective surrender to the mystery of God. The Institutional Church, however, looked upon mystics and their writings with suspicion and wary-interest because mystics were not as containable or controllable as the speculative theologian.

Some notable mystical writers are: Julian of Norwich (1373), Showings or Revelations of Divine Love; Walter Hilton (1396), The Stairway of Perfection; The Cloud of Unknowing (Anonymous, 1399); St. John of the Cross (1591), The Dark Night of the Soul, The Spiritual Canticle, The Living Flame of Love; St. Teresa of Avila (1582), The Way of Perfection, The Interior Castle.

The locus, as well as the focus, of spirituality has a notable influence. For many centuries the “spiritual” was seen as the privileged domain of those in monastic and religious life or the priesthood. Therefore spiritual direction was for a spiritual “elite.” This definitely influenced the ways and means that were promoted for holiness. Most spiritual exercises or activities were connected to the vowed state and community life of religious. There was little regard for the married and single states of life. Prayer was understood almost exclusively as “times apart” with its definite cycles, often linked to the recitation of the Divine Office, the Psalms, as in a monastic or cloistered setting.

But religious life itself shifted from the monastic setting and became more “apostolic.” Religious men and women began to respond to the needs of lay people living ordinary lives in the world. Thus spiritual direction became more open and connected to the everyday life of the Christian. Strong promoters of apostolic and lay spirituality were:

1. St. Francis of Assisi (1226), founder of the Franciscans, and St. Dominic (1221), founder of the Dominicans, both mendicant religious Orders whose pastoral task was to preach Christ to the laity, especially to counteract some dangerous teachings of the times, and to work for the care of souls.

2. Thomas a Kempis (1471) who wrote the classic The Imitation of Christ (1989) to help ordinary people on their spiritual journey and is considered the most widely read spiritual book after the Bible. Kempis was part of the movement Devotio Moderna (1300s–1400s), a movement interested in the mystical life, prayer, meditation, and piety for the laity, and in combating purely humanistic values of the day;

3. St. Ignatius of Loyola (1556) was the founder of the Jesuits and the author of the Spiritual Exercises (trans. 1951), one of the most insightful guides for spiritual direction, especially regarding the discernment of spirits. The Spiritual Exercises are still a very powerful and popular form of retreat. They can be done over 30 days, on an 8 day retreat, or on an ongoing daily basis.

4. St. Francis de Sales (1622) was a lawyer, the Bishop of Geneva, and a renowned spiritual director who wrote Introduction to the Devout Life (1972) and Treatise on the Love of God (1962). In Introduction, Francis states: “My purpose is to instruct those who live in town, within families, or at court, and by their state of life are obliged to live an ordinary life.” He once observed, “The measure of love is to love without measure” (Muto, 2000, p. 81).

It should be kept in mind that all these spiritualities were focused primarily on Christ and how to live out the mystery of Christ-in-you. At times devotions to Mary or the saints played a part in different spiritualities, but their authenticity always was assessed on the ultimate connection with Jesus.
In the modern era, there has been a shift in philosophical thought that resulted in a new worldview. From the classical, Greek, static view of life, science and other empirical observations opened a worldview that is fluid, evolutionary. Life and the universe began to be thought of in terms of process, which connects more with the biblical sense of history and spirituality as pilgrimage and journey. The 20th century also brought the impact of psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Science has created unimagined new frontiers and has traversed them almost as quickly. Communism, Socialism, Existentialism, Capitalism, Secularism, Feminism, etc., worlds were being shaped by new "isms." Faith, religion, and spirituality were naturally influenced by it all. Some reactions were exploratory, accommodating, adapting, finding mutual ground; others were reactionary, condemnatory, rejecting, setting up enemy lines. Some faiths and religions entered the dance, others blocked off new ghettos.

During the past century, the Catholic Church itself experienced many shifts. Biblical scholarship was given a new lease on life with Pope Pius XII’s letter *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943). The letter sanctioned a wide berth to biblical studies, incorporating cultural, historical, and textual approaches that enabled the discovery of many levels of meaning. Although already being done by some non-Catholic biblical scholars, this approach led to a tremendous revival of biblical appreciation in the Catholic church. The central importance of Scripture has become an integral part of the revised liturgy and also a touchstone for authentic spirituality. Catholic biblical studies have also been instrumental in protecting Roman Catholics from the fundamentalistic approaches evident in some other denominations.

In the 1940s and 50s, new lay movements emerged: the Catholic Worker Movement in the United States led by Dorothy Day; Young Christian Workers in France; Legion of Mary in Ireland; Cursillo movement in Spain, Latin America, and the United States; Christian Family Movement in the United States (McBrien, 1994). These movements brought spirituality into the marketplace and spiritual direction took on new vigor as members sought guidance for their involvement in the world.

However, the greatest seismic shift in the Catholic Church happened in the early 1960s when Pope John XXIII convoked an Ecumenical Council, a gathering of Catholic Bishops from around the world. From 1962 to 1965 they met in Rome for three sessions. This event became known as Vatican II. There had been a Vatican I Council in 1869-70. John XXIII’s desired to open the windows to allow a breath of fresh air into the Church and to establish a genuine, loving, open dialogue, and interaction between the Church and the modern world. Led by the Holy Spirit, the Pope called for a new pouring out of the Holy Spirit in the Church. He wanted a “new Pentecost.” “Aggiornamento” was the buzzword, meaning “bringing up to date” or “renewal.” Renewal was sought by returning to the “roots” of the Church’s foundation and existence for nearly 2000 years. These roots are the Scriptures, the Liturgy, the Church’s teachings, and especially the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Council, and the period following it, marked a strong re-appropriation of the Holy Spirit in the Roman Catholic Church. There was even a name change. No longer was the third person of the Blessed Trinity called the "Holy Ghost," but "Holy Spirit," with all the biblical resonance of life, power, vivifying force, breath, inspiration, movement, and transformation.

There was never a denial of the Holy Spirit in the Catholic tradition. Catholics have always believed they receive the Holy Spirit at baptism and its presence is reinforced in the sacrament of confirmation. Catholics believe in and pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit as described in Scripture (Is. 11:2; 1 Cor. 12:8-11). The Catholic Church also believes that the Spirit of Truth promised by Jesus (John 14:26; 15:26) has been present throughout its history. This Presence has preserved from error the handing on of Revelation, the articulation of the Creeds and Tradition. The Spirit guided the establishment of the Canon of Scripture and has inspired men and women, some leading or reforming the Church, others founding religious communities or movements. Catholics do not doubt that the Holy Spirit is at the heart of the Church.

Vatican II produced 16 documents. From these documents came major paradigm shifts, some bringing Catholics back to their roots, others leading into new territory. Some of the major Council contributions are the following:

1. The Church is described primarily as "the people of God" rather than as a hierarchical institution.
2. There is a "universal call to holiness," eliminating the sense of a "spiritual elite" made up of the
ordained and consecrated religious, but excluding the laity (McBrien, 1994).

3. Liturgy, the summit and fountain of life and holiness in the Church, invites fuller participation of the laity by use of the vernacular instead of Latin. Lay people can be Lectors and Eucharistic Ministers, highlighting the "priesthood of the faithful" conferred at Baptism.

4. The Scriptures are given renewed prominence in the Liturgy of the Word.

5. The laity can now exercise many ministries in the church, utilizing the diversity of gifts, charisms, bestowed upon all by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-11). Vatican II established a new relationship between the Church and contemporary history and culture. In The Church in the Modern World, no. 1, it states: "Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their [Christian's] hearts. Christians cherish a deep solidarity with the human race and its history." Spiritual directors cannot ignore the discoveries and advances made in understanding the development of the human person; the role of human sexuality, the holistic understanding of what it means to be fully human, to be holy, in today's world. Contemporary understanding of the human person is closer to the biblical view of man than that of the more abstract, scholastic definitions. Good spiritual direction will reflect this.

Vatican II encouraged recognition of the signs of grace in other religions and faiths, even non-Christian ones. The challenge is to discover what is good, what we have in common, affirm it, and when possible, celebrate it. A good spiritual director will have this capacity.

The Council's call for "inculturation," (i.e., expressing the Catholic Christian faith in the language and symbols of other cultures), is helping the Church to claim its true "catholic," universal, dimension, and to become less Roman, Western, European, and First World.

**Description of the "Process" of Authentic Transformation**

One of the principle settings for spiritual direction throughout the centuries has been the sacrament of Confession/Penance/Reconciliation. In confession, the penitents were assured of God's forgiveness expressed by the words of absolution spoken by the priest. The priest also gave advice on how to avoid sin. In the 5th and 6th centuries, Irish monks produced "Penitentials," books filled with remedies for sins and confessors used them as guides in their care of souls. Because of the sacramental context much spiritual direction focused on moral living.

The ultimate goal of Christian spiritual life, however, is to "put on Christ" (Rom. 13:14). The goal of Christian spiritual direction is to help a person "become sensitive to God's presence, deepen the personal relationship with Christ and attend to the action of the Spirit in one's life" (McCreary, 1996, p. 113). Anything and everything that contributes to that work may be included in the process of spiritual direction.

Direction most often occurs in a one on one situation, a director, and a directee. A first step in the process is to explore the desires and motivations of the person seeking direction. Are they seeking help to deal with a present crisis or problem, or are they seeking guidance for their long-term pilgrimage of life? What is their understanding of the Christian gospel way of life? How do they define a "spiritual life"? What are their present spiritual goals? Do they have a prayer life? What is their experience of God in prayer?

Classically, spiritual growth has been described in three stages: purgative, illuminative, and unitive. While there is a rich history within the Roman Catholic Church concerning the meaning of each of these classic categories and their place in the journey to Christian spiritual maturity, each of these stages has already been discussed in the two preceding articles. Therefore, I will not try the patience of the reader by echoing that information here. It is important to observe, however, that in the context of Vatican II and contemporary psychological focus, that there is a growing emphasis on the "holistic" approach to spirituality and spiritual direction. The goal of Christian holistic spirituality is to unite all parts of one’s life into the Christian call and response. “A holistic spirituality helps to develop Christians who can overcome the pernicious schizophrenia between soul and body, brain and heart, and thus become more whole” (Au, 1993, p. 490). Holistic spirituality opposes pitting the body against the soul, the sacred against the secular, “this world” against “that world,” the spiritual against the material. It counters the dualism that has plagued Western, Christian spirituality over the centuries (Au, 1993).

Holistic spirituality is rooted in the incarnational belief of the pervasive presence of God in all reality. We live in a divine milieu (Au, 1993). Our God is not
one of territorial imperatives, but a God who is everywhere “at home.” Although sin and its impact is not denied, in this focus consciousness of “original blessings” is preferable to an insistence on “original sin.”

Holistic spirituality embraces the totality of a person’s existence, relationship with others, with one’s work, with the material world. It finds every human concern relevant. “Holiness is not an otherworldliness which dims the radical goodness of the created order. . . . the holy person is the one who is fully what God created that person to be, and who has been recreated in the Holy Spirit” (McBrien, 1994, p. 104). Fullness is wholeness is holiness.

Here the religious question is, “How is God leading and loving me in all aspects of my life?” Spiritual direction helps “discover the personal God in the dark moments and the secularly nonvalued or ‘throw-away’ experiences of life. . . . God more literally becomes acknowledged as the God of my whole life” (Fleming, 1996, p. 8). Nothing is outside of God’s breath.

A powerful tool at any level of spirituality is the “examination of consciousness.” At different intervals during the day a person takes two minutes, reviews the previous three or four hours—the people, places, events, etc., and simply asks the question, “Where were You, Lord, in those moments? How did I respond to You?” With this God consciousness one becomes able to truly follow Paul’s challenge to “pray at all times” (Col. 4:2; Eph. 6:18). Ultimately, authentic transformation leads to, and actually occurs through, the most fundamental of spiritual action, that of “letting go and letting God.” Or as more commonly stated, “thy will be done.”

ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR: AUTHORITY AND ORIENTATION

Spiritual directors are to ally themselves consciously with the indwelling of the spirit of the living God because this indwelling Spirit is the source of the directee’s powerful desire for “more” in the way of life and union with God (Barry & Connolly, 1982). Anchored in God as much as possible and completely open to the Holy Spirit, the director must love the seeker unconditionally and respect his or her unique freedom (McDowell, 1996). Merton elaborates: “The director is not to be regarded as a magical machine for solving cases and declaring the holy will of God beyond all hope of appeal, but a trusted friend who, in an atmosphere of sympathetic understanding, helps and strengthens us in our groping efforts to correspond with the grace of the Holy Spirit, who alone is the true Director in the fullest sense of the word” (Merton, 1960, p. 6).

The director’s primary function is “clarification and discernment,” to clarify what God wants in the person’s life and discern between the evil and the good spirits creating movement in the person’s emotional and spiritual life. Put more poetically, the director is to “assist in helping the person read the breathings of the Spirit . . . read the writing on the walls of the soul” (Carlson, 1996, p. 89). Discernment gives the capacity to do this.

As early as the desert fathers and mothers, discernment has been recognized as one of the major tasks of spiritual direction. Discernment does not only involve discerning the movements of the Holy Spirit, but also the presence of the “enemy,” blocking the Spirit’s work. St. Ignatius’ work, The Spiritual Exercises, is the classic source for the rules of discernment. The Exercises were based on the “conviction that God can and wants to be met in dialogue” (Barry & Connolly, 1982, p. 27). Discernment helps to know who is speaking.

Ignatius gives two sets of rules for discernment. One set is to help understand, interpret, and deal with desolation and consolation, part of everyone’s spiritual life. The other set helps distinguish what are God-inspired thoughts and movements and what comes from the devil. Decisions need discernment: choosing between good and evil and choosing between two goods. Ignatius’ focus on the loving experience of God in dialogue was quite a departure from the emphasis on rational knowledge of God that dominated spirituality at the end of the Middle Ages (Barry & Connolly, 1982).

Spiritual direction is to be a free relationship, not a master-disciple relationship. The director is companion to the pilgrim and offers guidance. But he or she needs to reverence the spiritual freedom of the pilgrim and not foster dependence on him or her because it is the Lord who is the director of life’s pilgrimage (McCready, 1996).

A Catholic spiritual director needs an informed and intelligent understanding of the Bible, the faith of the Church, and modern theology, because initial work in spiritual direction often involves the healing or correcting of false images of God. The director needs knowledge of modern psychology, the diversity of Christian religious experience, and should also have a sympathetic awareness of non-Christian reli-
gious experience (Barry & Connolly, 1982). Today, with the greater emphasis on “holistic spirituality,” it is ever more imperative that a director have knowledge and understanding of the multiple facets of being human.

A director must be a person of: love, broad human and spiritual experience, competence, prayer, insight, vision, balance, prudence, reverence, patience, compassion, trustworthiness, discretion, sympathy, sincerity, warmth, simplicity, encouragement, and lots of common sense. The director may be a powerful “wounded healer” because of his or her own life-experience of struggle, passion, conflict, spiritual darkness, and light.

Patience is very important in a director, the patience to respect God’s timetable for the seeker’s spiritual growth. A director has to know how to live in kairos, God’s time, and not simply in chronos, man’s time. There is always a danger of wanting to “push ourselves beyond the pace of grace” (Muto, 2000, p. 153). It takes “patient effort to recognize God in all the complexity of His presence to us, on all the levels of our being” (Carlson, 1996, p. 73). Some claim that encouragement is the most significant help that a director gives (Carlson, 1996).

It is also important for the director to have a healthy respect, reverence, for the unique shape of this particular individual’s holiness. As each individual has a physical DNA, so too each has a unique spiritual DNA. Tools such as the Enneagram, Myers-Briggs Inventory, and other psychological inventories can help understand personality types and the influence this has on one’s way of praying, meditating, processing experience, and being involved in the apostolate.

To correct an at-times overemphasis on the director’s authority, today the director is described in less authoritarian images: (a) God’s Usher, aware of God coming, of God present (Wallace, 1996, p. 82); (b) midwife—Hugo Rahner linked to the great Patristic theme of the “birth of God in men’s hearts,” (Carlson, 1996, p. 83); (c) instrument of the main artist, who is the Holy Spirit, “engaged in the one work of art, which is to change us into the image of Christ” (Sheet, 1996, p. 57); (d) soul friend (Leech, 2001); and (e) doctor of the soul—one exercising cura animarum—cure or care of the soul.

Another role of the spiritual director is one that is not often mentioned. In this ministry the director is to be an “intercessor in the night.” The director, in quiet moments of prayer, consciously prays for the seeker (McDowell, 1996).

A final note that might be disconcerting to people who are involved in the ministry of spiritual direction is that the director should be looked at as a model. “Ideally, in looking at the director, the seeker understands what it is like to live the spiritual life more fully. The director’s interior joy and peace, effortlessness in movement, powerful presence, dynamism and effective modes of action can provide the hope and determination the directed one needs to persevere in traveling the spiritual path” (McDowell, 1996, p. 211).

**INDIRECT INDICATORS OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY**

Spiritual maturity builds upon human, psychological and emotional maturity, but stretches past the boundaries of what “common sense” may understand as maturity. Christian spiritual maturity finds its criteria in Scripture, and often in the paradoxes of Christ’s teachings.

St. Paul lists some of the characteristics of the person who has put on Christ (Rom. 13:14) who is conscious of the Spirit dwelling in him (1 Cor. 3:16, 19). The spiritually mature individual does “not conform to this age but is transformed by the renewal of mind, so that he may judge what is God’s will, what is good, pleasing and perfect” (Rom. 12:1-2). That person is able to cut through illusion and false desires and manifests a fresh, spiritual way of thinking (Eph. 4:22-24). This in itself sets that person apart and makes that person counter-cultural.

Christian maturity is more than living by “code and cult.” Mature holiness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 5:20). It lives in the conviction that it is mercy that God desires and not sacrifice (Mt. 12:7) and that the “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mt. 2:27).

Mature spirituality knows the “Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking, but of justice, peace and the joy that is given by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). The mature spiritual Christian never loses sight of Jesus’ bottom line: “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12; Mt. 22:34-40; Rom. 12:8-9).

Mature Christian spirituality “follows the way of love, even as Christ loved” (Eph. 5:1) and “loves in deed and in truth, and not merely talks about it” (1 John 3:18). This love is incarnate in ways indicated by Jesus himself: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and those in prison...
The command to love “as I have loved you” leads the mature to sacrificial love, to laying down one’s life for another (John 15:13), to loving and forgiving one’s enemies (Mt. 5:43-45). This love is compassionate and forgiving (Eph. 4:25-32) and seeks for every kind of goodness, justice, and truth (Eph. 5:3-21). This love has no room for fear, it casts out all fear (1 John 4:18-19) because fear is useless when what is needed is trust (Luke 8:50). Fear is also taken away because the mature Christian knows that “God makes all things work together for the good” (Rom. 8:28).

Mature Christian spirituality orbits around the central reality of the Paschal Mystery. It does not shrink away from following Jesus into death. It does not try to avoid or deny the cross. Mature spirituality knows one must die in order to live, that one must take up the cross and can only save one’s life by losing it (Mt. 16:24-25). Even when the spirit cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Mt. 27:46), mature spirituality is not crushed or overwhelmed because it knows resurrection follows, new life, new beginnings. Mature Christian spirituality recognizes and expects the rhythm of Good Friday and Easter in life and therefore sees meaning at the heart of suffering.

Mature Christian spirituality is also observed in those who manifest the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit in their lives: their love is sincere; they detest what is evil and cling to what is good; they are fervent in spirit, rejoice in hope, are patient under trial and persevere in prayer; generous in hospitality; rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, and live peaceably with everyone (Rom. 12:9-18). Through the power of the Holy Spirit they have hope in abundance (Rom. 15:13). Their love is shown not only in big ways, but also especially in the small choices and attitudes that fill every day. Their love is kind, patient, does not put on airs, is not snobbish, not jealous, never rude nor self-seeking, not prone to anger nor brood over injuries, does not rejoice in what is wrong, but rejoices with the truth (1 Cor. 13:4-7). The mature Christian has a steadfastness about him (Luke 9:62) and sin no longer has controlling power over him (Rom. 6:14). Such a person radiates with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness, and chastity (Gal. 5:22-24).

The fundamental criterion for mature Christian spirituality remains a gospel criterion: “By their fruits you shall know them.” And the fruit of having “put on Christ” is the character of Christ.

**Spiritual Direction in Contrast to Traditional Psychotherapy**

Religion and psychology have not had the best of relationships since psychology came on the scene at the beginning of the 20th century, claiming the status of a science and generally challenging, if not outright dismissing, matters of faith or spirituality. At times faith was not merely dismissed, but seen as dangerous and the source of many psychological problems. Naturally, religion reacted. It condemned psychology as a sick, sex-obsessed science; destructive of faith; the source of many, if not most, of the evils of the day; negates free will and personal responsibility; pernicious to the health of family and society; basically, the “enemy.”

The science grew. Emotional and psychological problems were identified and categorized. Treatments were suggested. Many churches responded in one of two ways, each an extreme. A more fundamentalist position armed itself with scripture texts, one for every illness, every discomfort, every crisis, and every question. Here was the answer. A more liberal approach baptized all or some particular psychological or therapeutic approach, especially the humanistic theories focused on “actualization of one’s potential,” and claim that the Grail could be found there. Others have striven to find a middle road. They take the insights of psychology and examine them in the light of Christian values. The Catholic Church is predominantly in this third category. Many within the mainstream Catholic tradition have been working with diligence and faith to forge approaches to spiritual direction that respect the developments and discoveries in psychology, and hold those findings in creative dialogue with a sound biblical, ecclesial, theological, and spiritual understanding of the human person. There exist many respected psychology departments in leading Catholic universities and Catholic Institutes of Psychology and Spirituality around the world.

Today anyone working in the field of spiritual guidance and pastoral ministry is neglectful if he or she ignores the findings of psychology, just as that same person is neglectful if he or she tries to do the ministry independent of the centrality of God’s word (Schroeder & Meyers, 1996).

Spiritual direction does build on the process of psychological development towards human maturity, but it takes the process further. The material and goal of psychotherapy is healthy relationship with self, others, and the world. The material and goal of
spiritual direction is ultimately one’s relationship with all the above, plus with God, with Christ, in the Holy Spirit. The freedom achieved in the human maturation process is now used to listen to and respond to God. It’s a response-ability in a realm broader than the simply human.

The major difference between psychotherapy and spiritual direction is that direction brings a person in contact with a reality that is beyond the realm of mere, human, common sense. That reality is the “Paschal Mystery” of Jesus. It is Christ’s paschal mystery that has established for us a rhythm of death and life in our experience. It is the “Good Friday-transformed-into-Easter Sunday” pattern that Christ not only invites us into, but guarantees us. “Come follow me” means to follow also into that crushing darkness on Calvary. Good Friday is the shape of many different kinds of suffering: the loss of loved ones, the loss of one’s health, chronic pain, being abandoned and betrayed. But “come follow me” brings us beyond Good Friday and guarantees the tomb-bursting new life, new beginnings of Easter. The Christian lives within this Paschal Mystery and a spiritual director is to help the person recognize that rhythm.

Jesus’ teachings are filled with paradoxes, especially the central wisdom of the cross, that one must die in order to live. There is also Jesus’ command to what Philip Yancey (1997) calls an “unnatural act,” forgiveness (Mt. 6:15, 18:21-2, 35). Jesus also throws in the command to love one’s enemies (Mt. 5:43-4). These are two Christian basics that must be grappled with in spiritual direction. They certainly are beyond the scope of mere psychotherapy.

Spiritual direction, unlike pastoral counseling which is focused on a problem or a crisis situation, is a more permanent and continuing activity that operates beyond “strategic problem-solving” in faith (Rossi, 1996). Spiritual direction focuses on the here and now, but never loses sight of the then and always.

The following captures what is the fundamental difference between spiritual direction and psychotherapy. “What the director knows about Jesus Christ, his Father and the Spirit of Jesus steadfastly becomes more important than what he knows about human feelings and interaction, although the two areas of knowledge will never become totally separated” (Rossi, 1996, p. 14).

The following grid may provide help in understanding these differences (see Table 1).

**Circumstances in Which a Referral Would Be Made to a Mental Health Professional**

Catholic spiritual directors hesitate attributing to demonic possession evidence of strong psychological or emotional difficulties. Even though Catholics have the tradition and the ministry of exorcism, this is rarely invoked. Spiritual directors today have enough wisdom or knowledge to know when the mental, emotional state, and behavior of a person is beyond the director’s competence and needs professional psychological help.

The following would be examples of such cases: (a) morbid anxiety without discernible cause, or all out of proportion to its apparent cause; (b) painful or intolerable sadness without reasonable cause, depression; (c) loss of normal adaptation (e.g., a student cannot study, mother cannot take interest in her children); (d) psychosomatic disturbances such as severe headaches, localized anesthesia, paralysis, fainting, or nausea; (e) obsessive, compulsive behaviors; (f) any threat of suicide (Rossi, 1996). Spiritual directors need to know mental health professionals who espouse and understand Christian spiritual values, or at least are not antagonistic to them.

Catholics have a strong belief in the sacramental dimension of life and believe God most often mediates His power and work. Therapists, counselors, and medication are channels and instruments of God’s miraculous work. They deserve acknowledgment, respect and use.

**Two Most Helpful Books in the Roman Catholic Tradition**


**Conclusion**

Spiritual direction in the Roman Catholic Church today has been greatly influenced by the theological perspectives of Vatican II and re-emphasis of the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Rediscovering and experiencing the charisms of the Spirit and the lay ministries that flow from them led to real change in the ministry of spiritual direction. Once the domain
of priests and religious, lay men and woman are now being trained in spiritual direction.

There is presently a tremendous revival of this ministry in the Catholic Church. In the United States alone there are over 300 centers established for the training of spiritual directors, and a very large number of participants are lay people. The title of some of these programs reflect the renewed emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual direction. In the archdiocese of Atlanta, a formation program for spiritual direction is called Ru’ah, the Hebrew word for the Spirit, the breath of God. In Orlando, a program is called Audire, which means to listen, highlighting one of the main tasks in spiritual direction—to “listen” and discern the Spirit at work.

The core of spiritual direction is the experience of God, explored in prayer. The spiritual director helps the individual discern his or her feelings during prayer and also encourages the individual to bring every part of his or her life to these conversations with God. Such authentic encounters with the divine are transformative and help the seeker to “put on Christ.”

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**Author**

BARRETTE, GENE. _Address:_ Father Gene Barrette, St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, 4300 King Springs Rd., Smyrna, GA 30082. _Title:_ Missionary of La Salette priest; parochial vicar in St. Thomas the Apostle Parish in Smyrna, GA. _Degrees:_ MA, English, Boston College; MA, Spirituality, Gregorian University in Rome, Italy. _Specializations:_ Spiritual direction, retreat work, and adult faith formation.