

Is spiritual direction right for you?

By Kathleen Fischer

On a sunny spring afternoon, Angela arrived at my office for her first spiritual- direction session. She was a bit nervous, not knowing what to expect, and was frankly a little embarrassed about her prayer life. An oncology nurse for many years, with three adult children and five grandchildren, Angela never felt she had enough time for prayer. At a retreat, she heard others talk about seeing a spiritual director, and it kindled a longing in her for that kind of support. Our initial session went well, and Angela decided to come again. After we had met monthly for more than a year, she reflected: "Spiritual direction is, for me, a place of safety and grace. I feel like it has helped me find fuller life, faith, hope, and love."

Like Angela, you may wonder if you need a spiritual director. To help you decide, let us look at the meaning of spiritual direction, and then consider some guidelines for finding a director.

Recall for a moment how Jesus walked with others. He listened attentively to Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, sensing what was in their hearts and drawing them out with his questions. (See Jn 3:1-21, 4:7-19.) He taught his disciples how to pray and to notice God's presence everywhere. Under Jesus' guidance, they gradually heard the Spirit urging them to forgive enemies or relinquish possessions. Graced by these conversations, they left with a fresh awareness of God's unconditional love, determined to carry it into their communities.

Spiritual direction is a similar conversation between a director and someone who wants to grow in the Christian life. Convinced that the Spirit lives in us, as well as in all creation, the director and directee (the person being directed) attend to God's many manifestations: Where is God in my desire to quit my job, or in my struggle with symptoms of Parkinson's disease? Am I being called to take a more courageous stand on justice issues? What is the meaning of this darkness I encounter in my prayer? "My director is so good at listening deeply, helping me to express what's trying to hide," said one ministry student. "I'm better now at allowing my life to unfold in God's time."

The term *direction* suggests that one person tells another what to believe or how to act, but a spiritual director helps others freely name what God is doing in their lives and shape their own response. To distinguish this kind of companionship from a more authoritarian approach, some prefer the term *spiritual guide* or *soul friend*. A young attorney highlights the difference: "My spiritual guide doesn't operate like the directors

of my firm, who always try to impose their own agendas on me. Instead, he helped me recognize how much I want to know Christ, and then suggested I try the Jesus Prayer. Now I say it often, and it anchors me when life gets especially hectic.”

Although topics like marital conflict, depression, or troubled teenagers may arise during sessions, spiritual direction is not psychological counseling. If a person is depressed or faces other serious personal problems, a spiritual director will usually recommend psychotherapy. However, the person may also continue in regular spiritual direction in order to explore how God’s call and compassion are present during these tough times. For example, one woman in counseling stemming from childhood sexual abuse remarked: “Coming for spiritual direction as well as doing therapy this year helped me see that God really wants my wholeness and happiness. I enter into this next phase of healing at peace, though a little scared, knowing of God’s love for me.”

Spiritual direction is an honored practice whose roots lie deep in the Catholic tradition. Scholars usually trace its beginnings to the fourth-century desert fathers and mothers. In the rugged setting of the Egyptian desert, both new and established Christians sought guidance from those considered more experienced or holy.

Throughout history, noted spiritual companions have offered diverse forms of this ministry, showing us what to look for in a spiritual friend. Teresa of Avila, for example, infused her guidance with common sense and a love of laughter. Jane Frances de Chantal reassured spiritual seekers who felt inadequate, encouraging them simply to redirect their hearts when they found themselves failing often. As practiced today, spiritual direction is especially indebted to Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus. His *Spiritual Exercises* provides not only a detailed description of the director’s role (he or she should be both gentle and prudent) but also a comprehensive handbook for spiritual direction.

This ancient Christian ministry has experienced resurgence in recent decades, its remarkable growth fueled by widespread hunger for prayer and a desire for greater intimacy with God. Though often considered a ministry of ordained clergy or vowed religious, spiritual direction embraces the gifts of the laity as well. In several of its documents, including the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), the Second Vatican Council affirmed that the vocation to holiness and ministry is universal to all the baptized. (See 33, 40). The council’s fruits can be seen in laypeople’s serious attention to their spiritual lives, as well as in the growing number of laypeople serving as spiritual directors.

Spiritual direction has been particularly important in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, but more recently people from diverse religious backgrounds—

Protestant, Anglican, Jewish, Quaker—are reviving its practice. Moreover, as the popularity of spiritual direction grows, its outreach includes elders with dementia, prisoners, and the homeless.

Since not everyone is interested in one-on-one spiritual guidance, interest in group spiritual direction is also increasing. In this form of direction, three to five people and a facilitator typically meet monthly to support one another in noticing and responding to God's ongoing presence in their lives. Group members commit to sharing their own sacred story, listening prayerfully to others, discerning what they hear in the times of silence, and offering that response to each person. Members also promise to pray for one another between meetings.

Spiritual friendship can be both formal and informal. You probably experience the spontaneous kind often, as when you and a friend ponder how best to love a difficult relative. Such informal guidance happens regularly in bible or prayer groups, and in conversations with pastors, family, and friends. But if you desire a relationship with a trained minister who practices spiritual direction in a more formal way, here are some suggestions for finding that person.

Who makes a good spiritual director? Above all, we seek faith and wisdom in such a companion. But other considerations may also matter: Would you be more comfortable with a man or a woman? Why are you looking for spiritual direction at this time, and what do you hope to gain from it? Do you want an ordained minister or vowed religious, or would a married layperson better understand your life situation? How far are you willing to travel to meet with this person?

To find a spiritual director who is right for you, ask friends, parish ministers, or the staff of a local retreat house or school of theology. Most people select a director based on the recommendation of someone they trust; the same way they choose other helping professionals like counselors or doctors. You may also use the resources of Spiritual Directors International. This organization, begun in 1989 by a group of Christian directors, is dedicated to supporting spiritual directors worldwide. Its membership now includes more than five thousand directors representing fifty countries and many cultures and faith traditions. Its Web site (www.sdiworld.org) contains a map listing regional coordinators who can recommend trained spiritual directors in your geographical location.

Interview two or three qualified directors. Ask about their training and experience, how they administer spiritual direction, whether they charge a fee and how it is established, how they handle confidentiality, and any other concerns you have. Notice especially how comfortable you feel with a possible director. The quality of your relationship, especially

your level of trust, will be among the most important aspects of your journey, for spiritual direction entails an open and honest sharing of your story.

Expectations regarding fees for spiritual direction differ widely. Some directors consider it a part of their ministry and charge nothing, or they may suggest a donation to the retreat center where they serve. Others rely on their practice for income and regularly charge a fee. Almost all directors are willing to negotiate an individual fee arrangement, however.

During your first session, you and your director will determine the basic structure for your time together, including when and how often to meet. Sessions usually last about an hour and take place once a month, but their length and frequency depend on circumstances. For instance, some individuals find having a spiritual companion during life's significant moments—retreats, important decisions, major transitions, times of illness or grief—to be enough. Since spiritual direction is a voluntary commitment, a person can stop at any time, and it is also perfectly acceptable to say that the relationship is not working. After a certain number of meetings, you and your director will usually evaluate how things are going, and mutually decide whether or not to continue.

No two spiritual direction encounters look exactly alike, for directors have unique personalities and the people they see bring a variety of experiences. However, certain elements are usually present. A session typically includes prayer, either at the beginning and end or when it arises naturally. Persons seeking direction bring what is in their hearts and on their minds: difficulties or consolations in prayer; pending decisions and significant dreams; stories of struggle or success in living the gospel. The director listens closely, sometimes mirroring back what he or she has heard or asking a question to help clarify a point. He or she may offer a suggestion, a gentle challenge, a Scripture passage, or words of encouragement. As in any conversation, both laughter and tears punctuate the sharing: "My director has been with me in so many seasons of my life—times of great growth and great loss—and all the in-between times," said one long-term directee of her relationship with her director. "I could show her my anger, sorrow, or joy, trusting that I would be treated compassionately and not be judged."

At times of a major decision, such as a possible call to the priesthood or religious life, meetings may focus on the pros and cons of the possible choices and on the divine promptings found in our deepest feelings and desires. Both director and directee will also watch for an abiding sense of rightness or peace about a choice and for the wider Christian community's confirmations of an individual's call. As in every spiritual-direction session, both persons in the dialogue listen attentively for signs of the Spirit, the final touchstone for Christian prayer and action. Paul names these signs in his Letter

to the Galatians: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (5:22-23).

While it is available to anyone who is serious about the spiritual journey, spiritual direction is not required for growth in one's faith. Moreover, it does not appeal to everyone. Support for a vibrant faith comes from many sources: the Eucharist and other sacraments, personal and communal prayer, spiritual reading, and retreats.

From the earliest centuries, however, countless Christians have also searched out seasoned guides. Whether or not we choose it for ourselves, the ongoing popularity of spiritual direction testifies to a perennial truth about the pilgrimage of faith: We need the love, wisdom, and witness of other travelers. The fundamental role of community in an individual's spiritual life was a persistent theme of Catherine of Siena, one of history's most esteemed spiritual directors. As she emphasized repeatedly, although each of us has our own vineyard, every one of us must also be joined to our neighbors.

Spiritual direction: Finding the key to our inner souls

By Ellie Hidalgo

Inside each human person, say pastoral ministers, is a deep desire to connect with what is most beautiful, joyful, peaceful and true about the world and about each person's unique call from God to be of service. But the noise, busy-ness and pressures of contemporary life often leave many people too frazzled to experience God's presence for more than a nano-second here and there.

"In our fast paced, changing, post-modern world, so many things are falling apart," said Father James Clarke, director of spiritual formation at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo. "How do people maintain virtues of hope, joy and love and not be overrun by becoming bitter, despairing or resentful?"

Enter the spiritual director--a skilled spiritual companion assisting a person of faith to discover God's presence in his/her life, build a vibrant prayer life, learn spiritual tools for discernment and decision-making, and develop a close relationship with God.

The interest in spiritual direction has mushroomed worldwide in the last 20 years. What used to be a spiritual tool practiced by almost exclusively priests and nuns is now being enthusiastically embraced by laity.

"There's a deep hunger in the world for spiritual friendship and companionship," said Christopher McCauley, executive director of Stillpoint: The Center for Christian Spirituality in Pasadena.

Sunday liturgies--with its focus on word, Eucharist and communal prayer--do not offer opportunities for Catholics to converse about grace-filled moments in their day-to-day lives.

"People need to talk about their experiences of God," said Mercy Sister Mary Ann Scofield, founder of Spiritual Directors International. In nearly 17 years, Spiritual Directors International has grown from less than a hundred people to more than 5,000 members from 30 different countries. A conference in Costa Mesa this April drew 600 participants from five continents. As the desire for spiritual direction swells in dioceses around the globe, so has the need to train and certify skilled spiritual directors.

Everyday holiness

"Catholics who are serious about their faith recognize they can't do it alone," said Father Clarke, who has been receiving spiritual direction since 1974 and has been offering spiritual direction to others since 1980, when he was ordained. "Many lay leaders now consider spiritual direction a necessity."

Joy Jones, a married mother of three sons, began spiritual direction as part of her formation process to become a pastoral associate for Holy Trinity Church in San Pedro. Growing in her relationship with God has allowed her to become a more effective minister, she said.

"It has helped me to be more present to people at the parish and to listen to them better," said Jones. "It has helped me teach catechesis and lead RCIA [Rite of Christian Initiation] in a deeper and more profound way."

As parishioners started asking Jones for help with their prayer lives, she decided to complete a three-year training program with the Spirituality Center in Los Angeles to become certified as a spiritual director. Now she also provides spiritual direction at archdiocesan sponsored directed retreats.

"As people build up their relationship with God, they find peace and enjoyment in life, and their relationships with other people increases," said Jones. A personal benefit has been more patience in listening to her sons.

Deacon Gary Becker of San Roque Church, Santa Barbara, said he used to "run over" the moments when God broke into his life.

"Spiritual direction helps me look at my own experience in a contemplative way," he explained. "I'm paying more attention to the real holiness in every day."

The experience led Becker and his wife to train to become spiritual directors, a ministry the couple offers from their home office.

A spiritual director "keeps you honest," added Deacon Jerry Cellner, director of the archdiocesan Office of Diaconate Formation, who has met with his spiritual director once a month for 20 years. His director will ask about the deacon's prayer life, spiritual reading, decisions he might be facing, or how relationships--work or personal--are being formed with God's guidance. The question "What is God calling you to do?" might encourage a meaningful dialogue between Cellner and his spiritual director about a particular family or work issue.

Ancient beginnings

Spiritual direction is an ancient Catholic tradition dating from the fourth century when some Christians took to living in the desert as a way of making a more radical

commitment to Christianity and to their prayer life. Desert fathers and mothers, like St. Anthony of Egypt, began offering spiritual guidance to new desert dwellers struggling with prayer and temptations, said Wilkie Au, professor at Loyola Marymount University in the practice of spiritual direction.

When monasteries were developed in the 6th century, senior monks or abbots helped new monks to internalize the Benedictine rule and embrace a rigorous spiritual path, added Au. St. Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century developed the 30-day spiritual exercises as a way of helping new seminarians discern God's will in their lives.

"He formed the exercises to help a person make a free decision, and to make major life decisions with as much freedom as possible from compulsions or attachments," said Au, who recently, with Noreen Cannon Au, authored "The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path" (Paulist Press).

Vatican II emphasized that the call to holiness is universal, creating a new understanding that the spiritual path is offered to men and women in all walks of life--lay, religious or ordained, married or celibate.

Responding to God

"How do you respond to that call to holiness in the concrete context of your life?" Au might ask a directee. "What does the call to holiness require of me? How might I discern that?"

A spiritual director offers a helping relationship to a directee seeking answers to those questions and wanting to develop a spiritual practice that supports their call. The director doesn't offer advice about solving problems as a pastoral counselor might, but rather helps a person tap into God's guidance and to sort out God's voice from other pulls or tugs that come from the culture or elsewhere, said Au.

Spiritual direction is not counseling or therapy, emphasized spiritual directors. "A counselor's role is to help individuals deal with a particular issue where they feel stuck. A counselor is using a microscope," said Father Clarke. "A spiritual director asks, 'Where is God in this particular situation?' A spiritual director is using a telescope."

Many lay people become interested in spiritual direction when facing life-altering decisions like whether to change careers, move to another city, or choose a marriage partner.

"God has given each one of us the key to understand our inner souls. I don't think we were taught to trust that," said St. Joseph of Carondelet Sister Carol Quinlivan, director of the archdiocesan Office of Parish Life. "A good director helps you find your key."

In the Archdiocese of Los Angeles pastoral associates, parish life directors and deacons in the process of discernment and formation are required to be in spiritual direction.

"We want to strongly emphasize the need for them to develop their own spirituality and a spirituality that will sustain them in ministry," said Sister Quinlivan.

Choosing a director

Choosing a spiritual director should also be guided by faith. At the Spirituality Center, Sister Thomas Bernard MacConnell, director, meets with potential directees to get a sense of the person and then to recommend three to five people who could serve as spiritual directors. People are encouraged to talk by phone or meet each spiritual director in person to ascertain with whom they feel the most comfortable and are able to sense that person's authenticity.

"People ask me, 'How will I know?' And I say, 'I don't know how you'll know, but I know you'll know,'" said Sister MacConnell.

The center, started under Cardinal Timothy Manning in 1983, also offers a three-year training program to become a spiritual director. About 200 people have completed the program, operated from the Doheny campus of Mt. St. Mary's College. Some spiritual directors offer their services pro-bono or are hired for ministry by their parish, while others offer a negotiated fee, said Sister MacConnell.

Societal impact

Spiritual direction will be limited if it only directs people inward, said directors. "Spiritual direction helps people to become friends of God and eventually prophets," said Sister Scofield. With time, many directees integrate their experience of contemplation with their social conscience. Ultimately, she said, spiritual direction "has to have an effect on the world."

It's already moving out into the world as spiritual directors apply their ministry in hospitals, homes for the elderly, prisons or homeless shelters.

Since the early 1980s Mercy Sister Mariana Clifford Rodriguez has worked with Mexican American and Central American communities in the Mission District of San Francisco. "We need to get in touch with our spirituality in two cultures," said Sister Clifford, herself a daughter of a Colombian mother and a father of Irish heritage.

Immigrants often lack extended family and trust the church as a place where they can be listened to, she said. Sister Clifford has created a three-year training program for Latinos to serve their community as spiritual directors.

The hunger for spiritual direction is spreading to people of other faiths, including Protestants, Jews and even some Muslims, who have sought out Catholic spiritual directors. More ministers from other faith traditions are training in spiritual direction to be able to offer it to their congregations. "It's a great ecumenical bridge," said Father Clarke, who chairs the archdiocesan Spirituality Commission.

College students are also exploring spiritual direction in greater numbers. Sister of St. Joseph of Orange Joanna Carroll is becoming certified in spiritual direction through the Center for Spiritual Development in Orange and serves as a full-time campus minister for spiritual direction at Loyola Marymount University. She meets monthly, twice a month or even weekly on an individual basis with students from diverse faith traditions who want to integrate their spirituality into every aspect of their life--their studies, relationships with peers or parents, and career decisions.

"I'm a listening presence, witnessing to students that God is wanting to journey with them through this process and loving them along the way," said Sister Carroll. "Students come to a sense of their own answers within."

Students' deepest dreams or desires are planted by God, said Sister Carroll. She helps students to sense God's deep love for them.

"What will bring someone the greatest fulfillment, greatest joy and peace? A student's desire, a dream, if they really listen, is not going to go against whom they are and who God has created them to be in their uniqueness," said Sister Carroll.

While most spiritual direction happens on a one-to-one basis, Sister Quinlivan also directs two lay women's groups in spiritual direction. "We listen in such a way that reverences someone else's experience of God and allows their experience to speak to us," said Sister Quinlivan.

"What we notice as we move in spiritual direction together is a tapestry--threads of people sharing, somehow mysteriously beautifully blending together to create a landscape of our souls. The good weaves in with the bad and we're in awe at the grace of God working in one another's lives."

Listening for God with Others

by Sandra Lommasson

Discernment is not something that just happens; rather it is the intentional exploration of one's living and one's personal relationship with God. This intentional exploration may begin in private prayer and a process of personal discernment, but it is only brought to completion through a testing of decisions with others in the faith community. All discernment is aided by the shared wisdom of the faith community. Our yes's and our no's will be strengthened through sharing with others our hearts' desires and how we are holding these in the light of our deepening connection with God and others. And when we share, we must be open to hear and respond, even reconsider our yes or our no.

—Jean Stairs, *Listening for the Soul: Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction*

As I began to enter the deeper waters of relationship with God, the desire to align myself with God's longing for me and for the world grew. I knew that choice-making mattered, and I wanted to choose well. I prayed, I studied, I worshipped, and I sought to make decisions based on all of those good practices. But something was missing. There's an ancient wisdom that says: "The eye cannot see itself."

As much as I wanted the journey to be just about me and God and to flow into the world from this protected place, I found that I needed other people. Not just other people to worship alongside or to pray with, but others with whom I might open the landscape of my soul and listen deeply for the Spirit's invitation. Darn! This potentially meant letting go of hard-won perceptions about myself and my choices. Feeling vulnerable and exposed was a certainty, but, beyond this, I didn't know where such opening might lead.

I know more now. I think of discernment as a 'sifting of the currents' within life. Some currents draw into fuller life while others distract from or even destroy life. And it's not always easy to tell the difference. I've been learning how to listen for the truly life-giving currents of my life *with* other committed companions on the way, rather than only bringing them the results of my personal discernment. One thing it means is liberation from the narrow confines of my own experience and perspective, no matter how valid. It also means growing in comfort with my own human nature, and finding it to be the place of deepest encounter with Grace. This piece from Jean Stairs speaks to me of the communal nature of the spiritual journey and practices like discernment. While the journey is intensely personal, it can never be cut off from community without distortion and significant loss. There is vulnerability in opening to depth spiritual community, but I truly believe there are wholeness and a maturation that cannot happen any other way.