

# “It is the Lord”: Spiritual Accompaniment (II)

Many people who have found Christ and the Church thanks to a friend describe the help they received as authentic spiritual accompaniment.

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“When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment, for he was naked, and cast himself into the sea” (Jn 21:7). The beloved disciple had merely

verbalized what he was seeing with the eyes of faith. And Peter, “with the same fervor with which he did many other things, went to Jesus.”<sup>[1]</sup> The first Pope received John’s cue in his own way: passionately. So he plunged into the water, despite the boat being close to the shore.

Objectively speaking, the leap was unnecessary; but at that moment, Peter needed to express his love for Jesus, his urgency to speak with Him. And it’s not hard to imagine the Lord’s smile, at once amused and moved by Peter’s reaction.

## **Fostering each soul’s personality and initiative**

This scene captures a key dynamic for authentic spiritual accompaniment: the guide discreetly points out, without imposing, where they believe they see the Lord; and the accompanied sets out to meet the Lord. The guide can offer guidance

and support, but ultimately, it is the other who must discern God's will for their own life and take the appropriate steps. In other words, in spiritual direction, it is essential to foster personal responsibility and initiative, helping each person develop their own prayer life, seek spiritual resources, and make their own decisions.

People grow in maturity and freedom when their responsibility is encouraged. This allows them to love more and better. In one of his letters, the Father reminded us: "As Saint Josemaria writes, referring to those who receive the personal chats of their brothers or sisters, 'the authority of the spiritual director is not power. Always instill in souls a great spirit of freedom. Consider what I have so often told you: because I really want to seems to me the most supernatural reason of all. The role of the spiritual director is to

help the soul to want to fulfil, to really want to fulfil, God's will. Don't command, advise.' The aim of the advice given in spiritual direction is to second the action of the Holy Spirit in each soul and help each person to approach God and his or her own duties with personal freedom and responsibility. 'In creating souls, God does not repeat himself. Each one is the way he or she is, and we have to treat each one according to what God has done, and according to the way that God is leading them.'"<sup>[2]</sup>

If we want to foster personal responsibility, it is helpful to avoid giving immediate advice, no matter how clear the solutions may seem. This happens in many areas of life: sometimes a person truly needs support or encouragement, and is given advice instead... Although sometimes it will be appropriate to advise, above all, we need to encourage each person to seek their

own answers: “What do you think...? Why don't you pray about this calmly and we'll talk about it another day?”

At times, spiritual guidance will involve helping people by asking questions that open new horizons for discernment: “What pros and cons do you see of acting this way?” or “Have you considered whether this is part of the path by which God has brought you to this point?” Without discouraging the person from seeking advice when needed, this approach helps them develop the virtue of prudence, which involves judging and deciding correctly, in an integral way. Naturally, if a person has little formation in moral or ascetical life, it is helpful for the guide to explain and demonstrate the meaning of teachings of the Magisterium relevant to their situation. It is also good to speak directly if the person might be on the verge of a serious mistake. But the main goal should be to guide

individuals towards personal reflection, inviting them to discern in God's presence how the Gospel illuminates their lives and challenges.<sup>[3]</sup>

When a person opens their heart, they accept placing themselves in a certain state of vulnerability. The guide, in turn, must learn to "remove [their] sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5)." In this sense, it is important to be very respectful of each person's dignity and intimacy, avoiding asking out of mere curiosity or forcing conversations the other may not be ready to have. Additionally, the guide should never show surprise at anything they are told, whether it refers to actions, desires, or temptations. Even those with good formation and a genuine longing for God can have moments of weakness or trial. Similarly, the person confiding their inner self should not

refrain from saying something for fear that the other will be surprised or upset.

A good spiritual director knows how to challenge without becoming burdensome, patiently respecting each person's pace. It is helpful to recall the passage from Isaiah that St. Matthew uses to refer to Jesus in his Gospel: "He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick" (Mt 12:20; Is 42:3). Thus, excessive emphasis on what is not going well could hinder the process of accompaniment. For example, pointing out a flaw might prompt someone to react and change, but it could also lead to discouragement or sadness. It is often better to help people realize things on their own, gradually removing obstacles so they can see problems or recognize flaws.

We have all experienced this: a person exhausted at the roadside

rarely gets back on track just because someone shouts words of affirmation from a distance; what they appreciate, and what helps them recover, is verbal encouragement and something to eat or drink. Just as we cannot force a plant to grow faster by pulling on it — indeed, doing so would uproot it — we cannot hasten a person's spiritual development without causing them harm. “Souls, like good wine, improve with time.”<sup>[5]</sup> Therefore, “the formation that we receive throughout our whole life [...] tends to a large degree to open up new horizons. In contrast, if we limit ourselves to just making demands and being demanded of, we can end up seeing only what we are not managing to do, our defects and limitations. We can forget about the most important thing: God's love for us.”<sup>[6]</sup>

## Friendship as spiritual accompaniment

The considerations above especially pertain to the formal practice of spiritual accompaniment, which in Opus Dei takes place in the fraternal chat, with a layperson or a priest, or in confession, and in other conversations with the priest. St. Josemaría always wanted to avoid calling these individuals our “spiritual directors.” This approach, by downplaying the role of the particular person, offers a diversity of perspectives that enriches the spiritual life, while also preventing excessive attachments on either side. It also addresses the risk of creating “possessive directors” and the self-referentialism often found at the root of some cases of abuse of conscience.

Nevertheless, spiritual accompaniment can also extend beyond these formal settings.

Friendship, understood as the benevolent love that arises between people with shared interests or visions, is an indispensable form of accompaniment in our lives. When our shared interest encompasses the spiritual realm, friendship naturally becomes a form of spiritual accompaniment. The Father reminded us of this by writing about St. Basil and St. Gregory Nazianzen. “The friendship they formed in their youth kept them united throughout their whole life, and even today they share the same feast day in the general liturgical calendar. St. Gregory says that ‘our single object and ambition was virtue, and a life of hope in the blessings that are to come.’ Their friendship, rather than distancing them from God, led them closer to Him.”<sup>[7]</sup> A friendship open to spiritual concerns is an informal yet genuine framework for spiritual accompaniment because all the elements we discussed earlier are

present: openness to the work of the Holy Spirit, attentive listening, and the motivation of both personality and initiative.

Many people who have found Christ and the Church thanks to a friend describe the help they received as spiritual accompaniment. Almost without realizing it, their friend accompanied them step by step and led them to love Jesus, until they took the step of being baptized or becoming Catholics. The same happens to those who have returned to the faith through a loyal friendship or who have avoided drifting away from God thanks to a friend's words. Thus, the “apostolate of friendship and trust,”<sup>[8]</sup> as St. Josemaría called it, closely resembles what we know as spiritual accompaniment: “Those well-timed words, whispered into the ear of your wavering friend; the helpful conversation that you managed to

start at the right moment; the ready professional advice that improves his university work; the discreet indiscretion by which you open up unexpected horizons for his zeal... ”<sup>[9]</sup>

The symmetrical relationship between two friends opens dimensions that are less accessible in accompaniment as such: sharing and mutual support. Friends exchange experiences and viewpoints, helping each other face life’s challenges. This opens some paths, though it also closes others. In a friendship, I cannot always expect the other to listen to me, as sometimes *they* will need to be heard. Also, although their perspective can undoubtedly enrich me, my friends may not always be able to advise me adequately on aspects of spiritual life or my particular path, because they may not know it well enough. For these reasons, while friendship

complements and enriches spiritual direction, it cannot replace it.

In formal spiritual accompaniment, however, the relationship between the two people is asymmetrical: only one party has the role of listening and advising, a role that should not be blurred or reversed. This distinction introduces limits that help the person open their heart without the emotional interferences that might hinder a proper focus and objectivity. It also helps the person, after considering the matter in God's presence, to discuss intimate aspects of their relationship with God and others, including the roots of their sins and deep struggles. This does not mean, however, that the relationship between the director and the person accompanied must be cold and dry: preserving that asymmetry and emotional distance, the spiritual director must have genuine affection for the people they accompany,

because we can only truly help when loving with the love of the One who has called us friends (cf. Jn 15:15).

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“Bring some of the fish you have just caught,” Jesus says. St. Peter, still dripping from his plunge into the lake, drags the net full of fish to the shore. After a well-deserved breakfast, he walks away with Jesus and they embark on an intimate dialogue. Is it prayer or spiritual accompaniment? It is both, in divine harmony. Peter, disarmed, renews his fidelity to the Lord. And Jesus, who never stopped believing in him, confirms him in his mission: “Follow me.” Peter turns and asks about the other disciple, following at a distance. “*You* follow me,” Jesus insists (cf. Jn 21:19-22). John does not hear their conversation: it is not his place. Like the Baptist (cf. Jn 3:27-30),

he rejoices in knowing that he facilitated the encounter.

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<sup>[1]</sup> St. Bede the Venerable, cited in *Catena Aurea*, Jn 21:1-11.

<sup>[2]</sup> F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 9-I-2018, no. 10; the quotes from St. Josemaría are from Letter 26, no. 38.

<sup>[3]</sup> “If my own personal experience is of any help, I can say that I have always seen my work as a priest and shepherd of souls as being aimed at helping each person to face up to all the demands of his life and to discover what God wants from him in particular — without in any way limiting that holy independence and blessed personal responsibility which are the features of a Christian conscience” (St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 99).

<sup>[4]</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 169.

<sup>[5]</sup> St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 78.

<sup>[6]</sup> F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 9-I-2018, no. 11.

<sup>[7]</sup> F. Ocáriz, Pastoral, 1-XI-2019, no. 5. The internal quote is from St. Gregory of Nazianzus, Sermon 43.

<sup>[8]</sup> St. Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 192.

<sup>[9]</sup> St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 973.

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