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Spiritual accompaniment

In his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis reminds us of the usefulness of spiritual accompaniment or spiritual direction for the Christian life.

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Today more than ever, we need men and women who, on the basis of their experience of accompanying others, are familiar with processes that call for prudence, understanding, patience and docility

to the Spirit, so that they can protect the sheep from wolves who would scatter the flock” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 171). With these words, Pope Francis reminds us of the usefulness of spiritual accompaniment or spiritual direction for Christian life.

It is the Holy Spirit who must sanctify: “the model is Jesus Christ; the modeler is the Holy Spirit, through grace”[1]. Whoever exercises personal spiritual direction is an “instrument” of God, who is the one who gives growth (cf. 1 Cor 3:7-9). We must leave “the grace of God and the Director to do their work” so that there appears “the image of Christ into which the saintly man is transformed”[2]. That grace is a participation in the life of Jesus Christ who, in the Eucharist, “makes us *cor unum et anima una* (Acts 4:32), one heart and one soul, and makes us a family, a Church”[3].

1. The fraternal accompaniment of the children of God in Christ

It is logical that one seeks spiritual accompaniment when one advances in one's spiritual life and notices that the Lord is asking for a greater vibration. Theologically, we could say it is to *identify oneself with Christ, to be another Jesus for our neighbour*. This is the real reason why every Christian can legitimately desire the help of spiritual counsel. It is to live in the continuous disposition to seek God, to dwell in the convinced desire to please Him. There is an inner impulse that asks for something more, but not in the order of efficiency (doing many things), but in allowing the other (God) to carry out the doing to oneself^[4].

The consideration of the Church as a family is one of the keys to spiritual accompaniment. In this atmosphere of Christian fraternity, of a family,

loving people with the proverbial heart of a father and mother, each one is helped to seek, find and love Christ[5].

Regarding spiritual direction, the Catechism of the Catholic Church recalls that “The Holy Spirit gives certain faithful gifts of wisdom, faith and discernment”[6]. These gifts can be found in priests and also in non-ordained faithful – men and women religious, lay people. Indeed, carrying out the spiritual direction of other people is one of the ways in which lay people can exercise their common priesthood, which enables them “to help people on their path towards God, with the witness of word and example, with prayer and with atonement”[7].

Spiritual accompaniment is therefore a reality with a baptismal foundation, as a development of having received Baptism, and a

concrete apostolate. One can, in fact, read in the key of spiritual direction (introducing the nuances and appropriate adaptations) what Saint Josemaría writes in relation to the apostolate of friendship and confidence, an apostolate that in the laity presupposes the witness of Christian life given naturally through the ordinary situations of life: “And when they see that we live the same life as they do, they will ask us: Why are you so happy? How do you manage to overcome selfishness and comfort-seeking? Who has taught you to understand others, to live well and to spend yourself in the service of others? Then we must disclose to them the divine secret of Christian existence. We must speak to them about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Mary. The time has come for us to use our poor words to communicate the depth of God's love which grace has poured into our souls”[8]. All of this assumes, certainly, that whoever

undertakes the task of spiritually directing a person meets the due conditions of spiritual maturity, prudence, discretion, affability, and training, since spiritual direction is not about advising from one's own experiences and opinions, but from the faith of the Church.

2. Towards holiness

“To go towards the Lord, we always need a guide, a dialogue. We cannot do it just with our reflections”[9]. The role of the spiritual “teacher” consists in supporting the work of the Holy Spirit in the soul and giving peace, in view of the gift of self and apostolic fruitfulness[10]. As such, his work introduces us to the Gospel, in which “everything, every point that is told there, has been gathered, detail by detail, for you to make it come alive in the individual circumstances of your life”[11]. Spiritual direction helps to discover

what the Gospel says to each soul, and it helps one to react with a response of self-giving. “It remains valid for everyone (...) the invitation to resort to the advice of a good spiritual father, capable of accompanying each person in the deep knowledge of himself, and to lead him to union with the Lord, so that his existence conforms more and more to the Gospel”[12]. When it is well-received, spiritual direction leads one to confront his or her life with Christ and with his message of love (cf. Jn 13:34), and to see, in the light of Scripture and counting on the action of the Holy Spirit, the hand of God in one's own existence.

“The function of the spiritual director,” Saint Josemaría teaches, “is to open horizons, to help in the formation of criteria, to point out obstacles, to indicate the appropriate means to overcome them, to correct deformations or deviations in

progress, to always encourage – without ever losing the supernatural perspective, which is an optimistic affirmation because each Christian can say that he can do everything with divine help (cf. Phil 4:13)”[13]. With the growth of faith, hope and charity, one is helped to deal with God personally and continually, often through a plan of life. In this way, prayer (vocal and mental), frequent confession, participation in the Eucharist – true center of Christian life – and familiarity with Sacred Scripture lead to a deeper understanding of the meaning of existence, to a knowledge of the love of God, to an improvement in self-knowledge and a desire to serve all souls.

Saint Josemaría advises that, in spiritual direction, one should always address three points necessary for true spiritual progress: faith, purity and vocation[14]. This

trilogy can be related to what the Acts of the Apostles tell us, when describing the life and perseverance of the first Christians “in the doctrine of the apostles and in communion, in the breaking of bread and in prayers”[15]. Faith refers to apostolic doctrine[16]. Purity is linked to the Eucharistic Bread: frequent Communion helps us to have a clean outlook and protects the treasure of chastity. Prayer, a response to the Word of God who calls, is essential to be faithful to one's vocation[17].

“The faith and vocation of Christians affect our entire existence, and not just part of it”[18]; therefore, it is related to family life, work, rest, social life, politics, etc. Although these areas are not the immediate subject matter of spiritual direction, nevertheless, while avoiding all interference in what does not pertain to it, spiritual direction must offer insight and advice so that each one,

with freedom and responsibility, firm in the Catholic faith and morals, makes the decisions that are considered appropriate with knowledge of the facts and letting the light of God illuminate one's entire life. From this perspective, spiritual direction aims to promote "unity of life,"^[19] which leads to seeking and loving God in everything, and to living our entire existence with awareness of the mission that the Christian vocation implies. Spiritual direction contributes to the growth process of each Christian in his or her condition as a son or daughter of God the Father in Christ through the Spirit; it helps one to discover with joy the figure and love of Christ and what following him demands.

3. Freedom and responsibility

The brother who spiritually accompanies another brother offers a disinterested and upright opinion,

respecting the personality of the one he advises, without supplanting the other's freedom and therefore his responsibility. As Saint Thomas Aquinas writes, "the children of God are moved by the Holy Spirit freely, out of love; not slavishly, out of fear" (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, 22). This is a concept that Saint Josemaría summarizes like this: "It is only when one loves that one attains the fullest freedom"[20]. The human person is a mystery: "In each soul there is a delicate depth, into which only God can penetrate"[21]. And it is up to each person to support the inspirations they receive from the Holy Spirit, the shepherd of our souls[22].

The task of the shepherd of souls is "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 that are the features of a Christian conscience. This way of acting and this spirit are based on respect for the transcendence of revealed truth and on love for the freedom of the human person. I might add that they are also based on a realization that history is undetermined and open to a variety of human options — all of which God respects.”[23]. Saint Josemaría also points out that “to achieve Christian perfection in the profession or in the office that each one has,” Christians “need to be trained in such a way that they know how to administer their own freedom: with presence of God, with sincere piety, with doctrine”[24]. Therefore, the advice of spiritual direction serves to illuminate the intelligence, to strengthen freedom. On occasions, this transmission of the truth will be done with fortitude. “True finesse and true charity require reaching the

core, even if it is exacting”[25]: it should always be done with delicacy and respecting the rhythms that are specific to each person.

He who is accompanied spiritually must have an attitude open to help. For this reason, it is necessary to remember that “humility is the truth on the path of ascetic struggle”[26]. One of the most important manifestations of humility is sincerity, which, at times, must be “savage sincerity”[27], that is, a manifestation of what is in the soul, without embellishments or euphemisms. Spiritual direction follows the traits of a confidence[28] that is based on trust. Therefore, just as the direction proceeds without “constricting anyone (...), respecting each soul as it is, with its own characteristics,”[29] the one who receives it leaves “the grace of God and the Director to do their work”. If spiritual direction is not founded on

this basis, “the sculpture, the image of Jesus, into which the holy man is converted will never appear”[30]. This requires a certain regularity in the conversations.

In this area of fraternal trust, it is logical to try to be docile to the word one has heard which, before God, is recognized as a light of the Holy Spirit. One can, therefore, speak of obedience to spiritual direction, but keeping in mind that obedience is not a univocal concept (cf. S.Th. II-II, q. 104). In spiritual direction, one does not follow another person's advice because he is obliged, nor because he recognizes that the other person has more experience or knowledge, but because he realizes that, through his words, God illuminates and advises him. Many times, the advice of spiritual direction is not completely detailed, but rather we are encouraged to reflect and, above all, face the Lord

in prayer. Indeed, it is up to the interested party to weigh what has been heard and decide with a resolution that, certainly, he or she has been enlightened by the advice, but this follows from personal deliberation and the use of one's will.

Freedom assumed as a choice of the good is inseparable from the correlative personal responsibility. "Each one is as he is, and each one must be treated as God has made him and as God leads him. *Omnibus omnia factus sum, ut omnes facerem salvos* (1 Cor 9:22), we must become everything for everyone. There are no panaceas. It is necessary to educate, to dedicate to each soul the time it needs, with the patience of a medieval monk to illuminate – leaf by leaf – a codex; to make people come of age, to form the conscience, so that each one feels his or her personal freedom and its consequent responsibility"[31]. In this way,

spiritual accompaniment, in a context of friendship and dealing with God, guides, gives optimism, opens to hope, broadens horizons, and contributes to the soul being capable of great things.

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[1] Letter, 8 August 1956, no. 37: AGP, series A.3, 94-1-2.

[2] *The Way*, no. 56.

[3] *Conversations*, no. 123.

[4] Cf. Fulgencio Espa, *Cuenta conmigo*, 33, Palabra, Madrid 2017.

[5] Cf. *The Way*, no. 382.

[6] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2690; cf. nos. 1435, 2695.

[7] *Christ is passing by*, 120.

[8] *Ibidem*, 148.

[9] Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, September 16, 2009.

[10] Cf. *The Way*, no. 62.

[11] *Forge*, no. 754.

[12] Benedict XVI, Address at a general audience, September 16, 2009.

[13] Letter, 8 August 1956, no. 37: AGP, series A.3, 94-1-2.

[14] Cf. Furrow, no. 84; Friends of God, 187.

[15] Acts 2:42.

[16] Cf. Conversations, no. 73.

[17] Cf. Forge, nos. 297 and 789.

[18] Christ is passing by, 46.

[19] Cf. Christ is passing by, 10; *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 43.

[20] Friends of God, 38.

[21] Letter, 8 August 1956, no. 37: AGP, series A.3, 94-1-2.

[22] Cf. Christ is passing by, 174.

[23] Christ is passing by, 99.

[24] Conversations, no. 53.

[25] Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. 2, p. 320.

[26] Furrow, no. 259.

[27] Forge, no. 127.

[28] Cf. The Way, no. 64.

[29] Friends of God, 249.

[30] The Way, no. 56.

[31] Letter, 8 August 1956, no. 38:
AGP, series A.3, 94-1 –2.

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