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“It is the Lord”: Spiritual Accompaniment (I)

We all need companions whose close conversation and encouragement help us navigate life, in service of “the ever-original action of the Holy Spirit” in our souls. This is the 15th installment in the “Combat, closeness, mission” series.

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“When it was already dawn, Jesus was standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus” (Jn 21:4). In the early morning by the Sea of Galilee, the risen Lord appears mysteriously to his disciples, perhaps half veiled by the mist rising from the water. His voice, though also shrouded, carries with force: “Children, have you anything to eat?” They say no. They do not yet know who is speaking to them, but something in that voice prompts them to listen attentively and prepares them to follow his instruction: “Cast the net on the right side, and you will find some.” Obediently, they cast the nets and, in striking contrast with the toil of the entire night, they make a great catch. While the others marvel at the overflowing nets, Saint John lifts his eyes. He sees far beyond the fish: he recognizes the one who has just spoken to them. And he tells Peter: “It is the Lord!” (cf. Jn 21:4–8).

Why is Saint John able to discern the presence of Jesus at the end of that hard night of labor? His reaction recalls the beginning of his Gospel, his first encounter with Jesus.

“Behold the Lamb of God!” Saint John the Baptist said then, as Jesus passed by John and Andrew (Jn 1:36). To others he was just another pilgrim, but the Precursor, “the one who runs ahead,” who sees things coming and announces them, saw the Messiah in Him.

John the Baptist had helped John and Andrew grow spiritually: he had taught them the value of fasting and the need for conversion; he had taught them to pray (cf. Mt 9:14; Lk 3:1–17; 11:1). But his greatest lesson was to present them to Jesus and invite them into a personal relationship with Him (cf. Jn 1:35–39). When he placed his disciples before Jesus, he reached the summit of his mission. From that moment on,

the Baptist humbly stepped aside to allow Jesus to take the central place in his disciples' lives (cf. Jn 3:27–30). Over the centuries, his example has been a model for so many people who guide others toward Christ and help them discern his presence in their lives, always aware that they are not “masters, but guardians.”^[1] — For “the mission is Jesus. He is Risen — thus, he is living and he precedes us. None of us is called to substitute him.”^[2] — We are called, rather, to facilitate each person's encounter with him; to say, with the closeness that comes with trust and affection, “It is the Lord!”

Spiritual accompaniment

“During this voyage of our life, there are times of calm weather, internal or external, and even for long periods. But only in Heaven is peace definitive and tranquillity complete.”^[3] — Our *restless heart* needs

someone to guide it through storms and still waters until it can finally rest in God.^[4] We need companions whose close conversation, comfort, and encouragement help us navigate life with greater confidence and bring clarity when darkness falls or we lose our way. These people have traditionally been called “spiritual directors”: individuals who help us remain steadfast, persevering in the *direction* we chose in following Christ.

A spiritual director walks beside the other person. They do not replace God’s action in the soul, much less override the individual’s conscience, but rather help discern between the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and the suggestions of the devil or one’s own wounded human nature. For this reason, in recent decades the Church has more and more frequently used the term “spiritual accompaniment.” In this regard,

Pope Francis said, “He or she who accompanies does not substitute the Lord, does not do the work in the place of the person accompanied, but walks alongside him or her, encouraging them to interpret what is stirring in their heart, the quintessential place where the Lord speaks. The spiritual accompanier (...) says: ‘Fine, but look here, look here,’ they draw your attention to things that perhaps pass you by; they help you understand better the signs of the times, the voice of the Lord, the voice of the tempter, the voice of the difficulties that you are unable to overcome.”^[5]

The first people who approached the Work felt loved and accompanied by Saint Josemaría. They didn't see him as a sort of “spiritual guru” with advice for every situation, but rather as a friend or a father who listened and cared about their lives... and who saw the blood of Christ flowing

through them.^[6] When people are accompanied in this way, they not only appreciate the help they receive but even come to enjoy the conversations of spiritual guidance. They grow in maturity and apostolic zeal; they are strengthened in their relationship with God. And if they have embraced a particular vocation, they are protected from a mistaken sense of independence that would isolate them from those who share their path and mission.

In the recent life of the Church, we have seen a growing awareness that not only priests, but also lay people, can carry out the task of spiritual accompaniment. This has been practiced in the Work from the very beginning. In the pages that follow, we will consider several aspects of this task, always bearing in mind that we are all called to lead others to “the light and warmth of Christ,”^[7] even if we do not formally serve as

spiritual directors or companions. A second article will explore how friendship “naturally (...) ends up in personal confidences, full of sensitive respect for freedom,”^[8] and we will see how much of what is described here also applies to that more informal, but equally necessary, kind of accompaniment.

Helping the Holy Spirit's work

The primary goal of spiritual accompaniment or direction is to help people encounter Christ and recognize what comes from Him, so that God's love may ignite their life and spread outward to those around them. This requires an environment in which the person can foster a personal relationship with God, develop a spirit of attentive listening in prayer, and learn to discern God's will at every moment of life. The spiritual guide can play a crucial role in helping create this environment.

But doing so means recognizing the uniqueness of each person and remaining open to the mysterious ways in which God acts in souls. “We cannot offer prefabricated formulas, rigid methods, or regulations if we want to bring souls closer to Christ. God’s encounter with each person is ineffable and unrepeatable, and we must cooperate with the Lord to find, in each case, the right word and the right approach, being docile and not trying to hinder the ever-original action of the Holy Spirit.”^[9] —

At the same time, the one being accompanied should reflect carefully on the suggestions offered, meditating on them in prayer with the eyes of faith. As the Father explains: “Because we know that God can speak to us through other people or through ordinary events, the conviction that we can hear his voice in them generates in us a docile attitude towards his designs, which

can also be hidden in the words of those who accompany us on our path.”^[10] This disposition can bear great fruit in our lives, provided we remember that God almost never speaks literally through the words of the spiritual guide. Their words are, rather, an invitation to tune our listening in a certain direction; to discover whether we can hear the Holy Spirit’s inspiration – something only we can do – there. Their words are meant to bring us into contact with the Word.

Genuine spiritual accompaniment, then, is built on a deep respect for the action of the Holy Spirit in each soul. The spiritual director is not a commander but a servant, one who helps the Holy Spirit to guide and enlighten the person being accompanied. As Saint Josemaría said, “Accompanying souls is an art in which the model is Jesus Christ and the one shaping the soul is the

Holy Spirit, through grace.”^[11] This is why the spiritual guide is more gardener than architect: they do not impose forms, or shape people according to their own ideas, but help cultivate the soil of the soul so that God’s life may flourish within it.

Truly listening

At one time or another, all of us have had the experience of being truly listened to; meeting someone who listens kindly and attentively and thus opening up a space in which we feel comfortable sharing our thoughts and feelings without fear or judgement or rejection. When people feel heard, they become more aware of themselves, and they are more easily drawn to listen to God, so that they may better discern his voice. For this reason, Saint Josemaría listened patiently to the young people who came to him, encouraging them to open their hearts freely. Only at the

end would he offer a word of advice or broaden their horizons.

Listening involves much more than just purposeful hearing: it means paying attention to the background of feelings, ideas, and experiences that the person expresses, and helping them explore that inner world for themselves. It requires a true attitude of interest toward the other person. We do not listen to others in order to impose our own agenda or involve them in particular apostolic projects; we listen to help them discover what the Holy Spirit – who loves each soul infinitely – desires for them, so that their joy may be complete (cf. Jn 16:24). In this way, as Pope Benedict XVI liked to say, we become servants of their joy (cf. 2 Cor 1:24).

If we truly want to listen – and make people feel heard – it can be helpful to briefly reflect back what they have

said, using our own words. This helps us foster in ourselves a genuine openness to the interior world the other person is sharing, without projecting our own views onto it. It also helps communicate that openness, ensures we have understood correctly, and encourages the other person to keep unfolding what they wish to share. This creates a sense of calm and helps people take responsibility for their lives, find their own solutions, set out on their own path, and discover their mission. In contrast, interrupting them or jumping ahead of their words can be discouraging and does not help them spread their wings.

Patient listening is an act of love that reveals genuine interest in the other person. For this reason, a spiritual accompanier should never appear bored or in a hurry. Often, for practical reasons, we recommend

making spiritual direction brief – but it is important to discern wisely in each situation, because true listening requires time, respecting the other person’s pace, including their silences. And sometimes, occasionally or over a season, someone may need longer conversations. Open-ended questions can be helpful, but they should not disrupt the natural flow of conversation, nor be used simply to fill awkward silences. On the contrary, silence can often help a person go deeper in their reflections and find the right words. “Joy, anxiety, and suffering can all be communicated in silence – indeed it provides them with a particularly powerful mode of expression.”^[12] —

More than anything else, authentic listening builds bridges of trust, which are a fundamental condition for any spiritual accompaniment, and one that cannot be demanded as

a prerequisite. Trust is tested from the very first encounter and grows with every meeting. For trust to flourish, the other person must feel respected, valued, and secure in sharing their most intimate spiritual experiences. They will do so if they recognize in their companion a refuge and a support in discerning God's voice.

The Apostles found such a refuge in our Lady, especially after Jesus' Ascension. She is a "teacher of discernment: she speaks little, listens a lot, and cherishes in her heart (cf. Lk 2:19). The three attitudes of our Lady: she speaks little, listens a lot, and cherishes in her heart. And the few times she speaks, her words leave a deep mark."^[13] —

[1] Pope Leo XIV, Homily, 31-V-2025.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] St. Josemaría, Letter 2, no. 9.

[4] Cf. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 1.1.

[5] Pope Francis, Audience, 4-I-2023.

[6] “And sometimes he would ask, ‘My children, do you know why I love you so much?’ and then, after a moment of silence, say, ‘Because I see the Blood of Christ coursing in you’” (A. Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III, Scepter, New York, 2002).

[7] St. Josemaría, Letter 1, no. 22.

[8] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 1-XI-2019.

[9] St. Josemaría, Letter 11, no. 42.

[10] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 10-II-2024, no. 6.

[11] St. Josemaría, Letter 26, no. 37.

[12] Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 46th World Communications Day, 20-V-2012.

[13] Pope Francis, Audience, 4-I-2023.

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