

## Spiritual Direction

We are blessed, indeed, if we have a soul companion: someone with whom we can share the love that is a fruit of our prayer-communion with God. Here we look at that special love-relationship we have with a person commonly spoken of as a spiritual director because we confide in this person our prayer experience and open ourselves to him or her as a vehicle of God's guidance of our soul. According to Teresa of Avila it will help if the director is a spiritual friend: 'A great means for making notable progress is to love one's confessor' (*Way of Perfection*, 5).

Teresa knows that we do not go to God on our own. She is also very conscious of the danger of deluding ourselves. It is important that we open our conscience to another, and it is important that that other person be someone who 'has good judgment and experience. If he also is learned, so much the better' (*Life*, 13.16). We need a director who is capable of responding wisely to what we reveal of our union with God. She writes:

'You should try to consult some learned person, if you can, and the more learned this person the better. Those who walk in the way of prayer have the greater need for this counsel; and the more spiritual they are the greater is their need' (*Life*, 13.17).

John of the Cross is of the same view:

'God is so content that the rule and direction of human beings be through other human beings and that we be governed by human reason, that He definitely does not want us to bestow entire credence upon his supernatural communications, nor be confirmed in their strength and security, until they pass through a human channel. As often as He reveals something to us, God confers upon our soul a kind of inclination to manifest this to the appropriate person. Until this is done, we usually go without complete satisfaction, for it is not received from another person like ourselves' (*Ascent II*, 22.9).

Saint Bernard has this warning:

'Let them be warned who are not afraid to enter the paths of life without anyone to guide and teach them, but act as their own pupils as well as their own teachers in the spiritual life. Nor are they satisfied with this; they even collect disciples, the blind leading the blind. How many have we seen wander from the right path, to their great peril, as a result of this? They begin in the spirit but end in the flesh' (*On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 77,6).

Father Marie-Eugène quotes Saint Francis de Sales along the same lines:

'Saint Francis de Sales, with delicate precision, underlines the fact that we are so lacking in clear-sightedness as to ourselves because of a certain complacency "so secret and imperceptible that unless we have very good sight we cannot discover it. The very ones who are tainted with this do not know it, if it is not pointed out to them"' (*I want to see God*, 275).

Saint Teresa insists on the importance of exercising our freedom to choose a director with whom our souls know they are at home:

'Praise God that you are able to choose the director to whom you are to be subject, and do not give up this freedom. It is better to remain without a director until you find the right one, for the Lord will give you one if your life is based on humility and you have the desire to succeed in finding one' (*Life*, 13.19).

Teresa also writes: 'If a soul seeks a director unsuccessfully, the Lord will not fail it' (*Life*, 40.8). John of the Cross warns of the danger of bad direction:

'Because of the refined quality and purity of these delicate and sublime touches of the anointing and overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, neither the soul nor its director understand

them ... Who will succeed in repairing that delicate painting of the Holy Spirit once it is marred by a coarse hand?' (*Living Flame* 3.41-42).

The director is to train a person in detachment by directing all the faculties to God in faith, hope and love. This includes detachment from spiritual favours as well. It must be God whom we seek, not our feelings about God. The director is to discern and evaluate the soul's religious experience and growth in prayer and to help discern what God is doing in the soul (see *Living Flame*, 3.32-40). The director's role is to support a person with understanding and compassion during dark periods of trial, when the soul is overwhelmed by its own sinfulness and the apparent absence of God. Above all, the director must lead souls in God's way, not in the way preferred by the director. John of the Cross writes:

'Directors should reflect that they themselves are not the chief agent, guide, and mover of souls, but that the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, who is never neglectful of souls. Directors are instruments for directing souls to perfection through faith and the law of God, according to the spirit which God gives to each one. Thus the director's whole concern should not be to accommodate souls to his own method and condition, but he should observe the way along which God is leading them, and, if he does not recognise it, he should leave them alone and not bother them. In harmony with the path and spirit along which God is leading them, the spiritual director should strive to conduct them into greater solitude, tranquillity, and freedom of spirit. He should give them latitude so that, when God introduces them into this solitude, they do not become anxious or afflicted with the thought that nothing is being done. Even though the soul is not then doing anything, God is doing something in it'

(*Living Flame* 3,46).

'The director should be kind and peaceful ... and guide souls in the way of faith'.

(*Ascent* II,22,19).

Saint Teresa writes:

'In matters outside his or her personal spiritual experience the director must not worry himself to death, or think he understands what he does not, or quench the spirits, for these souls are being directed by another Master, greater than he, so that they are not without anyone over them' (*Life*, 34.11).

Spiritual direction is a delicate art. People are as diverse as flowers and God has mysterious ways of leading each one into communion with himself. A director, therefore, should act out of spiritual love: a love which is free of self-interest, seeking only the spiritual good of the person, by encouraging the person being directed and helping him or her not to give in to timidity or laziness.

If we are to be helped by opening our soul to a spiritual director, we will need to have faith that God is working in and through the director. John of the Cross writes:

'A humble person does not dare deal with God independently, nor can he be completely satisfied without human counsel and direction. God is desirous of this, for to declare and strengthen truth on the basis of natural reason, he draws near to those who come together in order to know it' (*Ascent*, II.22.11).

We need to be simple and straightforward with our director, revealing the state of our soul as we see it. How can the director be an instrument of the Physician of our soul if we are not honest or are selective in what we choose to reveal? Saint Francis de Sales has this advice:

'Treat with the director open heartedly, in all sincerity and fidelity, revealing clearly to him the good in you and the evil, without pretence or dissimulation ... Have extreme confidence in him, mingled with a holy reverence, in such a way that the reverence does not lessen the

confidence, and confidence does not hinder reverence'(Introduction to the Devout Life, III,iv).

Saint Teresa writes:

'The really essential thing is that you should speak to your confessor very plainly and candidly in describing your experiences of prayer. For unless you do this, I cannot assure you that you are proceeding as you should or that it is God who is teaching you. God is very anxious for us to speak candidly and clearly to those who are in his place, and to desire them to be acquainted with all our thoughts, and still more with our actions, however trivial these may be'(Interior Castle, VI.9).

Jesus revealed his will to Paul through Ananias (Acts 9:6ff). If we have chosen to open our heart in trust to a spiritual guide with whom our soul feels at home, God will not let us down if we humbly listen to the words that come to us through the director. As we listen to the director's words, let us listen to the echo of those words that arises in our heart. If we are humble, honest and prayerful, the Spirit of him who loves us will know what words we are to follow and will use the director's response to guide us.