

# Spiritual Direction

This issue's question comes from a person who writes: "I am a lay person and for several years have had the recurring desire to find someone to counsel me in my spiritual life and prayer. I guess I am looking for a spiritual director, although I don't really know what a spiritual director does and I am embarrassed to ask anyone. What is spiritual direction and what can one expect from a spiritual director?"

We invited Father William A. Barry, a Jesuit, to respond. He is co-author, with William J. Connolly, of *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (Seabury) and was one of the founders, in 1971, of the Center for Religious Development, in Cambridge, Mass., a pastoral center for spiritual direction. Currently, he is assistant director of novices for the New England province of the Jesuits. He has a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Michigan.

We welcome your questions on prayer and spirituality and will select one to be answered in each issue. Send your questions to Praying Box 281, Kansas City, MO. 64141

**By William A. Barry**

**M**any Christians are asking the same question you ask. In the past 20 years we have witnessed a remarkable rise of interest in prayer and spiritual direction in people of all walks of

life. It has been somewhat of an embarrassment to the churches that so few of their professional ministers have been able respond to the desire of so many for help with their prayer.

Perhaps because of the embarrassment, perhaps because God himself has been calling people to respond to the need, centers and programs for training spiritual have sprung up across the United States and in other countries, and they can hardly keep up with the demand for such training. As a result, more and more of God's people are finding competent help when they ask: "Teach me to pray."

You ask what spiritual direction is. It is a form of pastoral counseling that focuses on a person's relationship with God – on a person's prayer life, in other words if prayer is defined as conscious relationship with God, then you will talk with a spiritual director about what happens when you are conscious of God. It is as simple and as profound as that.

For several years you have had a recurring desire to find someone to counsel you in your spiritual life and prayer. At this point you might ask yourself: "Do I mean that I want someone who will help me develop my conscious relationship with God?" If your answer is yes, then you are looking for the kind of direction I mean.

This definition of spiritual direction opens the way to describing what you might expect from a spiritual director. He or she would be interested in your actual experience of God, not your speculations about God. So, the director would want you to talk about your experience and would patiently help you to do this.

We almost have to invent a language to talk about our actual experience of God because we are so unused to speaking about it. The director will ask you questions such as these: "What happens when you pray?" "What is God like for you?" "What do you want or desire from God when you pray?" At first such questions may puzzle or even scare you, but gradually, if the director is patient and really interested in your experience, you will find yourself able to articulate more and more of what you experience in prayer.

It's not as though beginning spiritual direction is the beginning of your relationship with God. You already have such a relationship, and it is rather well developed and conscious if you have the recurring desire to seek help with prayer. The spiritual director wants to help you to become more aware of the relationship that already exists and more articulate about your experience so that you will know how solid the bedrock of your prayer life is. You will then be

helped to pay more attention to the Lord's communications to you and your own reactions to him and to life.

Relationships develop when the two persons involved pay attention to one another and reveal themselves to one another. Your director would help you decide how you best meet the Lord in the circumstances of your life. The Lord is available at all times and in all places, we believe, but are not always conscious of His presence.

Each of us who wants to develop our relationship with the Lord has to look at how and where we can let Him make His presence felt. For some it might be lying in bed just before going to sleep at night or in the morning, for some on the bus or train going to work, for some luxuriating in the bath tub, for some walking in the woods, for some stopping at a chapel or church, for some reading the Bible. Indeed, any one person may find all these activities (and others) at one time or another conducive to becoming conscious of God.

Often enough we think of prayer as "saying prayers." But prayer can just be silent awareness of God's presence or listening to the birds or to the wind in the trees or to music. God makes his presence, his desires, his hopes known under these circumstances. So, the director will encourage you to ask for what you want, e.g., "I want to feel deeply that God loves me

warts and moles and all," and then to do something that will allow you to be quiet long enough to let God respond. And your director will help you to pay closer and closer attention to your experience by a patient and persistent interest in it. As a result, you will grow in reverence for your own experience as the privileged place to meet God.

As you can see, the kind of spiritual direction I describe is not esoteric or even very difficult. It is just a matter of two fellow Christians talking about the experience of God one of them has. Spiritual direction of this kind ought to be much more available in our churches. But, truth to tell, it has not been so available. Even in religious houses and seminaries spiritual direction, until recently, did not consist of listening to the religious experiences of those directed.

Rather the spiritual director was often the confessor for a very large number and, at best, gave good advice when people had problems. I recall one director years ago who began every session with me with the question: "Any problems?" He seemed a bit crestfallen when I usually answered "no." During the time I met with him, we never discussed my actual prayer experience. Small wonder that few priests and religious knew how to help another with prayer when they got so little help themselves.

Throughout the church's history there have always been men and women who really listened to the prayer experience of those who sought their help. One thinks of the desert monks, of Teresa and Avila, of the holy woman to whom Ignatius of Loyola refers in his autobiography, of Ignatius himself, of Francis de Sales, and many others. But such listeners have always been in short supply. In our age more and more men and women are trying to learn the difficult, yet simple art of inviting conversations about religious experience. I hope that you will be able to find one of them.

How should you go about it? Ask around. "Are there any spiritual directors in the area?" "Do you know anyone who helps people with their prayer?" If you do find a possibility ask for an appointment so that the two of you can look one another over and talk about what you want. Even if you begin direction with someone, make an agreement to review together how things are going after about five to seven sessions. The main criterion for you will be whether you are being helped to develop your relationship with the Lord.

Besides my own book, written with Father Connelly, you might find helpful *Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet: An Introduction to Spiritual Direction* by Katherine Marie Dyckman and L. Patrick Carroll (Paulist Press).

