

# SPIRITUAL DIRECTION:

## Navigate Your Life Toward God

*If your prayer life has gotten off track, Lent  
is the perfect time to find a spiritual director*



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**HOW TO PICK  
A DIRECTOR**  
PAGE 26

**A HELPFUL  
DAILY PRAYER**  
PAGE 30

**QUESTIONS  
TO ASK**  
PAGE 31

**By Deacon James Keating**

At the holy Eucharist, the priest offers the sacrifice of Christ. The congregation offers itself to Christ and has this offering taken up into the sacrifice that the priest is offering. In this way the whole Christ is offered to the Father, head and body. Even though we experience the Sunday Mass as ordinary, routine and perhaps even mundane, it is, in fact, holy. It is the place of encounter between the Church and God. The priest desires to keep the inspiring truth of this holy encounter always in his heart. However, the circumstances of his daily life, his own sin, finitude and limits all conspire to take this consciousness from him. Nevertheless, in his heart he wants to remember — he wants to remain aware of this holy encounter throughout his daily ministry.



One of the keys to finding a spiritual director is someone who knows the Faith well, but also is someone you trust to keep you on the path to Christ. Karen Callaway/Chicago Catholic

More deeply, we recall that the holy work of a priest is not, primarily, his work. The holy work of bringing people into communion with God is Christ's own work, which is extended to the priest at the altar, in the confessional and in the other



sacraments and pastoral work he conducts. The personal work of the priest, per se, is to remain vulnerable to Christ, to be a man of prayer. As the priest intends the purposes of the Church in his sacramental ministry, Christ will take care of the sacraments and their effects. The personal work of the priest is to care for the doorway of his own heart. There is to be synergy between the work of Christ in the priest's ministry and the presence of Christ

in the priest's heart. For this communion between ministry and heart to remain and deepen priests must be faithful to their sacramental duty and to the duty of personally receiving God's love in prayer. To sever these two duties is to locate the origins of priestly stress, anxiety and worse: alienation from God and parishioners.

**Goal and Circumstances**

Spiritual direction is a useful spiritual tool to assist a priest to dwell in the synergy between ministry and his personal communion with God. Spiritual direction was mandated during seminary formation. Once out of formation, however, a priest has to find his own director. This raises the question of finding a competent one — and as Lent approaches, what better time to do so? When spiritual direction is recommended as a norm for one's prayer life, finding such a director can be frustrating. Some relief is found after ordination because the priest now can find such direction from a wider field of competent persons and not only from fellow priests.

But how does one know if any given director is competent? There is only one criterion: the priest notices his intimacy

**CHOOSING A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR**

*The following are some things to consider when searching for a spiritual director:*

- ❑ Pick a director who is Catholic. This may seem obvious, but it is crucial to consider, because the imagination and thought processes of a director must be doctrinally sound and not idiosyncratic.
- ❑ Pick a director who is not an ideologue. Having a spiritual director who is liberal or conservative is to entrust one's soul to partiality and not truth.
- ❑ Good spiritual directors should have theological training and a life spent in books and communities that carry true expressions of man's identity before God.
- ❑ While a spiritual director doesn't have to be a theologian, the director is to be in love with the Church, want only its good and draw life from its teachings and sacraments.



**ST. JOSEMARIA  
ESCRIVÁ ON  
SPIRITUAL  
DIRECTION**

“You wouldn’t think of building a good house to live in here on earth without an architect. How can you ever hope, without a director, to build the castle of your sanctification in order to live forever in heaven? ... You think you are really somebody: your studies — your research, your publications, your social position, your name, your political accomplishments — the offices you hold, your wealth, your age ... no longer a child. Precisely because of all of this, you — more than others — need a director for your soul.”

out and heal anyone and thereby circumvent therapy. But that is a miracle, not the norm. If a priest becomes aware that some debilitating emotional wound is present it is best for him to enter therapy. To do so is a mark of love for the Church. It may be possible to attend both therapy and spiritual direction simultaneously, but only those possessing the capacity to receive God’s love will find spiritual direction effective.

For the man of sound mind and heart, however, spiritual direction will give him the “newness of life” he craves as he negotiates the normal struggles of ministry, temptation and spiritual living. A priest’s whole life and ministry is germane to spiritual direction, but the conversation between him and his director always is guided by one question: Where is God working in this situation?

So if the goal of spiritual direction is the deepening and sustaining of a priest’s intimacy with the Holy Trinity, how does spiritual direction help achieve this?

**How to Prepare for Direction**

The major activity needed to prepare for a direction session is to begin, sustain and/or struggle to remain faithful to prayer. To seek out direction without a prayer life would be like a bachelor seeking out marriage counseling. Without a relationship there is nothing to talk about. Of course, one can seek out a director if the priest wants to start or restart a prayer life. If, on one’s own, a priest has been praying the Liturgy of the Hours regularly, giving himself and the congregation a sufficient time of silence to receive God’s love after receiving holy Communion at Mass (minutes not seconds), spending some time before the Blessed Sacrament in adoration, praying the Scripture in *lectio divina* style, possibly keeping a journal, then you are ready to seek a director. If you have not prayed the Liturgy of the Hours for years, have not engaged in *lectio* or adoration of

with the Holy Trinity deepening. Of course, from this measure many things follow: better self-knowledge; a developing moral life; vibrancy in affectivity is experienced; a more sensitive penitential heart is cultivated; empathy toward fellow clergy is recognized; and a love for parishioners is ignited anew. In other words, in a man with a sound mind and emotional life, spiritual direction changes everything in one’s life. It is obvious why this happens: God becomes the heart of everything.

To note that this new life occurs in a man of sound mind and affect is crucial, because spiritual direction is not therapeutic counseling. Stubborn emotional wounds, repetitive habits caused by neurosis, severe depression or worse can impede the goal of spiritual direction. These and other debilitating emotional wounds

(narcissism, obsessive compulsive disorders, etc.) can hamper a priest’s freedom to receive love from God in prayer. Now, of course, God can miraculously reach





late, and race through the silent periods of your Mass but desire to start your personal prayer life again, then you are ready to seek a director. If you began prayer and succeed intermittently and have sustained an on-again, off-again lifestyle of prayer but now wish to sustain it consistently, you are ready to seek a director.

To prepare for a first meeting with a director, I invite priests to consider entering the following pattern of being with God. It is a way of being with God that assists the priest in gaining intimacy with him. Intimacy is achieved through emotional vulnerability and is the adhesive of any love relationship. Intimacy consists of being aware of the presence of the one you love, being interiorly present to oneself and then sharing with the beloved all that is within one's own heart. Remaining alienated from God and or from one's own interior life is the fastest way to isolation

and emotional pain.

This way of being with God involves the following: While at adoration or engaged in scriptural prayer, first acknowledge the



thoughts, feelings and desires that such prayer is stirring within you, or what was present within you as you entered prayer. Allow any affective movements to rise and be named specifically: I am lonely; I am tired; I am grateful; I am distracted; I am sad; etc. Once you are present to your own interiority, relate the contents of your heart to Christ or the Holy Spirit or the Father. Speak directly to the Person to whom you are most drawn. Then allow what you have shared to be given to God in the silence that envelops you. From out of the silence receive anything God is giving to you, most fundamentally, of course, his very self. But you also might become aware of some particular wisdom he is sharing with you: a consoling thought; a truth that gently was raised about yourself that needs attention; a fear that is keeping you from the fullness of ministry and more. You know that it was God giving you these truths because it was given clearly, simply, gently, and it left you free and more engaged with reality. After these are received from God, respond to him

## PARAMETERS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

*Once you've chosen a spiritual director who is willing to work with you, it is good to set up the parameters of the relationship in the first session.*

- The director should give the directee complete freedom to meet with an agreed upon frequency.
- The director should make known that this is not a contractual relationship in any fashion (unless on the rare occasion that fees are required); the directee can end the relationship at any time without reason.
- It primarily is the directee's responsibility to set up appointments.
- Priests have had their spiritual lives suffer feeling obligated to return to a director whose skills fail to lead him to a deepening prayer life. Of course, the director is free to excuse a priest as his directee for any reason as well.
- Priests should know that one of the "common-sense" reasons directors end a relationship with a directee is that the directee has stopped praying and there is no longer anything to share with the director.
- Sessions should not become a ministerial problem-solving session or a pastoral counseling hour.



### THOMAS MERTON ON SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

“What we need to do is bring the director into contact with our real self, as best we can, and not fear to let him see what is false in our false self. ... We must let the director know what we really think, what we really feel, and what we really desire, even when these things are not altogether honorable. ... Hence, we should approach direction in a spirit of humility and compunction, ready to manifest things of which we are not proud.”

The goal of spiritual direction is to grow closer to God in prayer and to seek him in all aspects of our lives. Lightstock

with gratitude, adoration, more prayer or some other appropriate act of love toward him or members of your parish. This process of ARRR (acknowledge, relate, receive and respond) can be applied to a number of prayer forms, and is especially helpful in preparing for a spiritual direction session. In preparing for direction, the process of ARRR assists the priest in answering: Who am I with when I am in my heart?

Many times we are alone in our hearts in a judgmental way. We are alone in a manner of fear or envy, worrying about pleasing others or measuring up to their standards. We also can be alone within and cast judgments against God. In practicing ARRR we long to be with ourselves in truth and with God in his love. We are with God confidently when we choose to share ourselves honestly (ARRR) with him in faith — and so receive him in love. We do not want to put on a false self, do not want to doubt him through any unhealed pain or unrelated grief. We simply want to be truthful in his presence and enter a conversation with him in peace — a hum-

ble dialogue that disposes us to notice the affective movements influencing our actions, judgments, moods and more.

If a priest can practice this regularly, he is well prepared for spiritual direction. If any fears arise while the priest is praying, he should just note them and make sure they are shared with God and his director. Remember that prayer is the safest emotional place on earth if entered into by a man possessing a healthy state of mind and heart. A priest can safely share all with God, trusting that God will only love in return, since that is his nature. He is, if you will, bound by that reality: His only response can be love.

It also can be good practice to see one's confessor before spiritual direction. Doing so frees up the directee to focus on his relationship with God in direction and not use the time to unburden the conscience. We do not want to make direction an accidental confessional or give it a double purpose if one's director is a priest. Of course, circumstantially, one may find legitimate reasons to celebrate this sacrament immediately before direction begins or after if the director is a priest.

### What to Bring to Direction

The main thing to bring to spiritual direction is the memory of your prayer time. But because prayer is about one's whole life, to speak in spiritual direction about ministry and celibate living is natural and can help to deepen prayer. Ask yourself the questions found in the sidebar on Page 31.

It also is good to be ready to talk about priestly celibacy, chastity struggles, friendships and any habitual temptations to sin that the director can assist the priest to bring to God. It is helpful to mention any struggles with persons in authority, conflicts in the parish and temptations to believe lies about oneself or ministry. In this way the director can help one notice where God is working to set the directee free or inspire him to further spiritual or moral development.





**DAILY EXAMEN PRAYER**

*The Examen prayer from St. Ignatius of Loyola reminds us to be mindful of God in all things. The prayer, broken into five categories, can be a powerful tool for spiritual direction.*

**THANKSGIVING**

- What am I especially grateful for in the past day ...
- The gift of another day ...
- The love and support I have received ...
- The courage I have mustered ...
- An event that took place today ...

**PETITION**

- I am about to review my day; I ask for the light to know God and to know myself as God sees me.

**REVIEW**

- Where have I felt true joy today?
- What has troubled me today?
- What has challenged me today?
- Where and when did I pause today?
- Have I noticed God's presence in any of this?

**RESPONSE**

- In light of my review, what is my response to the God of my life?

**A LOOK AHEAD**

- As I look ahead, what comes to mind?
- With what spirit do I want to enter tomorrow?

Source: Xavier University

Further, the virtue of courage is vital to pray for as the priest begins and sustains spiritual direction. A good director will invite the priest to notice and say more about his deepest feelings, receiving the reality of these affective movements so the priest might share them with Christ. Some of these deeper thoughts, feelings and desires might be painful to notice and articulate, but if one does so in prayer, and in the presence of good director, the priest is rewarded with healing, freedom, insight and peace.

**The Process of a Session**

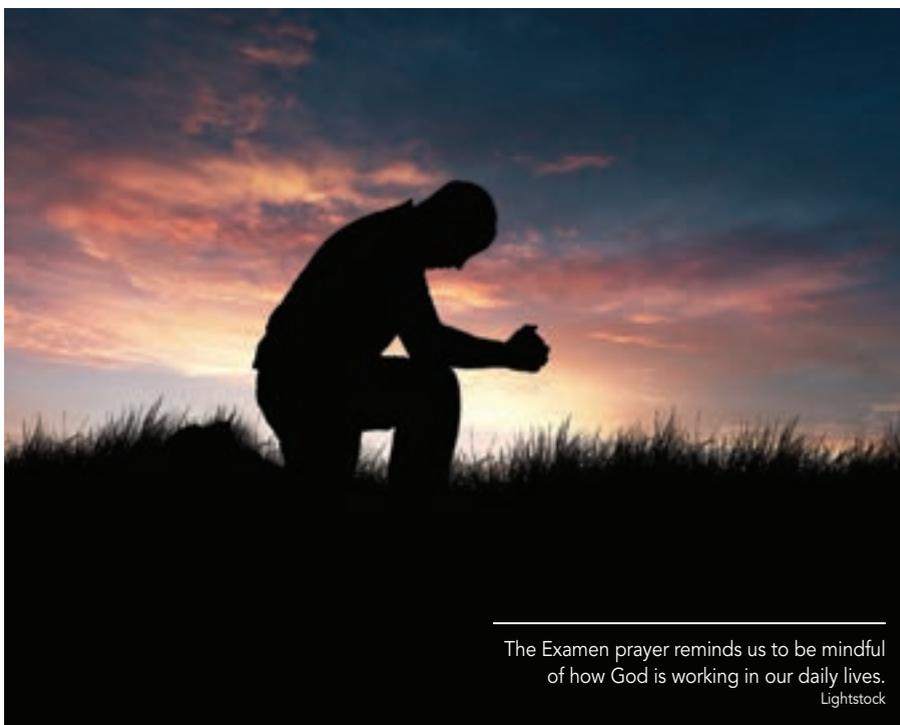
Normally a direction session should be held in a location where distractions are minimal. This is true so that the silence of the location may bear truth from the priest's heart to his director's heart. Silence allows both director and directee to attentively listen.

Exterior silence, and the growing silence that we welcome within our own hearts, condition spiritual direction, because spiritual direction is prayer. It is a time for recalling the prayer a priest had in the past weeks, but it also is time for listening to God in the direction session

itself, where divine intimacy and healing is bestowed.

A direction session typically lasts an hour, but a better barometer for judging time is to notice when the directee's heart is full: "Yes, I am so full now with truth or love or insight that I need to go and pray some more. This time was sufficient, I can leave now."

Directors don't want to keep talking when the real gold has already been given; now the directee simply needs to admire the gift with the Lord. Second, not only should the location for direction be externally silent, silence should be welcomed when it arrives right within the conversation itself. Silence — as the way to listen to the Lord, to gather our thoughts, or to process a difficult truth just revealed — is the engine of direction. The director might say, "Father, at this point in the conversation let's just be with the Lord for a moment and receive what he is giving us." The directee should be free to say this as well. After such silent prayer, more processing can go on. On the whole, the session encompasses two friends of Christ sharing faith and noticing the powerful actions of God in the directee's prayer life. It a con-



The Examen prayer reminds us to be mindful of how God is working in our daily lives. Lightstock

*For a man with a sound mind and emotional life, spiritual direction changes everything in one's life. It is obvious why this happens: God becomes the heart of everything.*

versation of deep listening to one another and to the Spirit abiding in the hearts of both and between them as friends in faith.

Generally speaking, the director should be expert in the ways of helping priests discern the movements of the Spirit. A capable director recognizes the way God's Spirit operates, the fluctuations of our human moods or even the presence of satanic temptations. Primarily the director is there gently to encourage the priest to receive what God is doing in his own heart. In prayer we are always led to receive the consolation of God's love and resist any lies or desolations that undermine our faith, hope or love. Consolation is not a "happy mood"; it is adherence to the indwelling Spirit, which leads to a deep faith, hope and love, making it easier to do God's will. Desolation is a prison of isolation, which leads away from God and makes it more difficult to do his will. The director assists the priest in listening to the contents of his own heart, distinguishing between what isolates him from God and what leads him to receive an abundance of his love.

Besides finding assistance in discerning spirits, some directors find it helpful to recommend that directees begin the practice of the Examen prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola (see sidebar on Page 30). This is a powerful tool in daily prayer, and its fruit should be part of any conversation in spiritual direction.

Simply put, the Examen prayer is our attentiveness to where we have received God's love throughout our ministerial day and where we have resisted his love. Do we have a habit of dwelling in thoughts, feelings and desires that block our reception of divine love and consolation? Alternately, during each day, where did we notice

and welcome the consoling love of God? If a priest would attend to these questions daily his intimacy with God would flower.

Finally, the director ought to be able to help identify any emotional wounds that the priest carries in his heart and encourage him to open these wounds regularly to God for healing. Spiritual desolation can feed off of and hide within any emotional wounds that remain unrelated to the Sacred Heart's great love for priests. The golden rule of all spiritual direction is to speak the truth in each session so God might reach the directee with his love. God lives in reality, and we must meet him where he lives for healing to reach us. Reality is the place we want to live — not alone with our pain or in isolation from truth. We want to live with the Lord!

**Conclusion**

Receiving deep love from God within prayer is crucial for all parish priests because to receive love from God is the very fuel he needs to give love to his parishioners. Receiving the consoling love of God

is not some luxury for a few priests with time on their hands; it is the very origin of ministry. Spiritual direction can assist in keeping the flow of love between the priest and God open, clear and flowing. This flow waters the priest's ministry from the source. The priest who draws life from this fountain can only bless those who await his healing presence. In committing himself to spiritual direction, the priest commits himself to growth in his own vocation as diocesan priest. The greatest beneficiary of a priest's deepening prayer life is not just the priest but the people he shepherds.

Christ is the Good Shepherd who wants to lead his flock to where life can be found. This leading is accomplished through his shared priesthood in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

As noted at the beginning of this essay, the priest wants to remain aware of the holy encounter that is the heart of his identity and ministry. Commitment to personal prayer and spiritual direction is a way a priest remains in the circulation of love that is Christ's own holiness. He shares this holiness with his priests out of love for his lambs (Jn 21:15). **TP**

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**QUESTIONS TO TAKE TO SPIRITUAL DIRECTION**

- ▶ How did I pray?
- ▶ What was its content?
- ▶ What did I notice about my affective life?
- ▶ What did God gift to me that increased my freedom?
- ▶ Where was I struggling in prayer?
- ▶ Was there anything in my prayer that made me resist his love or resist trusting him with more of myself?
- ▶ Was there anyone I needed to forgive?
- ▶ What new inspirations came from him for my parish ministry?
- ▶ Was my prayer seemingly dry or empty of life?