

POST #12 - SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND STAYING CLOSE TO JESUS

SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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Staying Close to Jesus

One way of staying close to Jesus is by doing repetitions of graces, that is, by finding a moment or prayer experience in your memory by which you can come immediately again to God and stay there. Such exercises keep us in God's love. For me, it is the memory of Mary's presence on my thirty day retreat. I can remember walking and feeling her next to me. She brought me to the Father, and I stayed there. Some of the repetitions are with us for a short period of time, but others can be re-entered and are an abiding gift to us— if we are looking and if we are slowing ourselves down to stay in the graces.

By opening up our decisions and actions to Him, we stay in God's presence. So, for example, if a man has ten minutes that are free, encourage him to ask God what God would like him to do. It may be that it seems that God, through the man's imagination, asks the man to pray or to give up a small pleasure. The man should check: Is this a free request, or is there something compulsive about it? If it seems compulsive (e.g., as if God is saying, "You will cut yourself off from My will if you eat those cookies"), he should act against it. It may be that the man's reason tells him to choose one or another option. God works through our reason, and we should honor Him by having a healthy respect for our reason. This kind of exercise helps train us to open our small decisions to the presence of the Lord, and it teaches us discernment. Finally, it helps lead us to desire God's will, however God may want to reveal it.

By staying with Our Lady and the saints, we stay with God. As members of Christ's Body, they draw us to Him, our head. At times, seminarians who do not know the saints can be wary of them. These seminarians are concerned that a relationship with the saints would diminish their relationship with the Lord. It can be helpful to remind the men that the saints live and move and have their being (Acts 17:28) in the Lord, that they will always draw us back to the Lord. They bring us and our needs to Jesus.

How do we come to know the saints? The rosary is one of the most common ways that we relate with Mary to the Lord. Precisely because it is common, it is a good way for diocesan seminarians to pray. We are so easily drawn by the esoteric, the trendy, and the fancy that it is good for us to stay in the spiritual Walmarts, Sears, and Penney's of the world of prayer.

Another way to stay in the Lord is to allow the liturgical calendar to draw the men into relationships with the canonized members of the Body of Christ. Reading about the saint of the day is a good, practical way to start knowing the saints as more than statues and paintings. They help people see the world of Grace, showing us that it is possible for men and women to live in Christ, to be faithful.

Finally, by praying to the angels and receiving their messages, we keep awake to the Lord. Since the good angels are the messengers of the Lord, it is useful to encourage the men to develop relationships with them. Being awake to the Lord and recollected will mean that we become more aware of evil messages and messengers. We will see things more clearly, including the world and all its creatures. Just as the evil spirits try to form relationships with us, so the good spirits want those relationships; so, praying to our guardian angels, to St. Michael, and to the other angels keeps us close to the One who gives their messages and helps keeps our eyes fixed on heaven.

The Liturgy, again, helps us become aware of the angels and their loving presence. An attentive reading of the Eucharistic Liturgy reveals references to the presence of the angels. More attention to the angels, in turn, leads to greater clarity in our worship; the angels focus us more clearly on God.

Some Practical Points for Direction

Here, I would like to give some practical points for direction. For example, when a man first asks if I will be his director, we meet; and I review with him our seminary's guidelines for spiritual direction, which describe how often we will meet and the itinerary of prayer that he will be taking.

Freedom for the Light

I also suggest that within two months, he needs to be free enough to bring to direction with me things that embarrass him, things of which he is ashamed or afraid. If he does not have that freedom, we need to talk, or he needs to ask for another director.

The qualities that lead us to admire a priest and to ask for him as a director can also lead us to be shy about bringing forward our sins and temptations. Direction will not work unless the man is free enough to bring into the light those kinds of things.

Journaling

St. Mark the Ascetic tells us that the three fearsome Goliaths facing the Christian are forgetfulness, ignorance, and laziness. I suggest that seminarians who are early in their walk with the Lord use a journal to note the more important movements of grace or temptation. The habit itself of looking for those movements helps us learn the ways of the Spirit and avoid the pitfalls of ignorance. Similarly, the habit of reflection and taking notes helps curb laziness.

Begin the Session with a Prayer

To keep it a prayer, when I meet with a seminarian and we pray together, I open my soul to the Holy Spirit to see how He would like us to pray. I can always go to habit or my reason if I do not sense that God is leading; but often, God gives some direction. For a form, I like to start with praise and thanksgiving; so, we thank the Father for His love, for making us His beloved sons in Christ. I ask Jesus to be within us, between us, around us. I then ask the Holy Spirit to move our thoughts and hearts to know the Father's will and to love the Father's will.

I then open my heart to God's direction for beginning the session. Often, I feel like God nudges me to ask, "From your prayer, from the homilies you are hearing, from your reading and conversations, what is the one thing your heavenly Father most wants you to be doing, or to be?"

At other times, I will suggest that people want their priests to be peaceful and joyful. Because we are often not peaceful and joyful, it is good to open those moments to the Lord. So, I will ask the man when he has been aware of a lack of peace and joy. We begin there and explore together.

At other sessions, I suggest that because our life in Christ is paschal, it is good to start with where we have known grace, victory, ease, and joy. Then, after talking about God's grace, it is good to look at where we have had fear, suffering, anger, and loss. Starting with what God does in giving us grace helps frame the time from the perspective of grace, rather than jumping right into problems.

At other times, I will mention that God's first question to us in the Bible is "Where are you?" In order for us to be in God's presence, we have to be in our own skin; we have to slow down to see what is going on in our lives. So, with that introduction, I will ask the man, "Where are you?" Occasionally, I will find that the question is too abstract for a man or, conversely, too pointed, so I will go somewhere else. Or, at other times, I find it is good to begin with a simple, "Okay, so how are you?"

Beyond the Beginning

Those beginning questions usually open up a larger conversation. During that conversation, the man's struggle with one of the theological virtues will often come up. Hints of those struggles can be a lack of patience with other seminarians or with formators; or a man may seem defeated and at a loss—or it may be that a lack of confidence in him is being expressed. If the man does not know much about the virtues, I teach him a few basics. I begin teaching him the value of recognizing a lack of love, of faith, or of hope. It is often when we are ready to recognize the poverty of virtue that we are ready to pray to receive the needed virtue from the Lord.

A practical way that I suggest the man to pray is for him to feel the lack of love, hope, or faith. He should allow himself to experience his poverty. Then, rather than calling out wildly from his poverty with desperation, he should consider that the Lord will always give us faith, hope, and love. For other prayers, there may be a delay, but He always wants us to grow in the theological virtues. To pray, it can be helpful to suggest that the man breathe in Jesus' hope, Jesus' faith, Jesus' love. Then, with that faith, hope, and love, he can breathe out fortitude, generosity, and confidence back to the Lord. He may first need to exhale fear, anger, defeat, and whatever else is in him; but as he receives more of God's grace, he will know more virtue, more of Jesus's strength infusing his own strengths.

At other times, in the face of temptation and lack of virtue, it may seem that the way to proceed is to encourage the man to more actively turn away from sin. If that is the case, it can be helpful to point out how sin weakens us, distorts our hearts, and makes us less able to serve.

Still, at other times, the wounds that a man carries may surface. When this happens, if it seems right, I lead the man in a prayer for healing during the session. I ask the man to identify the feelings and beliefs in the memory. I suggest that it is usually easier to focus if he closes his eyes. Then, I ask him if he is willing to have Jesus bring His truth and His presence into the memory. If so, I ask Jesus to enter the memory. Very often, the presence and truth of Christ will come at that moment.

At other times, if I think some deeper wound has surfaced, I suggest that during his upcoming times of prayer, the man open up these wounds to the healing presence of Jesus.