

Catholic

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Catholic Traditions: WHAT WE DO AND WHY WE DO IT

Spiritual Direction for Catholics

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Spiritual direction is a pastoral ministry in the Church that attends to a person's spiritual growth within their Christian journey. It is where "help given by one Christian to another enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship."

(The Practice of Spiritual Direction, William A. Barry, SJ, and William J. Connolly, SJ)

The purpose of spiritual direction is to nurture a person's growth in holiness by gently helping one recognize and respond to God the Father's love, drawing one more deeply into communion with Jesus Christ and conformity to his life. Through prayerful discernment, one learns to become attentive to the quiet promptings of the Holy Spirit and, like despairing Elijah beneath the broom tree, learns to distinguish that whisper from one's own thoughts and distractions, gradually discovering the threads of grace woven throughout their prayer and daily life. (See 1 Kings 19.)

The focus of spiritual direction is about nurturing one's personal relationship with the Triune God through attentive accompaniment, discernment, and guidance to individual spiritual needs as lived and experienced in prayer and everyday life. As Fr. Joseph Tetlow, SJ, explains, spiritual direction "addresses what is in one's daily life as one prays their way through life's complex decisions and interpretations of their spiritual experiences in those everyday life circumstances" (*Handing On the Fire: Making Spiritual Direction Ignatian*). Its goal is to support a deepening in one's relationship with God and to awaken awareness of one's God-given heart's desires.

The History of Spiritual Direction Ministry

Spiritual direction has been part of the Church's mission since Christ commissioned the apostles to teach and guide all nations. In the letters of St. Paul, we see the attentive guidance of a spiritual father, encouraging new believers and correcting them gently, and helping early Christian communities grow in faith and holiness.

Early in Church history, from the third to fifth centuries, this ministry took shape through the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who provided wisdom and counsel to those pursuing holiness. Their guidance greatly influenced the emerging monastic tradition.

Within the early monastic communities, the abbot or abbess served as a spiritual father or mother, entrusted with the care of souls and the guidance of vocations. Marked by obedience, discernment, and attentiveness to the movements of the heart, this model laid the groundwork



for the Church's understanding of spiritual accompaniment.

Over its 2,000-year history, spiritual direction has been shaped and enriched by the Church's many spiritual traditions. In later centuries, this ministry was further developed through religious communities, including the Augustinians, Carmelites, Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, Passionists, and Redemptorists, each contributing distinctive charisms and approaches to guiding souls in the life of grace.

Noted sixteenth-century saints, such as St. Teresa of Ávila, St. John of the Cross, and St. Ignatius of Loyola, left us a rich treasury of guidance in their writings. In the eighteenth century, St. Alphonsus Liguori carried this

tradition forward with tender pastoral counsel that fostered love of Christ and holiness in family life. Since then, millions have been guided by mentors shaped by the collective wisdom of these holy people.

Spiritual Direction Today

To this day, Catholic spiritual direction remains uniquely characterized by its Trinitarian, Marian, sacramental, and magisterial foundations. Spiritual directors share in a diverse yet unified ministry, rooted in the rich Catholic tradition of spiritual accompaniment.

They may be laypeople, religious, or ordained, serving in settings such as retreat houses, monasteries, universities, seminaries, and parishes. Many spiritual directors serve part-time in this ministry and bring formation and degrees from a range of disciplines that inform their work of accompaniment. Through attentive listening and Spirit-led discernment, they help individuals grow in holiness and live faithfully within their particular state of life.

Spiritual direction is available to all believers who desire a deeper relationship with God and wish to discern God's will. It is especially helpful for those discerning a vocation—marriage, single life, consecrated, religious, or ordained—

as well as for those seeking a more integrated lived faith within their present circumstances.

People come to spiritual direction for many reasons. Some are drawn by a longing for a closer relationship with God; others seek guidance in learning different forms of prayer; still others hope to understand their experiences in prayer—distraction, dryness, consolation, or desolation—more clearly.

Many turn to spiritual direction at significant moments in life: changes in family, career, or relationships; seasons of transition that invite deeper reflection; vocational discernment; or challenges that surface within the ordinary rhythm of daily life. In these times, spiritual direction offers a sacred space to weave faith into both everyday circumstances and life-altering events, helping individuals notice how God is present and active.

Others seek direction during times of interior change—shifts in faith, experiences of doubt, or questions about identity before God. In such seasons, spiritual direction can offer clarity and reassurance when one's experience feels confusing or unfamiliar.

Others arrive with a desire for personal growth: to know themselves more honestly in the light of God's grace, to listen more attentively to the movements of the Holy Spirit, to mature in virtue and holiness, and to follow God's will with greater freedom and trust.

What Happens in Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual direction, as a ministry of accompaniment, is marked by spiritual friendship between a director and directee. The director helps the directee discern God's presence and will in his or her life. Spiritual direction is where two people come together, listening to the whispers of the Holy Spirit's direction, growing in holiness, and applying their God-given gifts in the service of others.

A goal of spiritual direction is to help one discern the overall direction of one's life—both temporal and eternal—and to integrate earthly responsibilities

with the pursuit of heaven, so that the person may live faithfully in the world and respond more freely and lovingly to God's grace.

Spiritual direction sessions center on a prayerful exploration of one's sacred experiences and deepest desires and how these shape one's relationship with God, self, and others. Through reflective dialogue, the director helps the directee notice what is holy and meaningful within the person's prayer and daily life, using a manner similar to faith sharing yet within contemplative discernment.

Together, director and directee seek to grow in awareness of the movement of grace by reflecting on the directee's lived experience as he or she attends to the movements of the heart—consolations (such as inner peace or attraction toward God) and desolations (such as trials or spiritual dryness)—to uncover God's invitations in a particular season of life.

The director helps the directee interpret these patterns of God's activity over time and respond more fully to God's call.

This fosters an integrated awareness that aligns thoughts (head), feelings (heart), and actions (hands) with the mind of Christ.

Sessions are typically about an hour long and are often scheduled monthly. Each session begins and ends in prayer. Over time, these confidential conversations help the directee recognize patterns of grace and discern God's call more clearly.

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The Role of a Spiritual Director

Initially, a director may be instructive, explaining prayer and offering insights drawn from sacred Scripture, the lives of the saints, or the teachings of the Church. These insights are offered prayerfully and appropriately, not as instruction alone, but as help to illuminate the directee's lived experience in light of faith.

In a directive role, a director occasionally offers suggestions to help the directee notice something he or she may have overlooked in order to deepen the individual's relationship with God within the life of the Church and through the graces of the sacraments.

In the contemplative role, the director accompanies the directee in discerning the various interior promptings of the heart. As the director gently guides the directee to consider his or her experiences in prayer, the directee becomes attentive to and more aware of what arises or



stirs within him or her—feelings, insights, images, desires, attractions, or intentions that are called “spirits.” This begins the process known as the “discernment of spirits.”

Naming their experiences helps directees discern what is happening within them. For some, describing and naming their experiences in prayer—such as peace, joy, gratitude, longing, desire, or awe—come easily. For others, describing prayerful experiences can be difficult. They may sense vague or ineffable feelings that are hard to put into words.

Spiritual directors assist directees in naming these interior movements by offering language for what they are experiencing, using terms rooted in the Church’s spiritual tradition. By helping directees articulate their experiences, directors support their directees’ understanding of what has been happening over time and in them presently. This also helps directees notice patterns that have been emerging across their prayer lives.

Is Spiritual Direction for Me?

After a person recognizes the need for guidance, it is important to clarify what kind of helper is most appropriate: spiritual director, coach, mentor, companion, or therapist. Each offers a distinct approach with different purposes, roles, and formation.

Spiritual direction is not therapy or counseling as defined by our healthcare system. While there is overlap in skills used—such as active listening, clarifying questioning, and reflecting—the focus, framework, and goals of each are fundamentally different. Spiritual direction focuses on one’s relationship with God, the framework is one’s prayer life, and the goal of eternal life. It is therapy for the soul for today, for the tomorrows, and for eternity. The spiritual director may serve at times in various capacities—spiritual counselor, companion, facilitator, coach, teacher, mentor—but always and primarily as a holy listener. This is because, ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit who is

the true spiritual director, guiding the process and inspiring both the director and the directee.

Next Steps

Finding the right spiritual director for you is a prayerful process. Begin by contacting your parish office or your diocese’s director of formation, as they may maintain lists of spiritual directors serving in your area. You may also inquire at a nearby retreat center, religious house, seminary, campus ministry at a Catholic university, Newman Center, or program that offers certificates in spiritual direction, where the staff or graduates may be available.

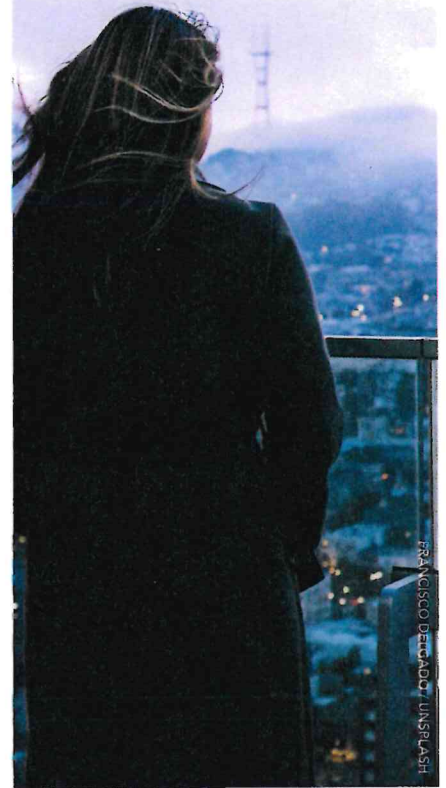
As you seek the Holy Spirit’s guidance in choosing someone to accompany you, it is entirely appropriate—and prudent—to inquire about their formation, training, and approach so you can discern the best person to walk with you, for a time, along your path toward holiness and deeper union with God. Many directors have academic degrees in theology, spirituality, or ministry with advanced post-graduate credits or certificates in spiritual direction from a university or seminary. Some have degrees in other disciplines and were formed as spiritual directors within a retreat house, independent organization, diocese, or parish program. Catholic spiritual directors are formed in the four pillars: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral, and also have particular knowledge about the ways of prayer, the spiritual life, and spiritual development.

A Path Toward Deeper Communion with God

Spiritual direction can be helpful for pointing the way on our ongoing journey toward heaven. Here, two people come together to be inspired by and to listen to the Holy Spirit, seeking out those droplets of grace from God so they can grow in holiness and virtue, and so they can discover and experience their identity as the beloved of our God, who is Love.

“Since the God we seek is a busy God, we cannot let our interior life and prayer float above our daily life in our lifeworld. Our spiritual life is rooted in an experience of God freeing us from our sins so that we can present our bodies and everything we experience in a day, lifelong as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship.”

Fr. Joseph Tetlow, SJ,
*Handing On the Fire: Making
Spiritual Direction Ignatian*



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