

# Spiritual Direction

By Thomas Merton

On June 21, 1961, Thomas Merton wrote to his friend and former Columbia professor Mark Van Doren, “I am not writing much at the moment and not intending to write much except for doing chores like an Encyclopedia article (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, which will probably be stuffy).”<sup>1</sup> In his journal eight days later, he provides more information on the “chore”: “*New Cath. Encycl.* has repeated its request for one article. I am convinced they do it very unwillingly, merely to get my name on their list. I refused before a ludicrous request to do 300 words on Dom Edmond Obrecht (!) and now they have asked for 5,000 on spiritual direction and I feel utterly foul for having accepted.”<sup>2</sup> On June 2, 1961, Msgr. William McDonald, Editor-in-Chief of the encyclopedia project, had written to “Reverend and dear Brother Louis” to “again extend to you an invitation to write for *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*” and had enclosed a Contributor’s Assignment form specifying the topic: “DIRECTION, SPIRITUAL Nature, object, relation to guidance, counseling, psychotherapy; history; necessity; the director (qualities, choice of, role); the one directed (manifestation of conscience, docility, discretion); methods and forms; special problems and classes.”<sup>3</sup> Presumably the topic was suggested because Merton had recently published his little book *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*.<sup>4</sup> No more is heard about the project until September 19, when he writes to his friend Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr, “I have had to write a few articles for a new *Catholic Youth Encyclopedia* which, between you and me and the gatepost, sounds rather useless. But maybe they had a method in their madness, and decided to do something that would have more life in it than the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. I have a long article to do for them, too, on ‘Spiritual Direction’” (RJ 239).<sup>5</sup> Five days later, he notes in his journal, “Have to finish article for *Catholic Encyclopedia*” (TTW 164), and on the same day he writes to Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy, “I have a tiresome task to complete for an encyclopedia.”<sup>6</sup> On October 10, he comments in the journal, “The other day I finally finished the article ‘Direction, Spiritual’ for the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. I should have finished it in August (Deadline Nov. 1, but I wanted to get it done in August)” (TTW 169).

On October 13, 1961, Merton wrote to Msgr. McDonald with an apology that because he had been at the doctor’s, he had not had the opportunity to check the typescript of the article before it was mailed by his typist, and he subsequently found a number of mistakes, which he corrects in the letter.<sup>7</sup> No further correspondence is available until a letter of February 19, 1962 from the Staff Editor, Sr. Mary Julian Baird, RSM, who writes Merton that his “revised carbon of the article on Spiritual Direction reached my hands only this morning. I shall make the changes immediately, and you may disregard the letter of last Friday. I am sorry if it has caused any inconvenience.”<sup>8</sup> No further evidence relating to the article appears until the end of 1962. An Article Routing Slip<sup>9</sup> circulated in December among *Encyclopedia* editors with comments on the article, beginning with a December 12 evaluation by the Staff Editor, Rev. Kevin P. Meagher, who wrote, “This article is too diffuse. It would perhaps make a good article for a spiritual review. But for an encyclopedia it takes too much wordage to cover the ground. It could perhaps be pruned and worked into shape, but this would be difficult to do, particularly if the reviser did not feel free to modify the sense of some of the statements.” The next day the Secretary of the Editorial Committee, Prof. Martin McGuire, wrote: “Unsatisfactory” followed by “The historical development of spiritual direction, for example, is not

even mentioned” which was cancelled in pencil, presumably because it was obviously inaccurate.<sup>10</sup> On December 14 Fr. Meagher wrote, “I would suggest scrapping the article and getting someone else to do it” and four days later Prof. McGuire concurred: “I am in full agreement with the Staff Editor. Reject the article.” A final note dated 1/11/63 at the bottom of the page reads: “We should reject the article. It won’t be used for the sample pages nor for the NCE in its present state file in reject file”. No letter notifying Merton of the decision survives in the archives either at the Thomas Merton Center nor at Catholic University. The published article on “Direction, Spiritual” in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (4.887-90) is written by Rev. Kevin A. Wall, a Dominican professor from California. It should be noted that while Merton very carefully followed the listing of topics provided by Msgr. McDonald, the published article, except for the three opening paragraphs, is entirely historical; evidently there was a shift in focus, perhaps under Prof. McGuire’s influence.<sup>11</sup>

Three versions of the Spiritual Direction article are extant. The earliest is Merton’s own typescript, a sixteen-page document preserved in the Merton Center archives. It is preceded by a handwritten title page and a page of handwritten notes organized according to topics corresponding closely to those presented in Msgr. McDonald’s original request. The typed text is filled with x’d out words and phrases indicating that Merton was composing as he went along, his usual procedure, as well as heavily revised with handwritten additions and substitutions, both on the text pages and for more extensive revisions on the verso side of previous pages, again a typical procedure. A second version, now in the Catholic University archives, is a 24-page typed version that is clearly the one referred to in Merton’s October 13, 1961 letter to Msgr. McDonald, since in its pagination and lineation it corresponds exactly to those of the corrections Merton refers to in the letter, which were duly made on this typescript by a clearly different typewriter. This text was lightly revised by a hand that is clearly not Merton’s to make it conform more closely to the style of an encyclopedia: e.g. the second sentence in the second paragraph, “Experience teaches us that we are often most wrong when we are subjectively convinced of our rightness” becomes “Experience teaches that men are often most wrong when they are subjectively convinced of their rightness.” These corrections are clearly being made at the editorial offices of the *Encyclopedia*. The first two pages of this typescript are later photocopied and much more radically revised; for example, the sentence just quoted is eliminated altogether, and in the previous sentence the words “ignorance, weakness, prejudice and inordinate desires” are replaced by “the consequences of original sin.” These revised pages were then retyped on specially ruled pages apparently corresponding to the column width to be used in the *Encyclopedia*, and then further revised: for example, the phrase “Since all are subject to the consequences of original sin,” the result of the previous revision, is now eliminated altogether.<sup>12</sup> These successive revisions were of course also made at the editorial center, not by Merton. The third version is a 13-page single-spaced typescript slightly revised from the typescript sent in October 1961 to Msgr. McDonald.<sup>13</sup> It is clearly later than that version since it includes as part of the typed text, not as additions, the corrections mentioned in Merton’s October 13 letter; this version is presumably the text that Sr. Mary Julian Baird mentions receiving from Merton in her letter of February 19, 1962, though only the original, in the Merton Center files, is extant; the carbon sent to the *Encyclopedia* editorial offices does not survive.

One might agree with the evaluation of the Staff Editor, Fr. Meagher, that the article “is too diffuse” and “takes too much wordage to cover the ground” for an encyclopedia. Merton’s writing style lends itself awkwardly to the rather rigid requirements of impersonality and strictly logical

organization typical of an encyclopedia article. Merton's own discomfort with the assignment is apparent in his journal from the very beginning. One should also note however Fr. Meagher's further comment, "It would perhaps make a good article for a spiritual review." Though Merton is diligent in trying to cover the subtopics assigned by Msgr. McDonald, and thus the structure of the piece is not reflective of what he would have produced if left to develop the material on his own, the article does provide significant insights on Merton's perspectives on spiritual direction, thereby complementing the discussion found in *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* and in other, later works such as the essay "The Spiritual Father in the Desert Tradition."<sup>14</sup> Therefore the hitherto unpublished "Spiritual Direction" article is now being made available with the permission of the Merton Legacy Trust. What follows is the third, definitive version of the article, differing from the typescript mainly in certain typographical conventions (e.g. italic for underlining, etc.).<sup>15</sup> Gratitude is expressed to Dr. Paul M. Pearson, Director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, for providing copies of this and the original typescript of the article, as well as of relevant correspondence in the Merton Center archives, and to staff members of The American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC for providing copies of material in their collection relative to Merton's Spiritual Direction article.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 42; subsequent references will be cited as "RJ" parenthetically in the text..
2. Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 135; subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text. The article on Dom Edmond, Gethsemani's fourth abbot (1898-1935) was eventually written by the abbey's "other" author, Fr. Raymond Flanagan: see *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967): 10.617.
3. Letter and form in the McDonald File at the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY (subsequent references will be cited as "TMC" in the text).
4. Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1960); see also the brief article "Spiritual Direction" from which the first part of this book was expanded: *Sponsa Regis* 30 (June 1959) 249-54.
5. The other articles referred to are two on "Contemplation" and "Perfection, Christian," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia for School and Home*, 12 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 3.228-30, 8.328-32.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 133.
7. McDonald File: TMC.
8. Baird File: TMC.
9. Merton Spiritual Direction File: The American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC.
10. A penciled note from Prof. McGuire is also in the same file, undated but evidently written earlier; it reads: "1<sup>st</sup> 2 pages only the article is weak on the historical side. The first two pages are satisfactory".
11. The rejection of the Spiritual Direction article did not mean the end of Merton's association with the *Encyclopedia* project, however. In his journal for August 9, 1964, Merton wrote: "Perhaps unwisely I have consented to do an article on 'Art and Morality' for the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. (I thought the work on that would have been done long ago.) One reason why I consented was that I thought the editor of the section was Ned O'Gorman's friend, the Benedictine artist [Roman Verostko, O.S.B.] (but am not sure)" (Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997] 134; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text). (The reason for Merton's uncertainty is apparently whether Fr. Verostko is in fact the friend of Merton's own friend and correspondent, the poet Ned O'Gorman, not whether he is the editor of the section, since Fr. Verostko himself had written Merton to solicit the article on August 3, and included his title of "Staff Editor for Art" in the letter (Verostko file: TMC). On August 12 Merton noted in his journal: "I already have material and ideas for the *Catholic Encyclopedia* article but no time to write it. Maybe next week. (I wonder if the editor of that section will take seriously my plea to wait until October or November?)" (DWL 135). On the same day Fr. Verostko wrote to Merton with further reflections on the topic and expressed a willingness "to give you the maximum time if necessary" (Verostko file:

(TMC) but on August 16, Merton wrote in the journal: “On Friday I finished a first draft of the ‘Art and Morality’ article” (DWL 136); on August 25 he sent out requests to quote copyrighted material in the article (Verostko file: TMC). There was apparently no difficulty with this article among the editors, and it appears as “Art and Morality,” a section in the longer article “Art” in the first volume of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (864-67). A second Merton contribution, “Gethsemani, Abbey of,” also was included, in vol. 4 (457-58); whether this was solicited at or shortly after the time when the Spiritual Direction article was rejected or later is not evident from any materials in the Merton Center files, but Fr. Verostko’s letter seems to imply that Merton was currently a contributor, rather than a rejected contributor, to the *Encyclopedia*, so that presumably the “Gethsemani” article had already been submitted and accepted some time earlier.

12. The penciled note from Prof. McGuire referred to in n. 10 is apparently a comment on these pages.
13. Among the changes in the third version is Merton’s inclusion in the appended bibliography of “See also the Notes on Mystical Theology by Merton—Private Circulation.” This is a reference to the lecture notes for his pastoral theology course entitled “An Introduction to Christian Mysticism” (sometimes referred to as “Ascetical and Mystical Theology”) that Merton taught newly ordained monks during the spring and summer of 1961, coinciding with his preparation of the “Spiritual Direction” article. The conference notes include a section on “The Spiritual Direction of Contemplatives” that was added to the course as originally outlined, evidently as a consequence of the work Merton was doing for the encyclopedia; the material in the notes for this section corresponds rather closely to what is found in the article, but has a more specifically monastic focus, and ironically, given the criticism of the article by the encyclopedia staff, a much more developed historical dimension. The notes are found in Volume 13 of Merton’s “Collected Essays,” the 24-volume compendium of published and unpublished materials assembled and bound at the Abbey of Gethsemani some time after Merton’s death and now available at the abbey and at the Merton Center, and are currently being prepared for publication in Fall 2007.
14. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 269-93.
15. The only readings taken from earlier versions are “systematic” on page 12 below (for the erroneous “sympathetic” in the third version) and the date “22 January, 1899” on page 13 below (erroneously changed to “12” in the third version).

## Spiritual Direction

### *NATURE, OBJECT AND FORM*

Spiritual direction is the art of guiding Christians to their proper interior and exterior perfection according to their particular vocation as manifested by their gifts, capabilities, ideals, duties of state and above all, by their place in God’s plan for His Church. This means first of all helping them to recognize their personal vocation and encouraging them, by means of instruction and guidance, to correspond with God’s Will in their regard by the best means at their disposal according to their state of life.

Since we are all subject to ignorance, weakness, prejudice and inordinate desires, no one is capable of guiding himself to spiritual perfection without danger of serious error. Experience teaches us that we are often most wrong when we are subjectively convinced of our rightness. An objective reorientation by an experienced and qualified adviser may be our only hope of avoiding catastrophe. It is true that the needs of the average Christian for guidance and formation should normally be satisfied by the general instruction he receives from his pastors in sermons, in the confessional, and in counseling, as well as from reading and other forms of instruction. Spiritual direction in the strict sense, implying a special and in some cases a really technical instruction in the higher ways of the spiritual life, is geared for the requirements of those Christians who have received a proximate call to perfection through a special attraction to prayer, penance, or to the apostolate.

Those who are called to the priesthood or to the religious life, those lay people who are dedicated to Catholic Action and those above all who, whether in the cloister or out of it, are called to contemplative prayer, require a special formation which will help them to adapt, with their own personal limitations, gifts and capacities, to a form of life that has its own peculiar and often mysterious

pitfalls. The danger of error becomes greater in proportion as the vocation itself is more difficult and more unusual. Few mature Christians are unaware of the occasional failure of priestly and religious vocations, evidence of the difficulties encountered in these ways of life. There will always be failures even under the most advantageous of conditions. But better and more consistent spiritual direction would prevent the unnecessary suffering and scandal which make some lost vocations so regrettable. The Church has never desired that anyone be forced to shoulder a burden that is unbearable. One of the functions of the director is to help the maladjusted priest, religious or apostle, to achieve a reasonable and sanctifying solution to his problems without unnecessary drama.

*Theologically*, the object of spiritual direction can be made clear by situating this art in the context of the whole economy of salvation. The director is not merely occupied with general ethical obligations and with the responsibilities of mature social and professional life. He must above all recognize that his penitent\* is one who has been redeemed by Christ, belongs to Christ, and has been called by Christ to union with Him by the fulfillment of a task in the Church, whether as a parent and spouse, or as a priest, a teacher, a contemplative, an apostle, etc. Here there is an *ascetic* aspect of spiritual direction. Each penitent, according to the peculiar circumstances of his own life, must be “nailed to the Cross with Christ” (Galatians 2:19), must “die” spiritually with Christ in order to rise with Him to a new life (Colossians 3:1-7). This does not necessarily mean that spiritual direction is obsessed with a morbid cult of suffering or that it encourages a martyr complex, but simply that the inevitable difficulties, problems and obstacles which everyone has to face must be regarded, by the director, in the light of the Christian vocation to “life in Christ.” Without this perspective, direction is hardly distinguishable from ordinary counseling (see below).

The ascetic task of the director is to help his penitent purify his heart of all that is spiritually dead, inert, and without function in the personal inner life willed for him by God. He must try to strengthen and educate all that is spiritually alive, especially when it is clearly germane to the personal needs and spiritual task of the penitent. One mark of bad direction is that by its blundering misjudgments and its arbitrary insistence on the letter of the law, it kills what is most vital and personal in the penitent’s life in order to emphasize mere external conformity which easily degenerates into routine.

The place of the person in the Christian community is a matter of crucial importance in spiritual direction. It is by loving and serving God in liturgical worship, by the service of neighbor in family or communal life, that the individual learns to transcend his own narrow limitations and reach the status of a mature Christian person. On the other hand the mere submersion of the individual in the collective is radically un-Christian, because it kills all genuine spirituality, all freedom, all responsibility and reduces men to the status of machines. Such is the great evil of mass-society today. The spiritual formation of members of Christ and sons of God whom “the truth has made free” (John 8:32) must aim to protect them against this evil and therefore it must not, in an inordinate fear of “individualism,” simply crush and destroy all personal spontaneity.

*The Mystical Dimension* of spiritual direction implies a recognition of the soul’s spiritual participation in the life of the Risen Christ, and requires a close and humble attention to the slightest indications of the action of the Holy Spirit who wishes to “pray in us” (Romans 8:26) in ways that are beyond analysis. The direction of penitents called to mystical prayer certainly requires very

\* The term “penitent” will be used for the sake of convenience, though the one seeking direction need not receive it in the confessional, and the director need not strictly speaking be a priest.

special aptitudes; but a director with learning, prudence and spiritual tact can be of service even to those whose way of prayer he does not understand, provided he respects their vocation. In general it can be said here that direction must be regarded as an *art* and not as a *science*. It is not, in other words, a mechanical technique with rigidly fixed rules which always produce the expected result when they are properly applied. Hence although a certain degree of system may be useful and desirable, the director must learn to abandon his own preconceptions and must never force his own spirituality on the penitent.

We can consider various forms of direction according to the degree of *systematization* and stress on *authority* which they manifest. Let us take two extremes. On the one hand there is a formal and systematic style of direction in which *the authority of the director as an official representative of the Church* is paramount. We will call this Type A. At the other extreme is an informal and unsystematic direction in which emphasis seems to be on the *quasi-charismatic* nature of the director. This we will call Type B. Both these extremes lend themselves to serious exaggerations, especially Type B.

In direction of Type A, the *authority* of the director is stressed; perhaps, indeed it is overstressed. The director who *abuses his authority* tends to think that just because he is a priest, or just because he has an official position of some kind, his decisions are to be accepted as infallible and that he is invariably protected against error. Hence he may neglect to consider special circumstances in his penitent's case and he may hand down crude and arbitrary decisions. By his quasi-official and "authoritative" teaching the Type-A director *forms* the penitent by exercising a full control over his actions, thoughts, ways of prayer, etc. This control is sometimes practically speaking *dominative*, although this implies more than is legitimate in normal spiritual direction. The Type-A director tends to be despotic. The authority of the director is never, of course, juridical. It flows from his power of Orders and from his special technical competency, his mastery of a *special system of spirituality* according to which he molds and forms the penitent. Type-A direction sessions are frequent, if not weekly. All problems are manifested with a view to obtaining a categorical answer, which is to be accepted with a minimum of questioning. Though modern theologians distinguish the *docility* owed to a director from the *obedience* owed to a superior, in practice a director of Type A exacts obedience from his penitent, even though the latter may not be a scrupulous case. In short the director of Type A tends to be a Master, with a Capital "M."

In order to emphasize the authoritarian tendencies of Type A, we have perhaps created the impression that such direction is arbitrary and harsh. Not necessarily. Directors of the authoritarian and systematic type who are convinced of the necessity of a special technique, and are profound believers in direction as an *institution*, may also be discerning, sympathetic, and profoundly humane. There have been and are great directors in this category. There is no question that some of the saints, especially in the last three or four hundred years, have reached their peculiar perfection owing to the help of directors such as these. Nevertheless we must reflect that the rigidities and artificialities which are so striking, indeed so repugnant, in the lives of some saints, may perhaps be due in part to this kind of rigid formation.

At the other extreme we find an emphasis on spontaneity, on direction as an unofficial and even supposedly "charismatic" function. Though sometimes irresponsible and open to serious abuse, this concept is nevertheless quite traditional. The original directors – the Desert Fathers – were laymen. This second variety (Type B) of direction relies for its authority on the holiness or the experience of

the one who gives it. The director need not necessarily be a priest or religious but may perhaps be a holy lay person. The “direction” he gives follows no special system, but bases itself on experience and spiritual insight into the particular needs of the one directed. Contacts between the director and the “penitent” may be casual to the point of being haphazard or else perhaps the ones directed form a sort of coterie of disciples in familiar attendance upon the “Master.” An example of this would be St. Catherine of Siena and her friends. As long as this kind of human relationship is not dramatized or exaggerated, a certain spiritual good can undoubtedly come from the spontaneous friendly advice of a spiritual person having no official position as director. But as soon as the Master is “canonized” by his disciples, and perhaps openly contrasted with the ordinary ministers of the Church, dangers of serious error can arise. What is wrong here is not so much the informality of the quasi-charismatic relationship, as its pseudo-institutional character, acquired when the “director” begins to form his own little church. It is evident too, that direction of Type B is often so casual that it can hardly be called direction at all.

The brief description of these two extremes will immediately suggest to the discerning reader that the fully Catholic notion of spiritual direction lies somewhere between the two, combining what is good in both, and avoiding what is dangerous and exorbitant. According to the traditional view the director is a Bishop, a priest, or a holy person leading a dedicated life. His capacity to direct is not derived merely from his official standing and his special education. The mere fact of being educated and appointed to give spiritual direction does not automatically make a priest a suitable director for everyone who has access to him. Nor does it necessarily endow him with any capacity whatever to form and direct souls. He must also possess special gifts and aptitudes which enable him to give prudent spiritual instruction fitted to the individual needs of the penitent. His direction must be discreet and kind. He must speak at once as a spiritual father and as the voice of God and of His Church. Hence the need for both learning and humility. He is more a Father than a Master. He does not make demands that would put him in the position of a quasi-superior. He is less concerned with forming the soul according to a preconceived pattern, than with discerning the mysterious activity of the Holy Spirit in this particular and unique vocation.

Above all the director is responsible to God for the growth and development of vocations entrusted to him. He is never entitled merely to form them according to his own pre-conceived ideas, or to make them replicas of himself. Nor is he entitled to experiment with those entrusted to him, as guinea pigs on which he practices certain spiritual or psychological techniques, for his own intellectual satisfaction. This brings us to an important question: the relation of direction to psychotherapy and kindred methods.

#### *DIRECTION, COUNSELING, THERAPY, ANALYSIS*

There is a tendency today to equate *counseling* and direction. In practice they may often amount to much the same thing, but it is important to remember the essential distinction between them, since a confusion of the two would lead to serious consequences. Counseling is now a fashionable term, and we shall see that it has its value. But it cannot and must not substitute for spiritual direction.

In the first place the spiritual director must not be placed on the same level as the secular, non-Christian counselor who simply listens sympathetically to ethical or emotional problems and offers a minimum of pragmatic advice. Nor is the spiritual director merely a pastor who is confronted with innumerable personal problems of his parishioners, many of which involve difficulties with Church Law. Catholic counseling, as distinct from spiritual direction, may be said to concern itself more

with those basic moral and legal problems which fall, so to speak, within the technical competency of the parish priest.

The decisions he gives as “counselor” would seem to be a matter of applying general principles to the individual case. Direction is something more than this. It involves a special insight into God’s Will for this particular soul, manifested not by a general law, but by personal grace and vocation. And this too falls within the province of the pastor, who then acts as “director.”

Counseling is concerned to a great extent with psychology. But it is primarily interested in the psychology of the “normal” person.

*Psychotherapy* deals with neurotic and psychotic disorders of the personality. Not that one has to be seriously ill to consult a psychiatrist: but the psychiatrist begins to act as such when he gets beyond the level of ordinary counseling and addresses himself directly to neurotic conflicts. The therapist does more than advise: he “works through” a problem with his patient, in an attempt to give the latter a new insight into his difficulties which will enable him to experience himself and his life in a new and more mature way. The *psychoanalyst* strives to achieve the same end by much more radical means, using techniques of depth psychology which have a powerful and sometimes a drastic effect. These are sometimes based on hypotheses, the value of which is uncertain. The Church has not reprobated psychoanalysis, but nevertheless requires that these techniques be used with definite restrictions (cf. the Instruction of the Holy Office of July 15, 1961).

Needless to say, the spiritual director is even less a therapist than he is a counselor. Least of all should he attempt to mingle psychoanalysis with spiritual direction. The director and the analyst are dealing with entirely different areas of the personality. The therapist and the analyst are concerned with unconscious emotional forces which disrupt the personality, causing mental or psychosomatic illness. The director is concerned with the conscious spiritual growth of the Christian, with his free response to grace, with his capacity to grow in supernatural love under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Ideally speaking, spiritual direction only begins where therapy and counseling leave off. In practice direction and therapy may tend to overlap, insofar as sin and the sense of guilt attached to sin may also have certain morbid and pathological overtones. However sin as such must never be confused with a neurotic conflict. It is equally false to say that the “cure” for neurosis is to be found in the confessional, and to declare that the sense of sin is a “mere obsession” which can be shrugged off by “healthy” self-indulgence.

The spiritual life of man is inextricably bound up with his emotions and instinctual life. No one can fully attain to the love and “freedom of the sons of God” if his capacity for loving self-oblation on a normal and human level, is psychologically blocked by obsession with an immature ego. A spiritual director guides and instructs his penitents in the use of ascetic means which liberate his love and enable it to grow spiritually. But a director ought to know at least enough of modern psychology and psychiatry to be able to evaluate his penitent’s capacity to receive direction. If the penitent is subject to neurotic compulsions, he is probably more or less unable to profit by traditional ascetic practice.

It is therefore important for the director to be able to evaluate the psychological capacity of his penitent for genuine spiritual freedom and cooperation with the special graces of the illuminative and unitive way. A neurotic and narcissistic self-absorption must not be confused with spirituality and contemplation. Many seemingly exalted spiritual ideals are only immature escapes from reality and responsibility and are by no means indications of a “special vocation.” The director must know



when the penitent needs to be referred to a psychotherapist. He must be able discreetly to make this referral, and then cooperate with the therapist.

### *HISTORY OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION*

In all primitive cultures we note the phenomenon of the Sage or Master, the Philosopher, the Shaman, the *Guru*, the extraordinary and gifted spiritual person who attracts others to him as disciples whom he “transforms” by his contact, initiating them into a higher life. In some cases these masters claim to open up a way of “liberation” leading to “immortality” or else to complete “deliverance” from the round of temporal existence.

When Jesus came to gather His disciples around Him, no doubt they thought of Him at first as a Master like the other Masters. This was not so. He was the Word Incarnate, not a Teacher but Himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. Gradually discipleship of Christ opened up totally new and supernatural horizons. Those sent by Him to announce His message of salvation were not *gurus* but Apostles, and the first Christians realized that they were so different from members of other religions in that they had no Master but Christ, and needed no *guru* since they had the Holy Spirit who by His Unction would teach them all they needed to know (I John 2:20, 27). In the early Church then, it was the Spirit living and acting in the Church Who guided each individual member of the Body of Christ, endowing him with the “mind of Christ.” Christ Himself spoke through the Bishops and presbyters, whether privately or in the sacred assembly. The Christian was instructed by the Holy Spirit in his own heart and through the teaching Church. Special forms of spiritual direction were not yet developed.

The concept of a specialized “spiritual direction” for Christians with a peculiar vocation arose in early Christian monasticism, where the novice who had fled from the “world” into the desert had by that fact also separated himself from the ordinary life of the Christian community. In the desert the spiritual father (*abbas*) took the place of the Bishop and presbyter, and, speaking in the name of Christ, gave instruction and formation until such time as the monk himself had mastered the temptations and difficulties of desert life. The monk who had conquered sin and the passions was capable of interpreting for himself the secret voice of the Spirit. Spiritual direction did not exist only in the desert. The virgins and ascetes who remained “in the world” were normally under the personal charge of the Bishop. However as the monastic life flourished the Bishops began to call holy monks to assist in the guidance of the laypersons. This pattern continued to be characteristic of the early Middle Ages, when hermits and monks were normally resorted to for spiritual guidance and encouragement. St. Bernard of Clairvaux not only guided scores of monks and monastic communities through the difficult ways of the spiritual life, but became in a sense the conscience of Christendom in the twelfth century, directing Popes, Kings, Bishops and nations to seek and follow the Will of God. Yet one person, even though a great saint with a charismatic mission, could not cope with all the problems of Medieval Christendom in ferment.

The need for a renewal of the spiritual life was met by the new Orders. And here the emphasis would be on personal fervor and reformation of the individual. The Mendicant Friars, in the thirteenth century, first introduced the kind of direction with which we are thoroughly familiar today. The Franciscan or Dominican who came to preach a reawakening of the Christian life would attract many into his confessional. There he would instruct the penitent in the ways of combating habitual sin, examining his conscience and leading a life of prayer. Often confraternities of lay penitents were formed, consecrated to lives of prayer and good works, usually under the direction of a Friar.

At this same time concern was felt for the reform and direction of religious communities, and for the systematic instruction of novices. The great mystical movements of the late Middle Ages also drew attention to the need for special directors who could guide contemplatives and preserve them from the manifold errors disseminated by independent groups of “free spirits.” The appointment of seventy *fratres docti* (learned brethren, theologians) by the Order of Preachers to direct the convents of contemplative Dominican nuns in the Rhineland led to the flowering of the German speculative mysticism in the fourteenth century, as in the writings of Eckhart, Tauler, Suso and later Ruysbroeck, all of whom were mystics as well as directors.

The stress on spiritual direction continued in the late Middle Ages, in which a distinction was made between the *confessio sacramentalis* of the pastor and the *confessio directiva* of the specialist who came into the parish on a mission. Manuals began to be written to instruct priests in the art of spiritual direction as well as the formation of novices, and in the guidance of contemplatives in particular.

In the Counter-Reformation the renewed emphasis on the reform of Religious Orders, initiated in the Council of Trent, brought into even sharper focus the importance of spiritual direction. Mental prayer now took a prominent part in the work of religious reform, and the director, consequently, became a special instructor in the art of meditation conceived as a special remedy for religious tepidity. Not only did he teach effective methods of meditation, but also he provided secure guidance and steered his penitents clear of the reefs of illuminism and other heresies. It is at this time especially that certain schools of spirituality became prominent. Other directors, less systematic, occupied themselves with the study of mystical and spiritual “states of soul” and developed a whole phenomenology of contemplative experience. Still others concentrated on psychological problems of the spiritual life, for instance, *scrupulosity*, which tended to become a specialty in modern spiritual direction.

Certain new Congregations, like the Barnabites and Theatines, occupied themselves in a particular way with retreats, missions, spiritual direction and propagating mental prayer. St. Ignatius would have his Spiritual Exercises conducted by a director who would aid the exercitant to “discern the various spirits” and come to a decision in accordance with the Will of God. Later, the great spiritual masters of the French School, including St. Francis de Sales, St. Vincent de Paul, the Oratorians, would give special attention to the spiritual formation and guidance of priests and seminarians, as well as religious of both active and contemplative Orders.

With this great expansion of spiritual direction there were also anomalies and abuses. While there were numerous examples of holy lay persons giving direction even to priests (and this is not necessarily to be reprobated, without further qualification) there were also many misguided pseudo-mystics and *beatas* spreading confusion and bringing discredit upon mental prayer and contemplation. At the same time the confessor of St. Jane de Chantal, who bound her by a triple vow: to consult him alone, to obey him alone, and to tell no one what he had told her, shows how the direction we have classified as Type A could sometimes lead to extreme authoritarianism. Fortunately St. Francis de Sales liberated her from this spiritual bondage.

There can be no question that the development of spiritual direction since the late Middle Ages has been inseparable from a certain subjectivism and it is true that an undue emphasis on accidentals and matters of detail may have falsified the true Christian perspective in some schools of Spirituality. In recent times, a reaction has set in. As was to be expected, some have denounced the over-spe-

cialization implied by certain techniques of direction, and have gone so far as to question the need or the validity of any direction at all. It is sometimes asked whether the whole insistence on spiritual direction is not itself a sign of decadence and individualism, a symptom of an unhealthy mentality tending to produce scrupulosity and obsession with one's emotions and experiences. Sometimes it is urged that psychiatry should replace direction. Indeed, it is argued, Christians ought to get along without any personal direction. They have the Holy Spirit; they have the Liturgy of the Church; the Word of God is announced to the Christian assembly: what more do they need? This brings up the question of the necessity of direction, which has been answered by the Church prudently and without ambiguity.

### *THE NECESSITY FOR DIRECTION*

In 1620 the Brethren of the Free Spirit were condemned for teaching that no one should seek guidance from learned men, whether in matters of devotion or in anything else. Leo XIII, in *Testem Benevolentiae* (22 January, 1899), reproved those who said without qualification that "the guidance of the Holy Spirit is sufficient" for a perfect Christian life. This statement requires to be clarified. It is certainly true that the guidance of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to sanctify the Christian, but this guidance has a twofold aspect. Not only does the Holy Spirit speak interiorly to the Christian soul, but that interior guidance by grace needs to be verified, directed and completed by the teaching authority of the Church also guided by the Holy Spirit. The power of divine grace is without limit and its efficacy is in itself perfect. But because of a multitude of seeming inspirations from unspiritual sources, direction is needed to distinguish the action of grace from emotional drives. While not insisting that spiritual direction is absolutely necessary for all Christians, Leo XIII teaches that all will profit by some direction, *but particularly those who seek a higher spiritual perfection*, since in their case error would have more serious consequences.

Pius XII takes up the same teaching in *Menti Nostrae* (23 September, 1950). Without a prudent guide, he says, "it is *often very difficult* to be duly responsive to the impulse of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God."

The saints and spiritual masters have also insisted, in varying degrees, on the usefulness of direction, particularly since the fifteenth century. St. Teresa of Avila emphasized the importance of her own contemplative nuns having access to "learned men" in the confessional, and she felt that this direction was more necessary for women than for men. She declared that bad direction was even worse than no direction at all, but insisted that those contemplatives who had mystical experiences such as visions *must* submit these to the judgment of a prudent director. She was not in favor of a vow of obedience to the director but insisted on docility to his guidance as a key factor in sanctification. Before St. Teresa, Gerson had believed that direction was necessary for those called to mystical contemplation. St. John of the Cross, however, warned directors not to presume to ignore or overrule the delicate and secret action of the Holy Spirit in the contemplative soul. He tends to regard the director as a very possible obstacle to progress in contemplative prayer (*Living Flame of Love*; III, Peers, Vol. 3, pg. 182 ff.).

In the seventeenth century, when the emphasis on the need for direction was most pronounced, St. Francis de Sales declared that the "warning of warnings" was "get a director." However, Father de Caussade, in the eighteenth century, himself a well-known director, felt that the importance of spiritual direction could easily be exaggerated or wrongly understood. Like St. John of the Cross he believed that the director could hinder progress instead of helping it. Dom Marmion and Msgr. Gay

in more recent times feared an undue emphasis on spiritual direction. These fears and reservations are seen to be salutary, when we consider abuses prevalent at the time and still prevalent, perhaps, in certain quarters today.

In resumé, the teaching of the Church is that spiritual direction is certainly not *absolutely necessary* for the average Christian, but that it is very *useful* and desirable for all, particularly for those who have dedicated themselves to the quest for Christian perfection. In certain particular crises, however, direction may be really necessary, to avoid catastrophe.

#### *GIVING SPIRITUAL DIRECTION*

As has already been indicated above, the authority of the director is distinct from that of the superior. The director does not exercise power of jurisdiction over the penitent as over a subject. He does not demand strict obedience from the penitent (except of course in cases where he points out an already existing obligation to obey a law or to fulfill a vow). The director derives his authority from the power of Orders and from the special gifts of holiness, learning or experience which qualify him for the role. But in particular it should be noted that the director in great part derives his authority over the penitent from *the decision of the penitent himself* in appealing to him for guidance in following the Holy Spirit and in doing the Will of God. It is when a penitent has, after prayer and good counsel, chosen a director in the belief that he will be able to indicate the spiritual path willed for him by God,, that he implicitly proposes to accept the director's guidance in a state of docility. This being the case, we believe that the director will be enlightened by God with special graces of state to help the penitent who relies on him with supernatural hope. It is this agreement and this spiritual relationship which in great part account for the authority of the director over the penitent and entitle him to speak to the penitent in God's Name.

Nevertheless it is not sufficient for the director to become by appointment or mutual agreement a providential instrument of God in the life of the penitent. He must also be worthy and capable of exercising his functions, and above all he must have a great respect for the individual needs of the particular Christian person with whom he is dealing.

In the first place the traditional Christian notion of the director is that he is before all else a *mediator* in the life of his penitent by his prayer, his holiness and his fatherly concern. The worthy director will pray often and fervently for his penitents, and the penitents in turn will trust in his prayer to obtain for them graces through his direction and instruction. At the same time they will pray for him to be enlightened as to their particular needs. It cannot be too often stressed that spiritual direction is rooted and grounded in prayer, and for this reason it is something more than counseling or instruction which relies more on natural wisdom. The purpose of prayer is to bring the Holy Spirit Himself to act in the director and in the penitent for their mutual enlightenment and benefit.

Besides fathering the spiritual life of the penitent by prayer, the director is also a *Master* who teaches the spiritual life both by *discipline* and by *instruction*. He owes it to his penitent faithfully to point out his failings and suggest remedies for them, according to his level of attainment in the spiritual life and clarify the use of the principal means for spiritual progress. He must show the un-instructed penitent how to participate fruitfully in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, how to pray, deny himself, and do good works. He must above all acquaint the penitent with the difficulties of the ascetic and mystical lives, when the occasion arises, and make sure that he does not try to evade these difficulties through ignorance or fear. When directing members of religious Orders it is necessary to guide them according to the spirit of the Institute to which they belong.

It must always be remembered that the director is a *guide* and a friend even more than a teacher.

He should not content himself with lecturing the penitent or preaching homilies to him. On the contrary he must be adept at *listening*. This is one of his most important functions. He must be on the alert to understand his penitent. He must pray constantly for insight. His direction should be based not simply on books and theories, but on the concrete needs of his penitent. Finally, he must never forget that there is but one Master: Christ, and that the real Director of the soul is the Holy Spirit. Consequently, his function is chiefly to observe and verify the action of grace and to encourage his penitent to respond to the divine inspirations in his heart.

The good director needs many *qualities*. If he is not able to combine them all he should at least possess a few essential ones. Chief among the qualities of a good director are *holiness* and *learning*. To what extent must the director himself be holy? He must at least be serious about his own interior life. He must be full of charity. He must be a man of prayer. To demand that he be absolutely without faults would be a delusion. In choosing a director, the penitent must be realistic about the fact that this will always be a man and not an angel who speaks to him in the Name of God. He must therefore not be tempted to discount the director's advice because he notices that he has certain inevitable human failings. Solid theological learning is of great importance. For this reason the direction that we have classified as Type B, above, is often dangerous, since unqualified and unlearned persons may arrogate to themselves the functions of director on a basis of a reputation for holiness or supposed spiritual experience. This is not enough.

A director certainly needs *experience*. He should at least be familiar with the trials and vicissitudes of the spiritual life, if not with the higher forms of prayer. Lack of experience in contemplation can be compensated for in part by learning and sound judgment. Experience in prayer without a background of theological learning can, on the other hand, be more of a hazard than an asset in a spiritual director.

*Humility* and *prudence* are perhaps the two most important qualities in a spiritual director. A humble person is protected by his humility itself from many delusions and mistakes. Even when he knows nothing of a problem, he has at least the good sense to admit his ignorance and refer the questioner to someone else. A less humble man may be inclined to assume that he knows all the answers, and may venture to give them with a deceptive air of self-confidence that may seriously mislead the trusting penitent. Prudence is naturally essential in anyone who advises others about the practical conduct of life. An erratic and imprudent spiritual genius can do far less good and far more harm than an unassuming director who is blessed with ordinary learning, humility and common sense.

*IN THE CHOICE OF A DIRECTOR* the penitent should consider all the above qualities, and in addition he should try to determine to what extent the director possesses *insight* into his own particular needs. A learned and capable director who nevertheless is blind to the special needs of his penitent, who is "closed" to the penitent, and to whom the penitent cannot confidently open his conscience, will not be of much help to him. However, two things must be remembered: first of all, one should not choose a director merely on the basis of personal sympathy or attraction. And secondly, one may not have too much of a choice in any case. If one finds a capable director, he should be accepted even if he does not immediately establish a warm personal rapport. This may develop with time and patience.

*A CHANGE OF DIRECTOR* should not be made without a serious reason. Habitual inability to open one's heart to the director, errors or incomprehension on his part, would constitute sufficient reason. One should not make the change without consultation with a third party.

Normally the penitent chooses his director. But in some cases, for instance in the novitiate of religious Orders, the director is chosen and appointed for all. This does not mean that his subjects cannot seek advice from someone else, but normally a Novice Master is the ordinary director of the novice, at least in all that regards his religious vocation. This is, however, a peculiar case, in which the director is at the same time a subordinate superior with domestic power over his subjects. This has both advantages and disadvantages. One of the advantages is that the Novice Master sees the novice more objectively and judges his vocation not in the light merely of what he says about himself, but of his actions and general conduct throughout the day.

There is, therefore, a special value in direction given by a member of one's own community with whom one is in daily contact. A director who bases his judgments solely on what he is told by the penitent, is liable to misjudge him, either by believing his overpessimistic view of himself or more usually by crediting his bias in his own favor.

*Steady DIRECTION BY MAIL* has very serious limitations. It has value in a case where the correspondence prolongs an intimate relationship that was begun in the confessional or in friendly conversations, and was broken off by separation of the two parties. Occasional advice by letter may be helpful, even when the director has never met the penitent, provided the case can be made quite clear.

#### *RECEIVING SPIRITUAL DIRECTION*

First of all the penitent must take a realistic view of spiritual direction. If he is depending on a wonder-working oracle to make all his problems evaporate he is doomed to disappointment. It must be said that some pious people who feel that they have need of regular spiritual direction are perhaps to some extent deceiving themselves with delusions of grandeur. It may even be possible that adequate direction or at least counseling is available to them already, but instead of taking advantage of it they are daydreaming about an impossibly perfect and understanding Master who will lead them by magic into a dreamworld of spiritual perfection.

The Christian who wants spiritual direction must seek it humbly and earnestly by trying to manifest all his problems and aspirations quite clearly to some priest he believes capable of helping him.

*Manifestation of Conscience* with a view to spiritual direction is something distinct from the confession of sins. Manifestation of conscience seeks to make clear the actual condition of one's interior life, faithfully and objectively, with virtues and failings in their right perspectives. It is necessary to give the director some idea of what the grace of God is doing in us. Detailed self-analysis is not necessary and may not even be possible, but what is essential is frankness and simplicity. One who does not say what he really thinks, feels and desires, and yet expects the director to guess what is going on in him, cannot hope for serious guidance. The director in turn should be able to encourage frank and sincere self-manifestation in the penitent. He then should be equally frank and objective in return, telling the penitent sincerely and kindly what he thinks. The penitent should be able to accept this gratefully and put it into practice. It is not necessary for the director to arbitrarily humiliate and frustrate his penitent at every turn, but if hard truths need to be spoken, the penitent should be willing to accept them in good part. *Docility* to the guidance of the director is necessary if his direction is to take effect. If his words are merely received as advice to be considered, turned over in one's mind and stored away as information, the supernatural grace of direction remains more or less sterile. It is when direction is freely put into effect as the Will of God that the full supernatural fruit of spiritual direction is received in the form of certitude, peace, strength, or some

other necessary grace.

### *THE CRISES OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE*

In the spiritual life as in all other life, one does not grow without passing through certain crucial transitional stages. These *crises* of the spiritual life are times of grave trial, marked with difficulties that are often serious. Inability to pass through the crisis may mean eventual stagnation. Perhaps it can be said that the small number of really spiritual men is due to the fact that most Christians never spiritually grow up. The Christianity of many devout Catholics is stalled at the level they reached in grade school. Perhaps they have not gotten beyond the crisis of religious adolescence. They have not assumed full responsibility for their lives before God. They have remained passive and infantile in their faith, conforming to acceptable trends in their milieu without really thinking out the implications in their membership in the Body of Christ. As a result they have never come face to face with God; they have never met Him in a valid spiritual encounter in the depths of their own heart and He remains a vague concept without any real function in their lives. Instead of knowing, loving and serving Him in a mature way, they go through certain exterior devotional routines which have no deep effect but only serve to pacify their anxieties.

Since the director makes himself responsible for his penitent's spiritual progress, direction cannot and must not be merely a timid, negative effort to "preserve the faith" and devotion of the penitent's childhood. The Lord does not desire His faithful to remain perpetual first communicants. A direction that simply holds a man back, confines him, restricts him, prohibits his true development, does more harm than good. Far from holding back the penitent who faces the normal risks of mature life in a pluralistic society, the director should encourage him to face these risks in a manful and constructive Christian way.

In these crises of development it is also important to help the penitent outgrow an aggressive, chip-on-the-shoulder type of Catholicism: the loyal but inarticulate resentment of all that is not familiar, which easily develops into the suppressed fury of the fanatic. This too is simply evidence of spiritual immaturity. In the contemplative life, the crises of growth in prayer are often not only baffling but seemingly incomprehensible. The director must not content himself with prescribing patience and abandonment. He must try to see the possibility of new and totally unexpected avenues of progress which begin to open up in the obscurity of the "dark night." Sometimes these avenues are not only disconcerting, but even seem to be completely unrelated to what is written in the manuals of the spiritual life. This is only another way of saying that a really competent director has to know many things that are never printed in books or treated in conferences, because it is almost impossible to put them into words.

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