

# The Teaching Power of Spiritual Direction

BY EMILIE GRIFFIN

In the ancient discipline of spiritual direction, practical guidance for Christian living is offered in the most sensitive and delicate way. The best spiritual directors are both good listeners and active interpreters of God's grace in the life of the individual and of the community.

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**T**he ancient Christian discipline of spiritual direction, once confined to religious communities, is now used broadly by laypeople. One-on-one meetings with a trained director, weekly, monthly, or at longer intervals, may help us to sustain a regular commitment to prayer and to the life of the Spirit.<sup>1</sup> In these meetings we describe our prayer experiences, our joys and difficulties, and gain perspective on how our spiritual practice may be shaping us. A spiritual director helps us to develop confidence in God, to relax in prayer, to deal with trouble spots of any kind. Spiritual direction is not entirely professionalized, but there are now many trained directors. The director should be a person experienced in prayer and able to listen.

Spiritual direction can become a deeply valued aspect of our prayer-lives. Sometimes these relationships take on the character of friendships. However, as long as the direction is in progress, it is good to maintain a certain holy distance. It is wise for both parties to keep confidentiality for everyone's protection. As with retreats, spiritual direction is a work of the Holy Spirit, to be honored and treasured as such.

## **A FORM OF CATECHESIS**

At first glance it may seem odd to describe spiritual direction as a form of catechesis. In Christian history, catechesis, that is to say, Christian instruction, mostly employs a structured format for teaching fundamental

doctrine and belief. Such formats have been used to good effect both by Catholics and Protestants. Though the word “catechesis” and its adjective “catechetical” are more often used today by Catholics, the development of a catechism for teaching Christian belief is longstanding among Protestants as well as Catholics.

Martin Luther developed two catechisms, one designated as “large” and the other as “small.” For the Reformed Churches the *Heidelberg Cate-*

*chism* and the *Westminster Catechism* are well known. Anglicans as well as Roman Catholics have used a catechetical format. Today, many older Roman Catholics remember fondly *The Baltimore Catechism* from which they were instructed as children. This has been supplanted by the recently

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published *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Certain popular books, like *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis, may be, practically speaking, catechetical. Many published Christian works serve as teaching instruments for conveying and instilling the fundamentals of Christian belief and practice. Yet by and large we do not think of spiritual direction as an aspect of catechetical teaching.

In Christian spiritual direction, guidance is offered for the very practical business of Christian living, but in a most sensitive and delicate way. The best spiritual directors are essentially listeners. They wait for the questions posed to them by the directee, the person who comes seeking such guidance. They remind themselves not to be overly opinionated and never to lecture or pontificate. Even so they are active interpreters of God’s grace in the life of the individual and of the community.

### **RAISING OUR AWARENESS OF GOD’S GRACE**

One good reason for taking on the practice of spiritual direction is that it may help us to become more discerning about God’s work in our lives. In fact, the entire spiritual life (sometimes referred to as Christian formation) is grounded in a willingness to interpret events in the light of grace.

A good example of how God’s grace may be seen in our lives is through published spiritual autobiographies and personal accounts of Christian conversion. C. S. Lewis articulates his life story in *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. In that narrative of his youthful search for God, Lewis names and describes a number of intense experiences. One of these is in early childhood, when he feels a keen sense of pleasure and nostalgia which he is almost powerless to name. Eventually he comes to call this experience “joy.” He spends much of his early life chasing this experience, until it

eventually leads him to the acknowledgment of God, and finally devotion to Jesus Christ. Yet it is easy to see, in his narrative, the difficulty which the young Lewis experienced in interpreting his various intense religious experiences. Although he had been raised a Christian, still he lacked a full vocabulary of grace. He could not connect his life experience with his knowledge of Christianity as a religious and philosophical system. This difficulty, wherever it may occur, could conceivably be bridged by the practice of spiritual direction.

In my own Christian practice, I have come to understand the vital importance of interpretation in the Christian life. Is God speaking to us through the smallest and most commonplace events of our lives? Often we are unsure how to listen to and discern the leadings of God. What stands between us and the experience of God's grace? Sometimes we are short on imagination; we have difficulty supposing that God is actually dealing with us. Just as often our willingness is what is at stake. We must become willing to interpret the events of our lives in the light of grace.

An event may occur. It may be large or small. But the magnitude of the event is not what matters. What really counts is the interpretation we may place on events, the specific ways we see how God communicates with us.

When I was in my early twenties I moved from my native New Orleans to New York City in hopes of pursuing a career. I began to look for a job, but for many weeks I had little success. Finally, out of a desperate sense of need, I went into St. Peter's Lutheran Church on Lexington Avenue and prayed for a job.

Within the next twenty-four hours I had a line on a job, a job which was offered to me within the week. But I was hesitant to interpret this event as the answer to prayer. I began to think that such a quick "answer to prayer" might be an aspect of superstitious thinking. I refused, at least for a time, to interpret this event in the light of grace.

A few weeks later I had a second notable experience. The man who had hired me (with whom I had never had any religious exchanges) organized an office lunch at a nearby restaurant, with the whole staff in attendance. As part of a light and friendly conversation, he suddenly said, "Have you ever noticed that people pray for things, but they fail to thank God for the answers they receive in prayer?" I was frankly astonished. It sounded like a direct message from God to me, a sort of a reminder to be grateful, even a reproof for the thanks I had failed to extend.

In such a situation, spiritual direction could have been helpful. But in those days I did not know that such a spiritual practice even existed, nor how to avail myself of it.

On my own, however, by careful reflection on what had happened, I got the message. I had prayed, I had received an answer to prayer, and I had been too proud to admit it. Finally, on my knees, I expressed my sorrow and went to God thankfully in prayer.

Many events in our lives—I would venture to say most events—are capable of a spiritual interpretation. When we hold back from this interpretation, we are underestimating God, and we are depriving ourselves of a full appreciation of God's grace.

### **KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IS THE FRAMEWORK**

Churches and theological institutes exist to provide us with a framework for our faith. They aim to teach us about the nature and the love of God. Not only do we turn to the Bible as an authority in the life of the Spirit, but also to trained interpreters—pastors, professors, spiritual writers, and teachers whom we regard as trustworthy witnesses to the nature and action of God. These interpreters guide us, through courses of formal instruction or one-on-one mentoring, to profess our faith, deepen our understanding of the gospel, and grow as disciples.<sup>2</sup>

In one sense, the profession of faith is one of the most fundamental aspects of our Christian practice. While this varies among denominations, almost every church affords us some way to proclaim our faith. Such a profession may occur when we stand up in church to read Scripture, when we preach, and when we testify to what God has done in our lives. Many informal and familiar phrases are really affirmations of what we believe about the nature of God: "God is so good," "God is good, all the time," and "Our God is an awesome God." We profess our faith when we pray the Lord's Prayer—"For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."—or the Gloria—"Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen."

The more liturgical churches encourage the recitation of a creed as a profession of the faith of the community. These creedal formulas are what remain of a lost Christian unity. All recite the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and even the Athanasian Creed, even though they may not agree on what constitutes "one holy catholic and apostolic church." But there is still a shred of Christian unity in some of their affirmations: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ his only son, Our Lord."

Yet, as many believers have noticed, more is needed to apply these essentials of Christian belief to our day-to-day experience. How should we relate to God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) on an ongoing basis? How do we live for God and others? What, to use William James's expression, is the "cash value" of our belief? How do we respond to the call of Jesus to take up the cross and follow him?

Volumes have been written to answer these questions. But the learning that takes place in spiritual formation is God's grace mediated through living persons who are our spiritual friends and counselors. This living and active application of Christian teaching can be invaluable.

Sometimes a person comes into spiritual direction wrestling with specific problems. The director may help him or her to apply the teaching of Jesus or other biblical wisdom. How do I deal with irritating people who intrude on my life and make unfair demands on my time? How do I deal with a person in my congregation who is constantly against me? *"But I say to you, love your enemies."* How do I appropriate the spirituality of my parents and grandparents and apply their life lessons to my own experience? *"Honor your father and mother."* What do I do about unanswered prayers? *"Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.... And he said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?'"*

In the last several years I have been serving as a spiritual director in a two-year training program entitled "The Path of Spiritual Direction and Spiritual Formation in the Congregation." This series of retreats, sponsored by the Academy of Spiritual Leadership of the Louisiana Conference of the United Methodist Church and directed by the Reverend Carole Cotton Winn, is now being offered for the fourth time. In its brochure, the program is described as follows: "the scope of the retreats includes the art of training in spiritual direction, and takes a broader look at bringing the practices of spiritual formation to the congregation. It is for those who want resources and skills which invite persons and small groups into the presence of God and which deepen the spiritual life of the congregation." Each person enrolled in these sessions is expected to have regular contact with an experienced spiritual director.

I have not attended these training retreats, but I am acting as a spiritual director for several who have gone through, or are now going through, the training. My task, in these sessions, is twofold: to do what spiritual directors should do, and do it well; and to help the directees

reflect on the process in ways that will strengthen them for their own work in spiritual direction. Is this also a form of catechesis? I suspect so.<sup>3</sup>

## **A NEW EXPERIENCE OF FAITH**

Certainly, part of my task as a director in this program is to help form opinions on what a spiritual director is like. I need to do just what good directors do—that is, listen attentively, ask questions when needed, apply

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spiritual principles sparingly and judiciously, and wait for the Holy Spirit.

More importantly, I notice these directees are developing a new vocabulary for spiritual life. They are devout Christians, long time churchgoers, practiced in their own style of worship and devotion. Yet such notions as spiritual formation and spiritual direction demand more of them. And they are entering into this program on behalf of their own congregations. They

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want to make the spiritual life more widely practiced and better understood. (Not all of them, by the way, are laypeople. Some, both men and women, are already ordained ministers who have been theological-ly trained.)

One way that some of these directees are expressing and capturing their new experience of faith is through writing. I am

always careful not to assign writing, but rather to offer it as a one of many options for spiritual discipline. This desire to write is not stemming from me or from my direction. But the directees sometimes keep journals and refer to them as ways to prepare for their sessions in spiritual direction.

In some instances, the directees write more organized reflection papers as part of the training course. I was particularly struck by one of these, in which the writer reviewed some of the devotional literature that had influenced her parents and showed its influence upon her own life. She also drew together the spiritual writers who had influenced her, finding the commonalities between generations.

Surely this is a learning experience, and one which has benefits both for the writer and for others who read her paper. Such an exercise is both devotional and instructive.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, in speaking of the spiritual value of writing, said: "Writing is a process by which we discover what lives in us. The writing itself reveals to us what lives in us. The deepest satisfaction of writing is precisely that it opens up new spaces within us of which we were not aware before we began to write."<sup>4</sup> This is, of course, a form of learning, a faith-learning in which we may discover the truths of our faith as part of lived experience.

In a similar way we learn from our devotional reading, which is often a real undergirding of our spiritual practice. In addition to the Bible, which is intimately connected to our spiritual living, many devotional texts, works of reflection, and faith-narratives nurture our understanding of God.

After many years in the spiritual life, I must take note of the various factors that have formed me, and how I have progressed spiritually over time. By and large I cannot calculate this in terms of an increase of virtue, though I have sometimes hoped for that. Instead I am conscious of a deepening of knowledge, not so much on the intellectual level but rather as a kind of wisdom. Many factors contribute to this. Prayer, worship, reading, reflection, writing, and spiritual direction are among them.

To list here all of the books which have instructed and nurtured me would be impractical. As an illustration I will mention just one: *Teach Us to Pray: Learning a Little About God*, by the Belgian contemplative and scholar Andre Louf. This small volume came into my hands in the 1970s, and I have read it countless times. Intended as an instruction on prayer for his fellow Cistercian monks, Louf's book has been read with great profit by a large audience of laypeople, who have been blessed by his vital consciousness of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Louf says of the Holy Spirit: "God's Holy Spirit has taken us over, has assumed complete possession of us; he has become breath of our breath and spirit of our spirit. He takes our heart in tow and turns it towards God." He adds that prayer, this knowledge given by the Spirit, is like a hidden treasure we always carry about with us. To explain all this he draws especially on Paul's encouragement, "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Romans 8:15) and "Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6). Prayer, he adds, is a heart that overflows with gratitude, thanksgiving, and praise.<sup>5</sup>

Such devotional reading is a vivid encouragement to the spiritual life. For me, this passage is a splendid footnote to that statement in the Profession of Faith: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and from the Son."

The practice of the spiritual life, including the practice of spiritual direction, serves to enlarge our knowledge of Christian faith and practice. J. B. Phillips, the British spiritual writer, once described faith as a faculty which becomes stronger in practice. So, the spiritual life, heightened by spiritual direction, is a way of enlarging and strengthening our catechesis.

## NOTES

1 Group spiritual direction is also practiced, and it observes many of the same sensitivities and constraints. But the historic method of spiritual guidance is one-on-one.

2 Among the programs of catechetical training, under Protestant auspices, is Alpha, an interdenominational training course in the essentials of Christian belief. The Alpha course, based on a program which originated in Britain, offers ten weeks of training to provide a "nonthreatening introduction to the Christian faith" ([www.alphausa.org](http://www.alphausa.org)). Recently a new

program, “Why Catholic?” has been launched in American Catholic Churches at the behest of the RENEW International movement ([www.whycatholic.org](http://www.whycatholic.org)). In a structured small-group process, participants will read and reflect upon the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which explores the essentials of Christian belief in the Catholic tradition.

3 One thing that strikes me about this program is the depth and breadth of devotional literature being recommended and in some instances required. Especially I noticed the readings from John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Origen.

The reading list also included a number of modern teachers on the spiritual life: William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*; William A. Barry, *Discernment in Prayer: Paying Attention to God*; Thomas Green, *Weeds Among the Wheat and Drinking from a Dry Well*; and David Regan, “Mystagogy and Experience,” chapter three in *Experience the Mystery: Pastoral Possibilities for Christian Mystagogy*.

Protestant publishers were well represented on the reading list – Upper Room and InterVarsity Press as well as Westminster/John Knox Press and Pendle Hill Publications. A number of the recommended authors were Anglicans or Episcopalians. Among these authorities were Gerald May, Alan Jones, Kenneth Leech, and Michael Gemignani. The recommended materials were all drawing from well-established and historic practices of spiritual direction and formation.

4 Robert Durbach, ed., *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader* (New York: Bantam, 1989), 28.

5 Andre Louf, *Teach Us to Pray: Learning a Little About God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1974), 19.



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