



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Teaching Power of
Spiritual Direction
(*Catechism*, pp. 73-80)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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Spiritual Direction

In the ancient discipline of spiritual direction, practical guidance for Christians of all ages 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.

Prayer

O God, we lift our hearts to you.
We turn aside from all that has consumed us,
that we might be consumed by something greater.
Consume us with the fire of your Spirit.
Burn away what needs to be no more
and refine that which is eternal.
This is our prayer and our great hope. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 4:6-8, 14-16

Reflection

Regular one-on-one or small group meetings with a trusted spiritual director – a favored form of instruction in monastic communities since the fourth century – are becoming more common for laypersons as well. “In these meetings we describe our prayer experiences, our joys and difficulties, and gain perspective on how our spiritual practice may be shaping us,” Emilie Griffin writes. “The director helps us to develop confidence in God, to relax in prayer, to deal with trouble spots of any kind.”

The meetings are not programmed, but generally follow the flow of the director's practical concerns. “Good spiritual directors,” says Griffin, “listen attentively, ask questions when needed, apply spiritual principles sparingly and judiciously, and wait for the Holy Spirit.” She explores several good reasons for reviving this ancient discipline today.

- ▶ *Spiritual direction helps us discern God's work in our lives.* “The entire spiritual life,” Griffin notes, “is grounded in a willingness to interpret events in the light of grace.” A director can help us read God's activity between the lines of even small events in our lives – a colleague's word of correction, the experience of joy in a Sabbath's rest, a friend's encouragement, or an answer to prayer. “[Most] events in our lives...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.”
- ▶ *Spiritual direction increases our practical knowledge of God.* The drama of God's creation, gracious redemption, and continuing guidance of the world as narrated in Scripture provides the framework of our faith. But to learn our role in God's drama, we turn 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...to profess our faith, deepen our understanding of the gospel, and grow as disciples,” Griffin writes. They help us wrestle with our doubts and deal with daily problems. In spiritual direction, “God's grace [is] mediated through living persons who are



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our spiritual friends and counselors. This living and active application of Christian teaching can be invaluable."

- *Spiritual direction enriches our vocabulary of faith.* In her work as a trained director, Griffin notices that some of her directees have begun keeping a spiritual journal. This personal writing is "a form of learning, a faith-learning in which we may discover the truths of our faith as part of lived experience." Another valuable discipline is devotional reading. "In addition to the Bible, which is intimately connected to our spiritual living, there are many devotional texts, works of reflection and faith-narratives that nurture our understanding of God." Through these disciplines of spiritual reading and writing, her directees are learning "a new vocabulary for spiritual life." They are becoming more comfortable in articulating their experiences with God and professing their faith.

In these three ways, spiritual direction "serves to enlarge our knowledge of Christian faith and practice," Griffin concludes. It continues and strengthens our catechesis, our Christian teaching and instruction.

Study Questions

1. For Emilie Griffin, what are the most attractive features of the practice of spiritual direction?
2. What sort of person would be a good spiritual director? What sort of person would be a good directee?
3. Could the practice of one-on-one or small-group spiritual direction be adapted for catechesis of new believers, young or old? Are there other believers in your congregation for whom this practice would be appropriate?
4. Henri J. M. Nouwen says, "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." What is the value of keeping a spiritual journal?
5. What is the value of reading devotional texts? Have certain authors shaped your spiritual vocabulary? What devotional books would you recommend to a new believer?

Departing Hymn: "Teach Me, O Lord" (verses 1, 2, and 4)

Teach me, O Lord, your way of truth,
and from it I will not depart;
that I may steadfastly obey,
give me an understanding heart.

In your commandments make me walk,
for in the law my joy shall be;
give me a heart that loves your will,
from discontent and envy free.

O turn away reproach and fear,
your righteous judgments I confess;
to know your precepts I desire,
revive me in your righteousness.

Joseph P. Holbrook (c. 1866), alt.

Suggested Tunes: OLD 100th or TALLIS' CANON

Spiritual Direction

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To examine the ancient Christian practice of one-on-one or small-group spiritual direction.
2. To weigh the advantages and drawbacks of this approach to catechesis.
3. To consider how your congregation might use spiritual direction for catechesis.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Catechism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Teach Me, O Lord” locate the familiar tunes OLD 100th or TALLIS’ CANON in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

The practice of spiritual direction originated in the desert Egyptian communities of the fourth century, where Christians gathered to put some space between themselves and the distorting culture of the Empire. They deferred to the spiritual direction and advice of those with more discretion. In clever stories they peeled back the layers of vanity that could afflict directees and directors in this network of authority. Here are two of the stories they told:

A brother said to a great hermit, “Abba, I want to find a monk who agrees with me and I’ll live and die with him.” The hermit replied, “Your search is good, my lord.” The brother repeated what he wanted, not understanding the irony of the hermit.... Then the hermit said to him, “You do not want to follow the will of anyone, you want to follow your own will, and that is why you will be at peace with him.”

Some hermits used to say, “If you see a young man climbing up to heaven by his own will, catch him by the foot and pull him down to earth for it is not good for him.”

Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Desert Fathers* (10.115 and 10.114)

In these stories we see ourselves, don’t we? Our fitful jumping from church to church to find a “good fit,” changing channels when a commentator “goes to meddling,” and insisting on reading the Bible “for ourselves” may reveal a deeper spiritual disorder. Are we capable of receiving spiritual direction today? Are any Christians good and wise enough to be our teachers?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Timothy 4:6-8, 14-16 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This is the second of three studies of how congregations might approach catechesis today. The first one, “Introducing Children to Worship,” examines how worship trains young children, and the second study, “Laying Foundations of Faith,” explores using a question-and-answer catechism with older children and

adolescents. This study considers one-on-one or small-group spiritual mentoring in the faith for adults. All of these approaches, however, may be adapted for believers of other ages and at various levels of maturity.

Study Questions

1. Griffin emphasizes how a spiritual director can help us (1) deal with doubts and see God's activity in our lives, (2) apply the "essentials of Christian belief to our day-to-day experience—e.g., knowing how we should "relate to God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) on an ongoing basis [and] live for God and others," and (3) articulate our faith as we speak and write. The director's guidance is tailored to our specific problems and concerns.

When a small group meets with a spiritual director, the participants have an opportunity to share their concerns with one another and to encourage and help other group members.

2. Ask members to explore the scripture reading for clues, because the Apostle Paul had mentored Timothy for several years and now Timothy was mentoring other Christians. For example, good directors must be wise and discerning in order to nourish directees "on the words of the faith" and offer them "sound teaching." They must be committed to "godliness" and actively training themselves in godly ways, even as they humbly acknowledge that their talents and efforts are gifts from God, which have been recognized and developed by the community of faith. Griffin writes, "The best spiritual directors are essentially listeners. They wait for the questions posed to them by the directee.... 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."

Good directees need to be self-aware and honest enough to articulate their struggles and concerns, and trusting and brave enough to share these with the director. They must be humble and obedient to take direction. (These last two traits are emphasized in the opening stories from the desert Christian tradition.)

3. Are the new believers, young or old, spiritually mature enough to have the traits of a good directee described above? The conversations, the guided spiritual readings, and the amount and type of writing encouraged would need to be appropriate for their abilities and spiritual awareness. Is it always best to group new believers by age, marital status, or educational level, or would they benefit from discussing some topics in a mixed group? Should parents or mature close friends of the directees be invited to some of the meetings, or would this undermine the intimacy and professionalism of the director's relationship to them?

When mature believers are dealing with similar concerns (e.g., responding to divorce, preparing for a new ministry, seeking guidance on family responsibilities, etc.), would they benefit from ongoing spiritual direction (rather than just a "book study" or retreat)?

4. Encourage members to discuss their experiences with journal-keeping and spiritual writing. What experiences have they tried to record and understand? Nouwen says, "The writing itself reveals to us what lives in us." As we articulate and interpret our spiritual experiences in writing, we discover our own fears, doubts, and hopes, our attitudes toward ourselves and concerns for the world, and so on; we come face to face with our sinful desires; we spell out our theological beliefs and their practical value. We also discover the Holy Spirit that "lives in us," providing correction, guidance, and comfort.
5. Griffin describes devotional texts that have encouraged her and deepened her "knowledge, not so much on the intellectual level but rather as a kind of wisdom." (Over the years she has written about many more of these texts and taught them professionally, often for the Renovaré movement.) What books would you recommend to a new believer who is an older child, an adolescent, a puzzled college student, a young adult, a busy professional, etc.?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.