

Making the most of Spiritual Accompaniment

Much has been written and many courses given on the formation of spiritual directors, but it is more difficult to find material on *receiving* spiritual direction/accompaniment. It is tacitly assumed that a person can go along to a director in the belief that the director has an agenda or method of procedure that will carry the meeting along. In this way the whole onus of the session is put on the director. All that the one receiving direction/accompaniment has to do is 'turn up' at the right place at the right time and all will be well. But spiritual direction/accompaniment in the tradition of Ignatius of Loyola, the tradition being offered here, doesn't 'work' in this way. So, what exactly is spiritual direction/accompaniment? And how does it work?

Spiritual direction/accompaniment had been part of the Christian tradition since earliest times. The desert fathers and mothers were convinced of the value of having a spiritual guide or companion with whom to share their experience of the ways in which the Lord had been dealing with them. Likewise the early Celtic Christians valued the practice so much that they sometimes travelled great distances over land and sea to meet with their director, known as their Soul Friend (Anam Cara). Meetings with directors would take place at regular intervals, and not only when there was a 'problem'.

Spiritual direction/accompaniment is not problem-based, though problems may be part of a person's spiritual journey. Rather, it is faith-based. This does not mean that it deals only with 'religious' topics, but it assumes that those seeking direction/accompaniment will have some sense of their lives being an expression of their relationship with God. The promotion of that relationship, in whatever way is appropriate, is the business of spiritual direction/accompaniment, and the director does this by encouraging the directee to recount their reflections on their life and prayer. Many will agree that to do this frequently opens up gateways that may not have appeared at the time.

The Spiritual Director / Accompanier

In recent times there has been a problem about the term spiritual director because it sounds rather directive and thus belies the nature of the directors' role. It is common today to refer to spiritual guidance or more often, spiritual accompaniment. The director is not there to give advice or tell you what you ought to feel or how you ought to proceed or what you ought to believe. Rather, the director is there to *listen carefully* to what you recount, to echo back relevant parts of it, and perhaps ask for explanation or further comment on things that have been said. In this way the director acts as a 'sounding board' for whatever you bring to the direction/accompaniment session, and helps you discern what is life-giving and what is not.

Your experience may involve speaking about your prayer life, or your spiritual life in general, or your relationships, or any other aspect of what has occurred in your life since your last meeting, and how these events have affected you and your relationship with God. Aspects of your relationship with God may have been illuminated or questioned by something you have read, and that also could form part of what you bring to the meeting with your director. It may well be that the session starts in prayer - becoming aware of how God is regarding you at this very moment. The way you imagine that God regards you will normally indicate how you regard God.

Sometimes the director will suggest things to reflect on, or Scripture to read or pray with, but whatever it is, its sole purpose will be to help you reflect further on your life and attitudes. If you are trying to make an important decision, the director may suggest helpful ways of proceeding, without trying to influence the decision in any way, since the decision is yours, not the director's.

It is important to know that anything shared with a director is held in strictest confidence, with two exceptions: (1) where there is the possibility of self harm or harm or abuse to another, and (2) in the supervision situation where the anonymity of all directees is safeguarded. Directors are legally bound to report to the police or safeguarding authorities when disclosures of child or at risk adult abuse have been made to them. However they would never do this without discussing it first with the directee. Directees who are not comfortable with incidents of abuse being reported to the authorities should not identify an abuser.

It will become obvious from this that spiritual direction/accompaniment is not simply a chat between director and directee. *God is involved* and, therefore, it can be an experience of God at work in both director and directee during the session itself.

Receiving Spiritual Direction/ Accompaniment

The prime mover in any direction/accompaniment session is not the director, but God, and, after God, the one receiving spiritual direction/accompaniment. The director's role, therefore, is constantly to invite the directee to let God shed light on what they are presenting. From this it is clear that the way in which the session moves will depend on what the directee brings to it. If nothing is presented, there is not much the director can say, though she/he may well feel forced to make an attempt. *It is important, therefore, that the one seeking direction/accompaniment should prepare for the event.* While it is true that the direction/accompaniment session is an interaction between God and the directee, with the assistance of the director, the groundwork needs to be there. Like gardening, seed put into prepared ground is more likely to germinate than if cast into the wind.

Preparing for Spiritual Direction/ Accompaniment

There are three main elements of ongoing preparation for spiritual direction/accompaniment: *prayer, reflection, and keeping a record.*

Prayer is one of the main means of connection between God and individuals: it is an expression of our relationship with God. Therefore, being aware of what is happening in our prayer will be a valuable source of information about our spiritual health. Our prayer will also be a main indicator of how we are reacting to the events of our ordinary lives. *And so, it is important that we do not simply pray, but that we keep a record of what we pray and what happened as we prayed.*

Perhaps in prayer, perhaps at other times, we may reflect on various 'happenings' in our lives: relationships, conversations, quarrels, attitudes, beatitudes and so on. As a means to this end, we could use the *Prayer of Awareness*, a prayer which invites us, before going to bed each night, to look back over the events of the day, especially to identify what we have received and for which we can be grateful.

Unless we have exceptionally good memories, it will be useful to make notes of events, thoughts and feelings each evening, so that we will have a definite idea of what we want to talk about when we next meet with our director. A perusal of these notes will enable us to see if there are patterns in what we have experienced and observed, and this will form a basis of what we bring. *It is advisable, therefore, prior to a direction/accompaniment session that the directee read through their notes to see if there are particular points of significance which would then be presented as the starting points of the session.* Of course, if the Holy Spirit is involved, the session might diverge into other channels!

Spiritual direction/accompaniment is a valuable part of our Christian heritage. It can be used to great benefit or squandered, depending on how we approach it and prepare for it.

Offerings?

It is usual for the person receiving spiritual accompaniment to offer something to the director for this service.

Some directors rely on the income generated by this work, others have other sources of income. As a guideline £30 or £35 for an hour's session is considered normal. Many directors are happy to take whatever the directee can afford to offer.

Clergy and others engaged in pastoral work may be able to charge the spiritual direction / accompaniment offering as a cost of professional development in their parish or other work agency.

The ISC has a bursary fund available, so finance should never be an obstacle.

(These notes are largely the work of Fintan Creaven SJ)

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