

What a Spiritual Director Does

Margaret Guenther, author of *Holy Listening*, calls spiritual directors “midwives for the soul.” The spiritual director is both as important and as unimportant as a midwife is the birth of a baby. The midwife is important. He or she has seen many births and can provide helpful advice and guidance, but the baby does not belong to the midwife. And the midwife is not the one experiencing the pains of labour and delivery. The midwife is there to encourage, give some direction, and provide an environment where the birth is safe and protected.

What, then, does a spiritual director actually do?

- The spiritual director welcomes the directee into God’s presence; more accurately, the spiritual director reminds the directee that God is already present, even in the most stressful experiences of life.
- First and foremost the director listens. To listen to another person in a way that helps that person hear the grace, love and truth of God is one of the greatest gifts we can give. Loving listening is active and engaged. It is more about offering questions than giving answers. In the spiritual direction relationship the focus is on the directee’s relationship with God. This does not mean that we talk only about prayer or church or reading the Bible. We talk about everyday life – jobs, family, health, houses and desires. In spiritual direction we come back again and again to the question “Where is God in this?” We allow for times of silence so that the directee can actually notice God’s presence in whatever they’re experiencing...and notice himself or herself and what is really going on inside.
- The spiritual director opens up a loving, non-judgmental space for a person to be honest about how things really are in their souls, what they actually believe and feel about God, themselves, others and life. The spiritual director gently helps directees look underneath these thoughts and feelings and discover their longings for experiencing a closeness with God.
- The spiritual director helps the directee to come to know, understand, accept and love himself or herself. (This is connected to experiencing *God’s* knowing, understanding, acceptance and unconditional love.)
* John Calvin wrote, “Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists in two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” (Institutes 1.1.1.)
Calvin argued that one could not truly know God without knowing oneself and that one couldn’t truly know oneself without knowing God. Calvin acknowledged the obvious dilemma in saying, “which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.”
- The spiritual director can help a directee implement healthy (according to the individual person) spiritual practices that can help with his or her relationship with God. This is only as per the directee’s desire.
- The spiritual director is not a psychological counselor, but he or she is a spiritual counselor. He or she is trained to help and facilitate healing from the wounds incurred in life as it relates to spiritual and emotional health or where a directee is stunted in their relationship with God. For deeper psychological healing, the spiritual director will refer the directee to a therapist or counsellor.

The environment of spiritual direction, then, is affirming and encouraging, but it is also a place of authenticity. In spiritual direction we look at the truth of our present situation and experience. The question asked is not, “What *should* be happening in my life?” but “What *is* happening in my life?” We look for God here, now, because the place where we are in our lives is the place where we find God. Sometimes He takes us back to what we need to face, but that always begins with today.

What Happens In a Session:

1. A spiritual direction session will often begin with some spiritual exercise, silence, music or scripture. This is called a centering exercise and is meant to help the directee and director settle into God's presence and open their hearts to hearing from Him.

Some examples of spiritual exercises:

- Lectio divina (Holy Reading)
 - Silence
 - Something visual used in collaboration with some questions
 - Contemplative Gospel Reading
2. The spiritual director will invite the directee to talk about what is happening or what happened in the past that is affecting the present. He or she will ask questions and then more questions. He or she might invite the directee to pray – either silently or out loud. From time to time the director may share a story of their own if it is thought to be of help, but always being aware of not bringing the focus onto themselves. (This will help you to understand if your spiritual director is brief in answering questions about his or her life. This is a sincere effort to let this be about the directee's journey. It is not meant to be an expression of coldness.)
 3. There are times when the Spirit will expose a need for grieving, healing or letting go. Other times there may be big decisions to make in regards to career, family, personal choice. There are other times when your sessions are simply part of your soul care, being in touch with what Christ is doing or saying and where He is growing you. A spiritual director will journey with you in all these elements of your life.
 3. The spiritual director may give you some exercise or reading to take with you or may think of something afterwards that would be helpful and send it to you.
 4. At the close of your hour, there will always be a prayer for you as you continue on your journey.