St Antony's Priory
SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT

Making the most of Spiritual Direction

Much has been written, and many courses offered, on the formation of spiritual directors, but rather less is available on how to receive spiritual direction well. For someone beginning, or returning to, spiritual direction, it can be reassuring to know that there is no need to arrive with everything neatly understood. Sometimes it may be assumed that the director has an agenda or method that will carry the meeting, while the directee simply comes at the right place and time. Spiritual direction is a shared and prayerful encounter. It is a place of welcome, listening, and gentle attentiveness to God.

What, then, is spiritual direction, and how does it work?

Spiritual direction has been part of the Christian tradition since the earliest times. The desert fathers and mothers valued a spiritual guide or companion with whom they could share how the Lord had been dealing with them. Early Celtic Christians likewise treasured the practice, sometimes travelling great distances to meet their Soul Friend, or Anam Cara. Such meetings took place regularly, not only when there was a problem or crisis. Spiritual direction is not problem-based, though problems may certainly be brought with trust and honesty; it is faith-based. It begins from the belief that those seeking direction already have some sense, however tentative, of life as an expression of their relationship with God. Its purpose is to nurture that relationship by encouraging the directee to reflect on life and prayer, often helping gentle insights to emerge that were not apparent at the time.

The Spiritual Director

The term spiritual director can sound overly directive and may not fully convey the nature of the role. Today, many people speak instead of spiritual guidance or accompaniment, which may better express the spirit of the encounter. The director is not there to give advice, tell you what to feel, dictate how to proceed, or prescribe what to believe. Rather, the director offers attentive, respectful, and compassionate listening, echoes back what seems significant, and may gently invite clarification or further reflection. In this way, the director acts as a sounding board and companion, helping the directee notice what is life-giving, what may feel heavy or unfree, and where God's invitation may be quietly present.

A session may include reflection on prayer, spiritual life, relationships, reading, decisions, or events since the last meeting, especially how these have affected your relationship with God. The way you imagine God regards you often reveals something of

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how you regard God, and this can be explored gently and without judgement. A director may suggest Scripture, prayer material, or ways of reflecting further, always in support of your discernment and freedom. If an important decision is involved, the director may offer ways of proceeding without influencing the choice, since the decision remains yours. What is shared is held in strict confidence, except where there is risk of self-harm, harm or abuse to another, or in supervision where anonymity is safeguarded. Directors are legally bound to report disclosures of child or at-risk adult abuse to the appropriate authorities, but would discuss this with the directee first. Spiritual direction is therefore more than a simple conversation: God is involved, and the session can become a grace-filled experience of God at work in both director and directee.

Receiving Spiritual Direction

The prime mover in any direction session is not the director, but God; after God, it is the one receiving direction. The director's role is to help create a safe and prayerful space in which the directee may allow God to shed light on what is being presented. The movement of the session therefore depends largely on what the directee brings, whether that feels clear, confused, joyful, painful, or unfinished. If little is offered, there may be little for the director to work with, so preparation can be a real gift to the process. Although the session is an interaction between God and the directee, assisted by the director, the groundwork needs to be there. Like gardening, seed placed in prepared ground is more likely to germinate than seed cast into the wind.

Preparing for Spiritual Direction

There are three main elements of ongoing preparation for spiritual direction: prayer, reflection, and keeping a record. Prayer is a primary expression of our relationship with God, so awareness of what happens in prayer can reveal much about our spiritual health and our response to ordinary life. It is therefore helpful not only to pray, but also to notice what we prayed and what happened as we prayed, without judging ourselves harshly. We may also reflect on relationships, conversations, conflicts, attitudes, and blessings, trusting that God can meet us in all of them. The Prayer of Awareness can help us look back each night over the day's events, especially to notice what we have received and for which we can be grateful.

Unless we have exceptionally good memories, it is useful to make brief evening notes of events, thoughts, and feelings. Reviewing these before a direction session can reveal patterns and help identify the most significant starting points. The Holy Spirit may, of course, lead the session in unexpected directions, and the directee need not be anxious about bringing the perfect material. Spiritual direction is a treasured part of the Christian heritage; approached with openness, honesty, and preparation, it can become a deeply fruitful gift and a gentle help on the journey with God.