

What about the spiritual direction itself? You should try to make it regular, generally no less than monthly and often weekly or biweekly. Although needs are varied, normally a well-prepared session of spiritual direction need not last for more than half an hour. It is good to jot down concrete resolutions drawn from the normally few words of advice given. These resolutions should be brought to prayer and action and then spoken about if possible in the next meeting. Try never to leave your meeting without setting up the next appointment.

What do you talk about? Many things or just a few. Perhaps you want to set the ground rules with the director himself. Certainly the quality and quantity of your prayer and spiritual reading and sacramental life should always be touched on. Your struggle to live as a Christian in marriage and family, work, friendship, and social life should normally be addressed -- specifically. There should be an effort to address a very particular area of life, which needs improvement, that defect or fault that keeps you from making more rapid progress towards holiness. With time your efforts to share your faith in a natural way with those around can also be a topic of discussion. These efforts may well result in God's grace in reconciliations, conversions, and vocations. And, oh yes, from time to time you may simply need to unburden yourself of unexpected joys and sorrows that come on your pilgrimage to the house of God, the Father. If you are

seeing a priest for direction, you may also want to avail yourself of the Sacrament of Penance, adding the sacramental grace to the actual graces received from being open and docile in the conversation with your spiritual director.

We Catholics now number more than a billion as we "cross the threshold of hope" into the Jubilee year 2000, but unfortunately how many as Thomas Merton put it, speaking of himself, in *The Seven Storey Mountain* have "slipped into the ranks of tepid and dull and sluggish, indifferent Christians who live a life that is still half animal, and who barely put up a struggle to keep the breath of grace alive in their souls" Merton's response was "I should have sought constant and complete spiritual direction." Such spiritual direction is an important step in helping us to identify ourselves with Christ so we may help construct through our prayer and sacrifice the "civilization of love and truth" that John Paul II foresees in the decades ahead.

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## A Spiritual Consultant

Father C. John McCloskey

Open up the yellow pages of your local phone directory. There you will find listed attorneys, financial advisors, plumbers, electricians, beauticians, bankers, and even fitness trainers. All of these people know much more about their business than we do. Therefore we pay them a fee to help us in their particular specialty. Some of them become regular consultants and a few even good friends. All of their expert advice is directed towards help in this present life.

In addition you will find dozens of people listed as psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists and so on. Although these health professionals can perform a useful function, often times they serve as surrogate spiritual directors, giving erroneous or unfortunate answers for spiritual problems. Their advice depends on their particular training often based on naturalistic theories or ideologies which can do much more harm than good.

The only question truly worth asking is that of the rich young man of the Gospel, "What must I do to gain eternal life?" which leads to other questions, such as "How can I achieve holiness in this life?" or "What is God's will for me?" God answers these questions for us in many ways. Simply to follow the Ten Commandments as they are written in our

hearts in natural law and come to us through God's Word is a good start, as Jesus himself advised the rich young man. We can also look to God's Revelation to us through Sacred Scripture and Tradition -- the guidance of the Church through its teaching authority and sacraments. We can then look at our present state in life and our past life experiences for good clues as to what God wants for us in any present moment.

However, in order to find answers to these questions, every Catholic should have a spiritual director. As Blessed Josemaria Escriva put it, "You wouldn't think of building a good house to live in here on earth without an architect. How can you ever hope, without a director, to build the castle of your sanctification in order to live forever in heaven?" This is true for everybody, not just for the poor, simple, or uneducated but even more for the complacently successful. Escriva goes on to say, "You think you are really somebody: your studies -- your research, your publications; your social position; your name; your political accomplishments -- the offices you hold; your wealth; your age...no longer a child. Precisely because of all of this, you -- more than others -- need a director for your soul." You may have several or even many during the course of your life. He will provide you the answer to your many questions as our circumstances change and as we grow "in wisdom and grace." Besides he won't charge you a dime.

Each person is a unique child of God with his particular genetic code, temperament, and life experiences. God has a specific plan for each. To discern this particular plan should be the continuing goal of any serious Christian. As God normally prefers to work through secondary causes, there arose right from apostolic times, the practice of seeking personal spiritual direction from a wise and prudent person who could guide one along the path to holiness with all its unexpected twists and turns. One would search with great difficulty throughout history to find canonized saints who did not receive regular spiritual direction. After all, even our Blessed Mother, the Immaculate Conception herself, found her vocation through the words of the Archangel Gabriel. And even she asked how this might come about.

Where do you search for a spiritual director? We should do what is referred to on Wall Street as "due diligence". That is, do careful research before choosing a spiritual consultant, perhaps as much as in searching for a spouse or choosing the right college. After all, you are looking for a person to whom you are, in part, at least entrusting the salvation and sanctification of your very immortal soul. Remember that you are the buyer and that it may take several tries to find the right person or organization that fits your needs.

The spiritual director may be a priest or a layperson. One very simple way is to look to your friends who clearly take their interior and apostolic life seriously. One flows from the other. Ask them for a referral. If you see a serious striving for holiness in them, there is little doubt they are taking advantage of a good spiritual director.

A second way is look for a person, a priest or a lay person, in whom you see deep piety, wisdom, experience, maturity, zeal for souls and an unquestionable faithfulness to all the Church's teaching. He need not have formal training in spiritual direction. The traits listed above more than make up for class hours or a degree. After all Karol Wotyla's first spiritual director was a tailor! Then try to get him to free some time up for you. I guarantee he has a long line of clients.

A third way to find a spiritual director increasingly popular and accessible in this age of the laity, is to take advantage of the formation provided for lay people by religious congregations and by the various and lay institutions which have as their specialty the formation of lay people. There you may find a well-defined spirituality complete with formational and liturgical activities that are both personal and collective, doctrinal and ascetical, tailor-made to your particular situation. They often also provide the services of both priests and laity steeped in a particular spirituality.