

## Spiritual Direction

### Fr. Eric Mah

So spiritual direction. You'll hear different ways of conceptualizing that idea from directors. But my understanding of spiritual direction is that the Holy Spirit remains the Spiritual Director. The Holy Spirit remains the Spiritual Director. So, the idea of being a spiritual director or even being the directee is that we're both deferring to the work of the Holy Spirit. So I always go back to this great quote by Father James Mallon. He wrote this great book called "Divine Renovation." Doing amazing stuff in his own ministry. But he had this really provocative statement that he gave during the priests seminar, that was hosted by the archdiocese a couple years back. And basically, what he said is that you don't want to ask the Lord so much to bless what you're doing. You want to do what the Lord is blessing. And so pretty neat. You don't want to kind of focus on asking the Lord to bless what you're doing, because you're still in the driver's seat and all that stuff. You want to kind of perceive what is it the Lord is blessing? And then correspond my action and my will. Am I being a purpose to that.

## The Holy Spirit is the Spiritual Director

So discernment at its highest level. What is the Holy Spirit doing in the life of the directee. So certainly, the directee has to be attentive to that, but also the director. What is actually happening in this person's life, and how can we make adjustments into the choices or whatever to better facilitate the work of the Holy Spirit. So, couple things in that regard. Typically, that mode of guidance and the of spiritual direction is incremental. So, shades of, the parable of the two sons. And necessarily so. I remember talking to one of my early spiritual directors shortly after I got ordained as a priest. And he talked about this in terms of evangelization and living out the mission. But it applies to what we're talking about here.

So he said, "Look if you're talking to someone in the office, for example, as a priest or as a spiritual director or, whatever. You might look at this person and have all these different desires and hopes and dreams for the good of this person. Maybe in the back of your mind, you think, "Oh, gosh, this person's at -50, and I want to bring this person to +50." Right? He says, That's never your job. Your job is never to bring this person from -50 to +50. Your job is, first of all, to recognize that the Holy Spirit precedes your action, cares about this person way more than you do. And is already working on this person's heart. So your job is to recognize, to the best of your ability, the work of the Holy Spirit, which is already living and active in this person's life. To kind of help this person move from -50 to -49. And then, until the next moment, which may or may not involve you. Right?

So it's a real kind of hands off approach, Because the idea is that when you look back on any sort of changes that happen in terms of the spiritual director/directee relationship, you should be able to look back and say, "Yeah, we could see the Holy Spirit moving in that relationship." And so clearly attribute any sort of significant changes to the work of the Holy Spirit. And if you feel like, in retrospect, "We did this thing," there's something kind of gross and disgusting about that. So you want to kind of avoid that.

## You are Called to Be Yourself

Another thing that's kind of distinctive about deferring to the Holy Spirit, though, is that the Holy Spirit, His work in people is unique and specific to the person. So, shades of this image of the mystical body of Christ. So, Christ being the head and all of us being, feet and toes, and hands and, elbows and stuff. And the idea is that, okay, you think about the people you admire, whether we're talking about, names of saints, like Charles Borromeo or, just people that in your life that you admire on a natural level or even from a spiritual perspective. No matter how much you admire a particular person you're never called to be that person. It's really, really important to remember. You're called to be your unique self. Who does God call you to be? Fully alive but, the best version of you. And a certain sense when we try to be someone else, even though it might be couch in terms of I'm trying to be holy I'm trying to be noble and this sort of thing. It's not really trusting God's work in you.

So the idea is that, okay, deep trust in yourself and deep trusts in God are kind of both one the same thing. Shades of that deep desire thing. When I trust the person that God has made me and I trust my heart in terms of, okay does this resonate with me, versus that. That's a good spiritual space. It's deep trust in God and deep trust in yourself both kind of working in concert.

One really concrete way to illustrate this, think about the story of the finding of the child Jesus in the temple. So you remember he's lost for three days as a young kid and they find him in the Jerusalem temple and there's obviously Mary and Joseph they're upset and on behalf of the parents basically Mary says, did you not know that you caused us basically tons of grief. And you remember what the Lord says. It's two parts to his response. So one thing he says, the other thing he does. And in order to get the point of the parable you need to be attentive to both. So first of all, when he says to the blessed mother is; "Did you not know? Did you not know I must be in my father's house, physically in the temple. But also doing his work. Did you not know that? Because I am, the son of God. You know that I'm called primarily to be the person that my father has called me to be which necessarily involves sharing in his mission. Did you not know I must be in my father's house?"

And the same thing goes with us. Your primary duty before God is to become the person that God is calling to be. And the forcefulness of that statement given by the child Jesus to his mother is, no one can interfere with that. That's why no one can really tell you what your vocation is. Not your spiritual director, not your parents not even the vocations director. It's just that's something unique and specific between you and the Lord. But at the same time, this is the second part. He goes home with them and is obedient to them where he grows in wisdom and stature in the concepts of the simple, humble ordinary life in the little nothing town of Nazareth. And that's really important too.

So yes, my primary duty is to become the person the father is calling me to be. But the child Jesus recognizes that the way that it happens is through various relationships I have in my life where I need to exercise obedience and humility and docility. That's why whenever people say, oh I want to become the person of God's calling to be but I don't want to listen to anybody. Yeah, it's not the Lord. There's a reason why you have parents. There's a reason why you have teachers. There's a reason why you have spiritual directors and vocation directors. God puts people in your

life, so you realize that salvation comes to you not individually, but it's meant to be found in community. God gives you people to guide you through relationships, again of obedience and humility and docility. So really kind of important to know.

## Be Honest to Yourself

Now in a particular concept of spiritual direction just want to hit on a couple points just with the remainder of time that we have. So first of all, to be honest to the best of your ability to kind of make clear to the spiritual director your hidden life. Which takes some getting used to for sure, but that's, that's the goal. So the idea is that the special director should know the interior state of your soul. And you got to realize a recurring temptation for all of us is to keep things hidden. Maybe for reasons of shame but also maybe because, oh, okay I know what the director's going to say. So what's the point of bringing up? The person's going to say this, and so what's the point.

Be bold. An important prerequisite to casting out demons I understand, in the concept of the right of exorcism is to like to name the demon. It's a similar thing with us. When you go to confession and when you go certainly to spiritual direction to kind of name your demons. There's a lot of situations where we're bothered, and we're thinking to ourselves, well I'm sad or I'm angry, or just off because of this nothing thing. And it shouldn't affect me in this way but it kind of does and I feel silly, and then I feel silly even with the idea of talking about it. Just bring it out in the open. Just be honest, be sincere, be brave. And you'll see a lot of things happen. Just by bringing the demon out in the open a lot of times that's enough to dispel the demon.

So that's an important tip. Another thing that's really important is to take seriously your plan of life. And by that I mean a serious habit of personal prayer and engagement and immersion in the sacramental and liturgical life of the church. So you got to have a serious habit of prayer. Ideally, I would say like 60 minutes before the Lord and the blessed sacrament if you can make it. Not to mention again liturgical, sacramental prayer, daily mass if you can manage it, regular confession, rosary all these different things.

## Stop Floating Through Life

Just to kind of drive the point home, I remember when I was on internship. My internship pastor would routinely say to me that, a lot of people want to come to him for a spiritual direction, but in retrospect they just want to talk about the spiritual life. And what he asked them or what he tries to discern early on in a relationship is, are you praying and are you doing something with your life? Are you working, are you a student, or are you just kind of floating through life? And if he finds that they're not doing anything and they're just kind of floating through life, he doesn't want to see them. If they're not praying he doesn't want to see them.

The way he explains it is, look if you don't have this mode of being. Whether it's working or being a student, which makes you attentive to the duty of the moment then what's your notion of love? It's just this, amorphous, merely conceptual thing. You need to have a thing which leads you to be attentive to a duty of the moment which of course corresponds to a duty to love. But more to the point when it comes to prayer. I always remember this, he said, the magic in terms of transformative grace doesn't happen when you attend talks and have conversations with your

director or whatever or even attending Zoom meetings like this. Transformation happens through prayer. Again, it's the work of the Holy Spirit. If you don't expose yourself regularly to personal and sacramental prayer but you say that I want to go God's way, something's kind of off there. You got to have this really habitual and regular attentiveness to the plan of life.

## Be Attentive to the Holy Spirit

A few more things. Just personally speaking, I think, something I've noticed over the years is that people they want to come for direction. They say they want to come for direction but they don't really want direction. Which sounds kind of funny but it happens all the time. People will come and again, they'll want to talk about the spiritual life but they don't really want to receive direction. You got to be kind of wary about that. I always think about, again one of my former spiritual directors, he said, even in the seminary, he had seminaries coming to him in the concepts of Lent saying like look for Lent for four years of Lent I want to do these really difficult things long lists of really difficult penitential practices shrouded in terms of prayer, fasting, and alms giving. And he said, recurring in response to these really long list of difficult things, his job would drop internally.

But just to test it, he would say, look say I have this really long list of difficult things, how about we do this short list of comparatively easier things. And then he would wait for their reaction. And if the people reacted with, gosh, I'm angry or I'm upset, or whatever, he would know, okay? It's not of the Lord, it's not of the Lord because a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit is obedience docility and humility. When you go the direction you want to make sure you have an openness to be directed. It doesn't mean like a slavish thing. But it's almost like when you go to confession. Maybe you know this, maybe you don't.

But when you go to confession the priest obviously will give a whole bunch of different bits of advice but it's not all going to be gold. Even if the priest says stuff which is like grounded in orthodoxy, if you reflect back on your own experiences of being a confession there are certain things which resonate with the heart, where clearly of all the things the priest said or the confessor said, that's the thing that the Holy Spirit wanted to say to me through the sacraments of the moments. And it's a similar thing with direction. You'll have the conversation with your spiritual director, but then in the concepts of prayer, in the concepts of the plan of life, certain things we brought to your attention by the power of the Holy Spirit. And so the idea is that, okay, am I attentive to again what the Holy Spirit is blessing in my life through the desires of my heart? And then that's how he guides me to be propelled forward.

## Have Intention and Purpose

One final thing, I'll end with this. So when it comes to direction, I think you want to be organized in your approach to sessions of spiritual direction. And again, maybe that goes without saying but perhaps not. It's not a matter of the director being generous or not generous with their time. It's a matter of you being purposeful and intentional in terms of your approach to a spiritual life. Just to go back to this notion of the mission of the church. The church is meant to be inherently missionary. Which means that, we're not just a bunch of people on a lazy lake and flotation device, just to quote Bishop Robert Barron. We're meant to have direction and purpose. It's not to

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go in a direction, with concentration camp mentality but just this idea of okay, when I go in, I want to become closer friends with Christ, the Lord. And I wanted to grow in freedom to become a person of love because I know that in doing so, I find joy I find new life. And if you approach spiritual direction and your spiritual life in general with that particular focus of intention and purpose and intentionality, you'll find you'll make great strides sooner rather than later.