



Important Qualities to Look for in a Spiritual Director

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PERHAPS NO WRITER HAS OUTLINED with such clarity and precision the technical qualities of a good spiritual director as have St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. She states that a good spiritual director should be learned, prudent, and experienced. St. John of the Cross also maintains that a director should be learned, prudent, and experienced, and he places great emphasis on experience.

Learning. The learning of a spiritual director should be extensive. In addition to having a profound knowledge of dogmatic theology, without which he would be exposed to error in regard to matters of faith, and of moral theology, without which he could not even fulfill the office of confessor, the spiritual director should have a thorough knowledge of ascetical and mystical theology. He should know, for example, the theological doctrine concerning Christian perfection, especially regarding such questions as the essence of perfection, the obligation to strive for perfection, the obstacles to perfection, the types of purgation, and the means of positive growth in virtue. He should have a detailed knowledge of the grades of prayer, the trials God usually sends to souls as they advance from the lower to the higher degrees of prayer, and the illusions and assaults of the devil that souls may encounter.

He also needs to be well versed in psychology so that he will have an understanding of various temperaments and characters, the influences to which the human personality is subjected, and the function of the emotions in the life of the individual. He should also know at least the basic principles of abnormal psychology and psychiatry so that he will be able to recognize mental unbalance and nervous or emotional disorders.

A priest should realize that, if he is not competent to direct a particular soul, he should advise the individual to go to someone who possesses the necessary knowledge. A priest incurs a grave responsibility before God if he attempts to direct a soul when he lacks sufficient knowledge. In recent times, with the wider dissemination of knowledge of mental illness, the priest must especially be warned that, as regards the field of psychiatry and the therapeutic methods proper to that branch of medicine, he is a mere "layman" and is incompetent to treat mental sickness. If he suspects that a penitent is suffering from a mental illness, he should direct that individual to a professional psychiatrist, just as readily as he would expect a psychiatrist to refer spiritual problems to a clergyman.

Prudence. This is one of the most important qualities for a spiritual director. It comprises three basic factors: *prudence in judgment, clarity in counseling, and firmness in exacting obedience.*

If a spiritual director lacks prudence, he is usually lacking several other virtues as well. Prudence enables an individual to do the right thing under given circumstances. Spiritual direction is not concerned with the general doctrine of spiritual theology, nor with theoretical situations that one may imagine, but with the individual soul placed in concrete circumstances at a given moment or in a given phase of spiritual growth.

The director is not called upon to make decisions regarding general doctrine; most people could find such answers in any standard manual of spiritual theology. The director's role is precisely to recognize the particular circumstances of a given situation and to give the advice needed at that moment. In order that the advice be prudent, a spiritual director must have the empathy by which he is able to place himself in the given circumstances and must have the patience to listen attentively. Of the various factors that militate against prudence, the following are especially common: lack of knowledge of the various states of the ascetical and mystical life, lack of understanding of human psychology, prejudice in regard to particular states of life or particular exercises of piety, lack of humility, excessive eagerness to make a judgment.

The second characteristic of prudence in the spiritual director is clarity in the advice given to the one directed and in the norms of conduct prescribed. In order that he may be clear in his direction, he must possess clarity in his own mind. In speaking to the soul he is directing, he should avoid any vague or indecisive language, but should always express himself in concrete and definite terms. He should resolve problems with a yes or a no and, if necessary, he should take the time for further deliberation before making his decision. If a soul perceives that the director is not sure of himself, it will lose confidence in him, and his direction will lose all its efficacy.

Moreover, the director should always be sincere and frank, without any partiality or selfish motives. It would be a serious fault if a director were to avoid offending the person directed lest that person should go to some other priest for direction. Those priests who place great importance in attracting and retaining a large number of followers are, by that very fact, disposing themselves to failure as spiritual directors. The director should never forget that he acts in the name of the Holy Spirit in directing souls, and that he must endeavor to treat those souls with kindness and understanding, but with firmness and utter frankness.

The director must also take care that he does not become the one who is directed. Some persons are extremely competent in getting their own way in everything, and even the director is in danger of falling under their power. For that reason, once the director is certain of his decision and the course that should be followed; he should state his mind with unyielding firmness. The individual must be convinced that there are only two alternatives: to obey or to find another director.

But the director should not forget that he should never demand of a soul anything that is incompatible with its state of life or vocation, its strength, or present condition. He should realize that there are some things that can be demanded of advanced souls but could never be required of beginners; that some things would be perfectly fitting in dealing with a priest or religious but not with a lay person. Excessive rigor does nothing but frighten souls and may cause them to

abandon the road to perfection. There is, therefore, a world of difference between firmness in demanding obedience and an excessive rigidity that discourages the soul of the penitent.

Experience. This is one of the most precious qualities of a good spiritual director. Even if he is less perfect in knowledge and somewhat deficient in prudence, experience can make up for these deficiencies. This does not mean that the experience of the director must necessarily flow from his own spiritual life, for he may obtain the benefits of experience from his observation and direction of others.

As regards the personal experience of the director, if it is a question of the guidance of the average Christian, he needs little more than the experience any priest can obtain from the faithful fulfillment of his duties in the sacred ministry. If it is a question of advanced souls who have already entered the mystical stages of the spiritual life, it is desirable that the priest himself have some experience of those higher stages. If he lacks this, a delicate sense of prudence, coupled with competent knowledge of the mystical states, will suffice in the majority of cases.

But personal experience alone is not sufficient to make a spiritual director as competent as he ought to be. There are many different paths by which the Holy Spirit can lead souls to the summit of sanctity. It would be a serious mistake for a director to attempt to lead all souls along the same path and to impose on them his own personal experiences, however beneficial they may have been for himself. The spiritual director should never forget that he is merely an instrument in the hands of the Holy Spirit and that his work must be entirely subjected to the Holy Spirit. If, through a lack of understanding of the variety of divine gifts and the multiplicity of roads to perfection, he were to force all souls to travel by the same road, he would become a veritable obstacle to the workings of grace in the soul.

Moral Qualities of a Spiritual Director

The moral qualities indispensable for a good spiritual director are piety, zeal for the sanctification of souls, humility, and disinterestedness. Because there are so few who possess all these qualities, there are also few competent spiritual directors. Yet it should not be thought that a person who is unable to find a perfect spiritual director will be unable to reach perfection. If the soul has an ardent desire for sanctification and strives faithfully to cooperate with all the graces God bestows, it will not fail to reach sanctity, even if the spiritual director does not possess all the qualities that are necessary. Indeed, such a soul could possibly attain perfection even without a spiritual director. It is not the director who makes saints; sanctification is essentially the work of God and the cooperation of the soul.

Piety. It is easy to understand the necessity of piety in a spiritual director, and St. John of the Cross insists upon this quality with great emphasis.⁽¹²⁾ The piety of the spiritual director should be permeated with the great truths of the Christian life. It should be eminently Christocentric and orientated to the glory of God. The director should likewise be animated with a profound sense of our adoptive filiation so that he can see God above all as a loving Father. He should have a most tender affection for Mary, the Mother of God and our mother. He should practice recollection and be detached from the things of the world. A director who is animated with these sentiments will be perfectly at home in the direction of souls. He will understand their language and will be able to communicate with them. His own experimental knowledge of God and divine things will give him an understanding that no acquired science could ever provide. There can be

no doubt whatever that piety is the first and most basic moral quality a good director of souls should possess.

Zeal for the Sanctification of Souls. The director's ardent zeal for the sanctification of souls is a natural consequence of his personal piety. Zeal, as St. Thomas explains, is an effect of intense love. The love of God impels us to labor for the extension of his kingdom in souls, and the love of those souls enables us to forget ourselves so that we think of nothing but of sanctifying them in and for God. This is the zeal that urged St. Paul to become all things to all men in order to gain all, and gave him that beautiful sympathy by which his whole being was united with others in their joys and sufferings and sorrows (cf. 1 Cor. 9:22). Lacking this ardent zeal, spiritual direction will lose its power because the director himself will have lost the stimulus for persevering in his efforts in spite of any difficulty, and the direction will become an oppressive burden.

Zeal, however, is always in danger of degenerating into a stubborn inflexibility that would be most harmful to the person who is being directed. For that reason it must be counterbalanced by a basic goodness and sweetness of character. The spiritual director should be animated by the same sentiments that animated our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

If the director is excessively rigorous and lacks compassion, he will discourage the soul and may even cause it to abandon the work of its sanctification. The director needs compassion especially in dealing with souls who are strongly tempted, who find it difficult to open their hearts to the director, or who are weak and inconstant by nature. For that reason the goodness and kindness of the spiritual director should enable him to be truly paternal in striving to form Christ in the souls whom God has entrusted to him.

Humility. The director also needs a profound humility, and this for three reasons. In the first place, God resists the proud and gives his grace to the humble. Of what value is all human knowledge and wisdom if one is lacking in humility? Second, the spiritual director needs humility so that he will distrust himself when necessary and not rush forward to solve difficulties without reflection. Humility will cause him to study and meditate and to consult others more learned than himself. In this way he will avoid many of the mistakes and embarrassments that occur to those who are too proud to doubt themselves. Third, humility in a director attracts souls, while pride repels them. In this respect also the director should imitate Christ, who said of himself that he is meek and humble of heart and that he seeks only the glory of his Father.

Disinterestedness. Lastly, the director should love souls in a disinterested manner, that is, he should not seek to guide them because of any self-satisfaction or consolation that he would receive, but simply and solely to lead them to God. St. Augustine states emphatically that those who lead the sheep of Christ as if they were their own and not Christ's, show that they love themselves and not the Lord. By means of this disinterested love the director will forestall many temptations that could arise in regard to pride and sensate affections, and he will be able to respect the liberty of the souls he directs.

We have already stated that both the director and the soul directed enjoy complete freedom. If this freedom is to be respected, the spiritual director must never show any annoyance if a soul leaves his direction, and he should certainly not look upon other directors as his rivals or competitors. In order to preserve his detachment and disinterest, the spiritual director should never, under any circumstances, accept any gifts as a recompense for the work he has done for a

particular soul, and he should never impose upon it any kind of sacrifice or mortification that is undertaken for his benefit.

Duties of a Spiritual Director

We have already mentioned that the function of the confessor and that of the spiritual director are not the same, although spiritual direction is frequently given in the confessional. The following seem to us to be the principal duties of a spiritual director:

1. *To know the soul that is directed.* The director should have a profound knowledge of the person he is to direct—character, temperament, good and evil inclinations, defects, likes and dislikes, powers and energy. He should have a knowledge of the individual's past life, at least along general lines, so that he will know the principal temptations to which the soul is subjected, means used to overcome those temptations, the graces received from God, the progress in virtue and by what means, the individual's present dispositions, the intensity of the desire to strive for perfection, the sacrifices the individual is willing to make in order to attain sanctity, and the obstacles and difficulties at the present time.

Nothing should be put in writing, either by the director or the one directed. It is easy for a penitent to imagine that such written accounts may one day rank with the autobiographies of certain saints, and there is always the possibility that they may fall into the hands of the wrong persons. Moreover, it is usually difficult to judge accurately a written account of one's personal experiences. Hence all information given to the director should be given orally. Unlike the confessor, who should normally believe whatever the penitent declares in the confessional, the spiritual director is not obliged to believe everything that he hears; indeed, there are occasions when he should examine and question the person before making any decision.

2. *To give instruction.* The spiritual director is expected to instruct the person under his guidance, thus making it possible for the individual to solve his or her own problems and difficulties whenever possible. Spiritual direction has as its goal the perfection of the individual, and the ideal is to enable the individual to walk or even to fly to the summit of sanctity. Like any form of counseling, spiritual direction should be given only when necessary. If the director dominates the individual excessively and makes that person come to him for decisions or permissions in unnecessary and sometimes foolish things, the subject becomes increasingly weaker and more dependent on the director. It is not unusual to find spiritual directors who violate this basic rule and nullify any good they could accomplish by making themselves the focal point of all their direction. The only exception would be in dealing with souls who are scrupulous or excessively curious, because with such persons the only method of treatment is to exact unquestioning obedience.

The instructions given by the director should avoid all controversial points in the theology of Christian perfection, all abstruse and disputed questions in speculative theology, and in general anything that would serve to sharpen the curiosity of the person directed without giving an understanding of spiritual matters. His instructions should be based on those fundamental points commonly accepted by all theologians rather than any particular devotion or spiritual exercise, which may be perfectly orthodox and commendable in itself but not suited to the taste or present need of the person directed. He will above all avoid any word or action that could be interpreted as disapproval or disdain of any other school of spirituality.

3. *To encourage the soul.* Few souls, even among those who are advanced, are so self-sufficient that they do not need to be encouraged. The spiritual director is not only called upon to give instructions and to solve difficulties, but also required to be a true educator who makes a positive contribution to the spiritual formation of the soul under his direction. .Sometimes the best possible way of contributing to this formation is by means of encouragement and stimulation. To that end, the director should endeavor to infuse in souls a healthy optimism founded on confidence in God and distrust of self. Souls must be made to realize that they are individually called to perfection and that they can attain it if they are faithful to the graces God gives them. If they fail or become discouraged, the director should lift them up and make them see that discouragement at their failure can be more harmful to their spiritual life than the failure itself.

It would be impossible to measure the harm that is done to souls by severe and harsh treatment from the director at the precise moment in which the disheartened individuals need assistance and confidence and encouragement to resume the difficult journey toward perfection. Frequently there is nothing that so animates a soul as to be received with kindness and understanding when it expected to be censured and scolded by the director.

4. *To control the spiritual life of the person directed.* The soul should not take any important step without the approval of the spiritual director. The plan of life, the method of prayer, the practices of piety, the practice of mortification, the work of the apostolate, the-material of the examination of conscience - all can be controlled by the spiritual director as the need arises. But the direction should be limited strictly to those things that concern the soul's growth in holiness. The spiritual director should take care that he does not become an intolerable burden to the person directed by interjecting his authority into those matters that are of petty consequence or are not related to the spiritual life.

By the same token, he should never allow the penitent to insert family matters, business affairs, or human preoccupations into the interviews or conferences. As soon as he perceives that the person is beginning to wander from the matter that pertains to the spiritual life, he should immediately and definitively put an end to such discussion. In order to prevent any such digression, the spiritual director should always be in control of the conversation and should insist that all matters be discussed as briefly and as directly as possible. If from the very start of the spiritual direction he restricts the individual to a succinct discussion of the matter at hand, he will avoid wasting much precious time and will prevent the direction from degenerating into pious conversation or purely social visits.

5. *To correct defects.* The spiritual director will have to know how to unite sweetness of character with the obligation of correcting the fault of the person directed. Although the purpose of spiritual .direction is eminently positive-to lead the soul to the height of perfection-he cannot achieve that goal without the negative aspect of uprooting defects. It does not suffice for the director to be concerned simply with the correction of voluntary faults; he must likewise understand and seek to remedy the predispositions to sin that are found in the individual person. Thus the precipitation, inconstancy, superficiality, and sensuality, which predispose to various sins, must be corrected so that the personality can be integrated and properly disposed for the practice of virtue. As regards voluntary faults, the spiritual director will never allow the individual to excuse himself for his fall by blaming them on his temperament or some external circumstance.

The particular examen will be utilized as a means of discovering the occasions that provided the temptation and the causes that disposed for the deliberate fault. Although he must avoid discouraging the individual, the director must make the subject realize that voluntary imperfections are incompatible with the perfection of charity.

6. *To direct by progressive stages.* Spiritual direction should be progressive and accommodated to the soul's degree of virtue, temperament, age, and circumstances of life. If the direction given is far above the needs and capacities of the soul, the soul will become disheartened and discouraged because more will be demanded of it than it is capable of doing. If, on the other hand, the soul has advanced beyond the type of direction that is given, the wings of the soul will be tied so that it cannot soar to God.

The director must, therefore, discern what are the needs of the soul at a given time, and then take care that the direction given will satisfy those needs. When he wishes to intensify the spiritual life of the soul, he may propose things by way of a trial or test, in order to see how the soul reacts. He need not and should not tell the soul that this is his method, but he should take every precaution not to hold the soul back when God wishes to lead it to a higher stage, and not force the soul to a higher stage when it is not yet ready to make the step. Growth in the spiritual life, like any other kind of growth, must be gradual and continuous.

Consequently, the spiritual director should know the various steps that mark the phases of growth from the beginning of the ascetical life to the transforming union, and in dealing with particular individuals he should expect that they will not remain static in any given phase, but that they will progress in gradual stages from one phase of the spiritual life to another. And although it is, true that God could take a soul in his arms, so to speak, and carry it from one stage of life to a much higher stage, this is not to be presumed in any given case, because it is not the ordinary working of God's grace.

7. *To observe secrecy.* The spiritual director is obligated to observe absolute secrecy in regard to the confidences he has received from the persons he directs, not only because many of these things are in some way connected with the internal forum, but also because the office of spiritual director obligates him to natural secrecy. The obligation to secrecy is especially important when it is a question of advanced souls who have experienced certain extraordinary phenomena and supernatural charisms. Although a director who comes into contact with such phenomena may have a strong inclination to discuss these things, he should remember that, as a rule, the narration of such things does nothing more than arouse morbid curiosity in others and dispose the director himself to feelings of pride and self-complacency.

The Person Directed

Since spiritual direction involves two persons, the success of the direction is not guaranteed by the mere fact that the director possesses all the necessary qualities and understands the purpose and function of spiritual direction. There are also definite requisites demanded of the soul that receives the spiritual direction, and these requisites flow, first of all, from the nature of spiritual direction itself and, secondly, from the relationship of the person directed with the spiritual director.

The direction itself cannot be successful unless the person directed possesses the following qualities:

1. *Sincerity*. This is the first and most important quality because without it any kind of direction is impossible. The spiritual director has to know all: temptations and weaknesses, desires and resolutions, good and evil inclinations, difficulties and trials, successes and failures. If he is to guide the soul to greater perfection, his hands are tied unless he has sufficient knowledge of the soul. Although the spiritual director need not also be the confessor, it would be impossible to give any spiritual direction if the director were to know nothing of the sins and imperfections of the individual.

One should reveal to the director whatever has any importance in regard to the spiritual life, but it is not necessary, and it would even be an abuse, to give him a detailed account of petty trifles and insignificant events. But what is revealed should be revealed with all frankness and sincerity, without condoning or excusing one's failures or exaggerating one's virtues.

2. *Obedience*. The director does not possess any authority by which he can demand strict obedience. Spiritual direction is a matter of perfect liberty on the part of the director and the person directed. By the very fact that a person seeks the help of the director, however, the two are not on an equal footing; the director is in a position of superiority as the master and guide.

Granted the voluntary submission of a person to the director, the director has a right to expect docility and obedience from the one directed. If these are lacking, there can be no spiritual direction. The soul should obey simply and without discussions or personal interpretations. And it should be noted that even worse than disobedience is the duplicity by which a soul would so ingratiate itself with the director that he would command it to do only the things the soul wants to do. This does not mean, however, that an individual may not take the initiative in order to make a manifestation of conscience or to point out particular difficulties or obstacles that the director perhaps did not see.

What is to be thought of the vow of obedience that some persons have taken to their spiritual director? In general, this is not advisable because of the disadvantages connected with it (i.e., too much responsibility for the director, anxiety for the person directed, too much passivity, unnecessary visits and interviews). In any case, the director should never take the initiative and suggest that a person make a vow of obedience to him, for this would be an abuse of his authority and his office. It would be an even greater abuse if a director were to add to the vow of obedience the promise never to change directors or never to consult anyone else.

But if an individual voluntarily and repeatedly requests permission to make a vow of obedience to the director (for an increase of merit), it could be permitted under the following circumstances: (a) that the vow be made for a short period of time and then renewed if desired; (b) that the person making the vow be perfectly normal, serene, and balanced; and (c) that the vow may be revoked if any difficulties or anxieties arise.

What is to be done if a conflict arises between the commands of a lawful superior and those of a spiritual director? One must unhesitatingly obey the superior, even if one has taken a vow of obedience to the director. It should be noted that private vows taken by religious are null and void without the approval of their superiors. And even if one has received permission of a

religious superior to make a vow of obedience to one's director, the superior never loses the power over the subject that is the result of religious profession.

3. *Perseverance.* The very nature of spiritual direction requires that the person directed should persevere in seeking the help and guidance of the director. Spiritual direction is rendered sterile by the frequent change of directors, by absenting oneself for long periods, by the constant change of spiritual exercises and means of sanctification, or by letting oneself be led by a caprice of the moment instead of following the instructions received from the director. When serious reasons justify a change, a person should not hesitate to find a new director, but that is something quite distinct from the fickleness and inconstancy manifested by some persons in changing from one director to another under the slightest pretext.

4. *Discretion.* The person receiving spiritual direction should never forget that, if the director is obliged to the seal of confession or to natural' secrecy, the one receiving direction is obliged to observe silence

concerning the director. As a general rule, a person should never reveal to others the particular admonitions or counsels received from the spiritual director. Such advice is given to a particular person in view of particular circumstances and does not apply to other persons living in different circumstances. Many directors have suffered greatly as the result of the indiscretion of their penitents, and this is sufficient reason for a director to refuse to continue the direction of such a person.

The principal qualities required of the person directed in relation to the director are respect, confidence, and supernatural love.

1. *Respect.* The person directed should see in the director not merely a man gifted with certain qualities, but the representative of God and of Christ. No matter what defects or perfections he may have in the natural order, the director must be regarded with respect precisely as a director and guide of the spiritual life. This profound respect will be most useful, not only in fostering the docility and obedience of the person directed, but also in serving as a brake to any excessive attachment or sensual affection for the director.

2. *Confidence.* In addition to respect, there should be absolute confidence in the director. It should be a confidence that is truly filial, and so absolute that one can always be perfectly natural and frank when dealing with the director. If the person directed is timid and selfconscious, the spiritual direction will never be completely efficacious.

3. *Supernatural love.* Once a person has cultivated a filial confidence toward the director, it frequently happens that a true love develops for the director. This is one of the most delicate problems in the relationship between the spiritual director and the person directed. There is nothing unlawful about a love for one's spiritual director so long as the love remains on a supernatural level. The lives of the saints give countless examples of this type of holy love. The difficulty lies in keeping the love on a purely supernatural level.

It is not at all unlikely that, in many instances, the love of a woman for her spiritual director is purely natural, proceeding from the normal affinity that exists between a woman and a man. The love could also be the result of the paternal interest and affection manifested by the director and a sense of gratitude for all that he has done for the individual. The danger that lies in the love of

friendship between a director and a woman is augmented by the fact that the director necessarily must know about matters of conscience, temptations, and even sins. Even if a director is convinced that there is no danger to himself or his penitent, he must always be conscious of the danger of scandal to others: As a consequence of all this, the person directed should make every effort to see the director as another Christ, to confer with him only when necessary, and scrupulously to avoid any manifestation of human affection.

In such matters, the director must have a most delicate conscience and a refined prudence, without going to the extreme of being excessively timid, suspicious, or gruff. If it is a question of a mutual sensible affection recognized by both parties, it would be more prudent for the individual to seek another spiritual director. The reason for this is not only the obvious danger that such a friendship may easily degenerate into sensual affection, but also that under those conditions it would be difficult to have true and efficacious spiritual direction.

If the director experiences a sensible affection for the person directed, he should examine it before God in order to discover whether such an affection disturbs his spirit, places him in danger of temptation, impedes the liberty he should have as a spiritual director, or is the source of some other danger. In this case, without revealing his feelings to the person directed, he should find some reasonable cause for abandoning the direction. If, in spite of the sensible affection, he does not experience any danger of temptation or any obstacle to the direction, he may proceed with the direction, but always keeping a prudent vigilance over himself.

If, finally, the director realizes that his penitent has developed a sensible affection for him and he himself does not return that affection, he should examine whether or not such an affection is disturbing the person's peace of soul or provoking temptation. If so, he should advise and even command that the individual seek another spiritual director. If there is no danger that the affection of the penitent may degenerate into a sensual love, he may continue the direction of that individual, but he should be very careful, lest by some imprudent word or act he should augment that human affection.

Selection of a Spiritual Director

Some persons (for example, cloistered nuns or persons who do not have access to several priests) are not in a position to choose their own director. In such cases one must do as well as possible with the person available and supply for any deficiencies by consulting books.

Apart from these particular cases, the choice of a spiritual director should be made in the following way. The first thing to be done is to ask God in prayer for the grace and light to proceed prudently in this important matter. Then one should investigate who among the available priests possesses the prudence, experience, and learning necessary for a good director. Under no circumstances should the choice be made because of one's natural inclinations toward a particular priest, although it should be recognized that it would be more difficult to open one's heart with confidence to a priest for whom one feels repugnance or antipathy. It is not advisable to ask the priest immediately to be the spiritual director, but one should test him for a time to see whether or not he will be able to fulfill the task of director.

It may sometimes be necessary to find a different spiritual director, although one should not readily believe that it is necessary to change directors. The reasons that are sufficiently serious

for changing one's spiritual director can be listed under two heads: if the direction has become useless or harmful. Spiritual direction becomes useless when, in spite of one's good will and sincere desire to advance in holiness, one does not feel toward the director the respect, confidence, and frankness that are indispensable for the efficacy of the spiritual direction. It would also be a futile effort if one perceives that the director never makes corrections of one's defects, does not encourage progress in virtue, does not solve problems, and shows no special interest in the sanctification of the individual.

The direction would be harmful if the person directed discovers that the director feeds the vanity and complacency of the individual, readily tolerates one's faults and imperfections, or judges things from a point of view that is too natural. Or if the director wastes time by frivolous conversations, by asking questions out of simple curiosity, or in discussing matters not related to growth in holiness. Or when one perceives that there has developed a strong sensible affection on the part of one or both; when the director imposes obligations that are beyond one's strength or incompatible with the duties of one's state in life; or when one perceives clearly that the advice given has been harmful instead of helpful. It should be noted, however, that one may easily be mistaken in making judgments concerning the competence of the director and the efficacy of the direction, and for that reason it is imperative that one deliberate before making a change in spiritual directors.

Would it be fitting to have several directors at the same time? Although there have been cases in which a person had several spiritual directors, in general it is not prudent to do so. There is always the danger of a difference of opinion and a conflict as a result of discrepancy in the advice given. Nevertheless, it is perfectly compatible with the unity of direction to seek advice from other competent persons when an especially difficult or extraordinary problem arises. As we have already stated, the director himself, if he is prudent and humble, will take the initiative and advise the penitent to consult another person. But apart from these special cases, the unity of spiritual direction must always be preserved, especially when dealing with scrupulous persons, and this unity is best preserved by having one director.

Spiritual Direction by Correspondence

The last question to be answered in the matter of spiritual direction concerns direction given by mail. If it is a question of an isolated case in which an individual requests advice or the solution of a problem by mail, there is no reason why such direction should not be given in a letter, if one observes the necessary precautions required whenever confidential matters are discussed by letter. If advice is requested by persons who already have their own spiritual director, great caution should be observed, especially if one is not sure of the good faith and discretion of the person who is asking advice. Sometimes individuals seek an answer in writing from another priest in order to show this letter to their own director and confront him with advice that is contrary to what he has given. If it is necessary for one priest to correct the advice given by another priest, this should be given as an amplification and further application of the advice already given rather than a complete and total rectification.

But what is to be said of spiritual direction given entirely by mail? It may happen in exceptional cases that it is the only way in which a person can receive spiritual direction, and even apart from these cases there are examples of direction by mail in the lives of the saints (for example, St. Francis de Sales and St. Paul of the Cross).

But the disadvantages far outnumber the advantages of spiritual direction by letter. It is morally impossible for the director to acquire an intimate knowledge of the person directed unless there is oral communication between them. It is very difficult to express and describe one's interior life in writing; it is equally difficult to understand another person from a written account. Moreover, the spiritual director is not able to make corrections immediately, as he could do if the person were actually speaking to him. Another disadvantage is that letters may easily fall into the hands of others.

In practice, the spiritual director should not be willing to accept the direction of a soul through correspondence unless he already knows the individual and the person has no other recourse. In the actual writing of letters, the director should never write a single line that would in any way constitute a violation of the seal of confession. If he does receive such material in letters from the person directed, he should destroy the letter as soon as he has read it and should severely forbid the individual from writing such things in the future, under penalty of discontinuing the spiritual direction.

Whatever direction is given in writing should be brief and objective. The spiritual director should scrupulously avoid any terms of affection, pet names, excessively cordial salutations, and anything that smacks of sentimentality. Those who have had experience in spiritual direction by mail have been most succinct in their answers, sometimes writing a few words on the letter itself and returning it to the sender without any signature.

If in some cases it is necessary to write at greater length, the director should confine himself to the problems or questions presented and to the instruction, exhortation, or correction the matter demands. He should observe the greatest prudence and delicacy, and should always remember that, in spite of his own good will, there is always the danger of false interpretations and rash judgments. His letters should always be such that he never has anything to fear in this respect. Lastly, both he and the person directed must avoid any kind of secret or clandestine correspondence.

This is an excerpt of Fr. Jordan Aumann, O.P.'s classic work, *Spiritual Theology*, now out of print, though available in its entirety online, courtesy of the Central Province of the Dominican Friars: <http://www.domcentral.org/study/aumann>.