

Women and Diaconal Ministry: Spiritual Direction

Sister Rebecca Cown

Today I will be sharing with you a glimpse into the process of spiritual direction as I have experienced it over many years. Time will not permit me to follow the outline you have in your folders, but it may serve to give those of you interested in this topic, whether for personal reasons or for ministerial purposes, some 'jump off points for further sharing and discussion.

Personal Experience of Spiritual Direction

I have lived forty years in monastic life. It is from this background and perspective that I will talk about my own experience. My life's journey has taken me over a number of countries: born American, Roman Catholic, with military background and living within the four corners of the USA and abroad, in Guam, Quebec, Hong Kong, Switzerland and France. My first experience of spiritual direction was during my 10 years teaching in HK. I profited immensely from meeting with a retired French Bishop of Mongolia- a truly wise and holy person whose spiritual teaching and pastoral care have influenced me to this day. My 2nd most important spiritual guide (a true spiritual mother) was the Prioress of a monastery in France, where I was a member for twelve years. From its very beginnings it found its roots in the early Desert Tradition with a special focus on the Apophthegmata (i.e. the Sayings of the Desert Elders) and the spiritual guidance correspondence of the Gaza elders, Barsanuphius and John. There I was steeped in the Liturgical, monastic spiritual life, and practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church. After 5 years the prioress invited me to participate in the spiritual formation of the novices and retreatants, but I also remained accountable to her for my own personal journey as well as for the spiritual accompaniment of others. It is always difficult to express in words what I received from these two spiritual guides. I not only benefitted from their spiritual guidance, but also received invaluable teaching. I learned crucial importance of self-knowledge and discernment. It was an extraordinary gift to find elders or guides who are competent and willing to listen to disclosure of thoughts (logismoi). To

be able to lay before them my thoughts, feelings and at times, painful crises, was freeing, healing, and enlightening. But most of all, it deepened my awareness of the Presence of God as loving and compassionate despite my sense of unworthiness but also because of it.

Spiritual awakening:

Fast forward to the present at New Skete Monastery in Cambridge, NY: we frequently encounter people who are seriously questioning: “Who am I? What is my purpose in life? Why am I here?” When I listen to them I often sense in them an awakening to the Mystery of God and even a thirst for God. Metropolitan Kallistos Ware comments on this becoming open to the transcendent:

‘The boundaries of the human person are extremely wide; each of us knows very little about his/her true deep self. Through our faculties of perception, outward and inward, through our memory and through the power of the unconscious, we range widely over space, we stretch backward and forward in time, and we reach out beyond space and time into eternity. “Within the heart are unfathomable depths,” says St. Macarius.’ (Cf. *The Orthodox Way*: by M. Kallistos Ware p. 25)

Unless there is such an initial awakening to grace it is unlikely that anyone would desire spiritual direction. It is the beginning of a transforming power in one’s life. In our Orthodox tradition we call this ‘awakening to the perception of God within’, an invitation to what we long for most in life: communion with God, Theosis or Deification. At the same time we still find ourselves caught up in controlling relationships, personal agendas, affirming our egos and in fixating on the surface of life, often unaware of the subtle currents of the Spirit within. All of this impels certain people to seek out a spiritual guide and this existential tension can lead to metanoia, a profound, healthy re-examination of self, a change in mind and heart and eventually in the way one is living.

What is Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual direction is quite simply a path enabling us to perceive and respond to the Holy Spirit in the depth of our being. One of my own teachers said, “My job as spiritual guide is to keep my students

from tripping over the rocks in the road. As a student, my teacher keeps me from tripping over the rocks in the road.” “My teachers help me to stay on the path.

It is important to note that spiritual direction is not psychotherapy, although it might include elements of counseling. Spiritual direction does deal with the same raw material, so to speak, as with therapy, but the aim and method are very different.

Also, spiritual direction is not sacramental confession. Sacramental confession is more of a process of looking back and expressing contrition before God, whereas the orientation of Spiritual direction is more forward looking. Although, it may also include a look at where we have been in order to move forward.

Terminology:

With regard to the terminology of director/directée, I often hear the terms spiritual accompaniment but the one most frequent seems to be spiritual direction. Our Orthodox tradition has coined the terms: Spiritual Mother or Father and the generic Spiritual Elder. For the sake of brevity I will use the terms, director/directée, all the while knowing that the ultimate Director is the Spirit of God. Someone accompanies us on the spiritual path as we articulate our experiences, reveal our thoughts (logismoi) and bring to light how we are being invited to greater life.

Do we really need a spiritual director?

There are many deceptions and dangers for those who wish to walk the spiritual path. “One who climbs a mountain for the first time needs to follow a known route, and needs a companion and guide, who has been there before and is familiar with the way. (cf. Spiritual Father in the Orthodox Church. I Cross Currents 24, 1974, p. 296)

Over the years I have also encountered people who want the spiritual director to tell them what to do. They do not want to take responsibility for their own lives. It is easier to follow someone else’s

second hand path than to do the hard work of forming a mature conscience, and developing good judgment.

A spiritual director is not a law-giver. Nor is the spiritual director out to get disciples. He/she points and leads to the person of Christ Jesus—his life, example and teaching as well as the entire Paschal mystery. The process is also shaped by how I live my own life, and by being held accountable by someone who has travelled here before me.

Traps and abuses:

There are persons who have recourse to a spiritual director or an elder who has the need to control or is fascinated with power. This can infect any relationship. At present we are hearing a good deal about pastoral abuse, especially in regards to women. This is one of the reasons that we need women as spiritual directors! Let's face it: there are false and incompetent guides out there. Persons seeking spiritual direction must also learn to discern and follow their personal conscience and intuition. Paul Evdokimov writes: "A spiritual father [or mother] is never a director of conscience. Both director and directée place themselves in the school of truth. There is no room for idolatry, even if he or she is a saint.

Training for Spiritual Direction:

Spiritual direction is now talked about very much here in American, across the religious spectrum: should spiritual direction be taught in our colleges or seminaries? One suggestion would be to have classes on this topic whereby we familiarize ourselves with the writings on this subject beginning with the writings of St Antony the Great and continuing up to the present day. Another suggestion would be to have some training in psychology and human development. However, it must be understood that studying about spiritual direction, even getting a degree, does not make one a spiritual director. It is a gift of God.

Anyone engaged in the pastoral ministries, whether confessor or spiritual guide must be engaged in the spiritual path themselves. It means doing the inner work on one's own passions-greed, lust, anger, vanity, pride etc. We need to grow in our self-awareness and self-knowledge. As a guide, one must be guided, accountable, led, heard, and directed in this growth process. And last but not least, we must be persons of prayer, contemplation, communion with God and a regular liturgical life and sacramental life.

In closing this talk where we have just barely skimmed the surface, I will leave you with a short list of books, articles and conferences found on the internet that I recommend in order to expand, or read in context, some of what I have spoken about today.

Suggested Books or resources for further reading on Spiritual Direction:

The Inner Kingdom by Bishop Kallistos Ware: The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity: pages 127-151

Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West: From Egypt to Palestine: Discerning a Thread of Spiritual Direction, by John Chryssavgis: pages 299-315

Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction: by John Chryssavgis

Ages of the Spiritual Life: by Paul Evdokimov

Light Through Darkness: The Orthodox Tradition by John Chryssavgis

Two excellent conferences that can be obtained free of charge via the internet:

The Illumined Heart #157 The Spiritual Guide in Eastern Orthodoxy, Ancient Faith Radio: (Host Kevin Allen speaks with Fr. Steven Tschlis about the role of the spiritual guide-father or mother-in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition.)

The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity (Part 1) by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware (www.pravmir.com)