

The Spiritual Director:
A Guide and Mentor

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“A brother asked Abba Poemen, ‘Some brothers live with me; do you want me to be in charge of them?’ The old man said to him, ‘No, just work first and foremost, and if they want to live like you, they will see to it themselves.’ The brother said to him, ‘But it is they themselves, Father who want me to be in charge of them.’ The old man said to him, ‘No, be their example, not their legislator.’” (Ward 1975, 191)

This little story from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers speaks about the relationship between the spiritual child and the spiritual director. Abba Poemen tells his brother that he should not be the legislator for others but rather lead them by example. He suggests that the brother will teach and guide his disciples through his own actions and how he leads his own life. This is the model that spiritual directors in society, outside of a monastic setting, should employ to guide and teach their spiritual children.

This paper will examine the role of the spiritual director in relation to the spiritual child by examining the function of obedience for the laity, the authority of the church and its leaders, and finally various types of spiritual guidance. Throughout the paper the term “spiritual director” will be used to refer to either a spiritual father or a spiritual mother. In cases where a source is quoted, the term that the quoted author uses will be kept.

Obedience is not something that is readily accepted in American society of the 21st century. While society encourages one to be free, personally independent, financially stable and dependant only on oneself and one’s achievements, our church takes the opposite stand. The church says that one should be obedient to the teachings of the church and its leaders, and therefore obedient to the one true God, our Father in heaven. In John 14:15, Christ says, “If you love me, keep My commandments.” (NKJV) Through our love for Christ, we follow the commandments and teachings that He gave us, and by following those commandments

and teachings we show the love that we have for God. Saint Paisios Velichkovsky said, “The keeping of God’s commandments and His words is nothing else than perfect obedience toward Christ the Lord.” (Chrysostomos 1984, 43) Christ’s command is to above all put God first, then serve others, then lastly ourselves. When Christ said to deny oneself, take up one’s cross, and follow Him, he meant that one must put aside their own will and follow the example of Christ’s love for others and obedience to the will of His Father in heaven (Matthew 16:24, NKJV). Christ emphasizes this even more in Mark 12:30-31 when he minds us of the two greatest commandments: to love God and to love one’s neighbor. St. John Climacus says in the step four of his famous treatise “Obedience is absolute renunciation of our own life...” (Climacus 2001, 21). To be obedient to someone, one first must choose to freely deny their own life and accept the guidance of another.

As humans we are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27, NJB). Jesus Christ’s entire ministry on earth is an example of obedience and humility. Beginning with His incarnation, we see an act of obedience toward the Father. Jesus Christ was obedient to His mother at the wedding of Cana (John 2:3-5), to his cousin St. John the Baptist (Matthew 3:13-15), to the Roman authorities (Mark 12:13-17) never wishing harm towards them (John 18:11). When St. Paul speaks of spiritual warfare, he says that we must bring every thought “into captivity to the obedience of Christ...” (2 Cor 10:5, NKJV) We are called to lead a life of obedience, just as Christ did while He was on earth.

Humans are, by their nature, in search of healing and wholeness. As creatures in a fallen world where sin abounds, becoming whole again spiritually and physically is a natural goal for humans. While not all humans are Christians, all look for this in some way, whether through modern medicine and surgery, through greed, through various religions and many

other ways. The words “wholeness” and “holiness” derive from the same Greek word (*holos*) showing that to become holy (one with God, or *theosis*) is similar to becoming whole or complete (Allen 2000, 9) The act of *theosis*, or becoming one with God, is an act that is natural to humans. The role of the spiritual director is precisely this, and “the same as that of the Gospel itself: to lead individuals deeper and deeper into the struggle for the Christian life.” (Allen 2000, 4)

It is also natural for humans for this process to be done in the atmosphere of the community. Humans are relational beings, and St. Paul describes each person as being a member of the body of Christ, each with one’s own duties and responsibilities. (1 Corinthians 12:1-31) St. Basil in his Longer Rules (Question 24) describes this as a natural process that one lives in a community with obedience towards a superior. Although he was referring to the context of a monastic community, it is still similar to the laity being obedient to a spiritual director.

Staretz Silouan tells us that when one gives themselves up in obedience to the will of God, the Lord alone dwells in one’s soul. “When the soul is entirely given over to the will of God the Lord Himself takes her in hand and the soul learns directly from God.” (Sophrony 1974, 68) Being obedient to God’s commandments and the church’s teaching will help the lay person lead a more fruitful life because he/she will be guided by the Holy Spirit in all that he/she does. Through obedience to God’s commandments one will experience freedom from the worries, temptations, and cares of the world. St. Symeon the New Theologian says “He who gives himself in the hand of a good teacher will have no such worries, but will live without anxiety and be saved in Christ Jesus our Lord...” (Symeon 1980, 237) Obedience is necessary because it is a denial of our self-will, and acceptance of the other. If the other that

we accept is leading us on the path toward Christ, then we are following God's commandment to deny oneself. St. John Climacus says that without obedience "no one subject to passions will see the Lord." (Climacus 2001, 23)

The institution of the Church is set up with clergy in hierachal positions of church governance. This authority is through the laying on of hands that has been passed on in successive generations from the Apostles and from Christ Himself. The laity are called to be obedient to the clergy and leaders of the church that have been appointed and elected, and likewise clergy are called to be obedient to the hierarchy of clergy above them. "Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God." (Romans 13:1, NKJV) Ultimately, all humans, laity and clergy alike, are called to be obedient to God's commandments and His Word. St. Paul says that one must "...be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ..." (Ephesians 6:5, NKJV) The leaders of the church are representatives of Christ, and therefore require our obedience to them.

Christ always invited people and never insisted; using the simple words "Follow me." (Matthew 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 16:24, 19:21, NKJV) One's obedience to the church is a voluntary obedience that one chooses using their free-will. One is never forced or required to believe in Him or to follow the teachings of the church. It is a voluntary choice. Once the choice to follow Christ is made, the path is set forth for each Christian by the Church and its leaders, but the daily choices required to live a Christian life are up to the individual person. One will never be forced into acting a certain way to be a Christian.

The obedience we are called to follow is not to the person specifically, but rather to the teachings of Christ that these leaders model in their lives. If we are to be obedient to the person more so than Christ and His commandments we risk making an idol of the person and taking the place of God. This authority, however, was not meant to be a controlling force that limited what one was allowed to do. The obedience that we learn from the hierarchy of the church and from our spiritual directors must be obedience to Christ, and not to the specific person.

The spiritual director is to assist the laity on their journey by helping to provide discernment and guidance. The spiritual director is never meant to be a commanding force that gives permission or restricts the laity from doing what they choose. There is a difference between the authority that the clergy have to lead the church, and the responsibility of the spiritual director to mentor and guide his spiritual child. "The spiritual Father does not coerce, he does not give orders; rather, he takes the spiritual child by the hand and *leads* the way, gently but firmly." (Chrysostomos 1984, 45) While the clergy have the responsibility to administer the sacraments according to the canons and Traditions of the church, the spiritual director serves as a guide for the spiritual child who mentors him/her along their Christian journey.

The relationship of the spiritual director and child must be in the context of love and a close personal relationship, similar to the relationship of a biological parent and child. St. John Climacus describes the spiritual director as "*anadochos*," which is the term used for the sponsor or god-parent at Baptism and signifying the one who assumes responsibility for another." (Chryssavgis 2000, 53) Those entrusted to be spiritual fathers and mothers are to lead by example, and not by command. The caution here is to not create an idol out of the

spiritual director, even those that have been recognized as saints. “‘Call no one father’ means that all fatherhood shares in the fatherhood of God, that all obedience is obedience to the Father’s will...” (Evdokimov 1966, 128) One must remember that both the spiritual director and child are on the path towards God, and “are subject to the same conditions and commandments, both accountable before the living God” though the spiritual director would be farther along the path than the child. (Chryssavgis 2000, 79) When a spiritual director becomes too commanding and forgets to lead with love and by example, the director ceases to follow the commandments of God himself/herself. According to Abba Mius of Belos, “Obedience responds to obedience”, not to authority. (Ward 1975, 150) If a person tries unjustly to claim authority and demand obedience to oneself, one has ceased to be obedient to their spiritual director and more importantly, to the commandments of God.

A spiritual director is not necessarily one who is ordained to the Holy Orders. Any person, ordained, monastic, or laity, male or female, can be a spiritual director. The one key is that the person is him or herself living a Christian life and has been recognized of doing so by others. Fr. Alexander Elchaninov said “You cannot cure the soul of others or ‘help people’, without having changed yourself. You cannot put in order the spiritual economy of others, so long as there is chaos in your own soul. You cannot bring peace to others if you do not have it yourself.” (Elchaninov 1967, 218) One must first achieve the virtues of the Christian life, before one can guide others on that path. There is no certain requirement to determine when the spiritual director has attained a certain state, except for when others recognize that person to leading a holy life. St. Seraphim of Sarov teaches “Acquire a peaceful spirit and then thousands of others around you will be saved.” (Ware 2000, 133) Once a person has successfully traveled the path of spiritual achievement, then others will

recognize their holiness and want to follow in their footsteps. “Thus it is his spiritual children who reveal the elder to himself.” (Ware 2000, 130)

Fr. Alexey Young points out that there is a difference between one who is an elder and a spiritual director. The elder is a prophetic figure in the church, and “as such, he must be obeyed as one who truly reveals the will of God to others.” (Chrysostomos 1984, 44) One must be careful not to confuse the function of the elder and spiritual director. While some spiritual directors may be blessed with special gifts of the Holy Spirit, other spiritual directors may only be able to provide the necessary guidance needed. (Chryssavgis 2000, 57) Different people are given different talents, and therefore expected to hold different roles. The role of the prophetic elder is rare and much less common, especially in the parish setting.

In the monastic setting, the abbot or abbess of the monastery is the spiritual director for that community. In most parish settings, the parish priest assumes the role of the spiritual director because of a lack of other spiritual leaders in local parish communities. There is also the problem that sometimes a spiritual director who is not the parish priest will give different direction than the parish priest. One must remember that the parish priest is the leader of the community, and if one is a member of that community than that person can not be disobedient to the leader of the parish. However there are some that seek out other spiritual directors who are not their own parish priest, and they must be aware of the potential conflict that could arise.

There is also a difference between the father confessor and the spiritual director. Again, if the spiritual director is an ordained clergyman, he may also serve as the father confessor, but the two are not dependent on each other. The Sacrament of Confession is essentially a retrospective act where one confesses sins that have already been committed. In

contrast, spiritual direction is a preventative act where the focus is on future decision making. (Allen 2000, 21) The spiritual child discusses his thoughts (*logismoi*) and ideas with the spiritual director, and the director will “discern secret dangers or significant signs” that the spiritual child has unknowingly revealed to his/her spiritual director. (Ware 2000, 136) While one could say that this is part of the confession process, it is not necessarily part of the sacrament of confession where one receives absolution.

A healthy relationship of guidance and advice of the spiritual director with the spiritual child is necessary for every Christian. St. Basil the Great encourages each person to find a spiritual director “who may serve you as a sure guide in the work of leading a holy life” and warns that “to believe that one does not need counsel is great pride.” (Allen 2000, 35) Dorotheos of Gaza, who agrees with St. Basil, says, “I know of no falling away of a monk which did not come from his reliance on his own sentiments. Nothing is more pitiful, nothing more disastrous than to be one’s own [spiritual] director.” (Dorotheos 1977, 253) It is very hard for one to lead a Christian life if they do not have a guide to help them along the way.

The sacrament of confession and absolution can not be reduced to a “magical act” that does not require any work. True *metanoia* requires a change of direction and a change in future actions. The discussions that one would have with one’s spiritual director help them fight their *logismoi* and how to make better choices in the future to lead a more holy life. Spiritual guidance is an ongoing process that takes place throughout one’s life. One can never reach a state of godliness, and therefore would always be striving to attain that stage until one’s death.

Through a trusting relationship, the spiritual child is mentored and guided by the spiritual director in both word and action. St. Basil in question 43 of the Longer Rules encourages the spiritual leader to lead by example “making his own life a shining example for the fulfillment of every commandment of the Lord, so as to leave no cause for his disciples to believe that the Lord’s commandment is unattainable or contemptible.” (Chryssavgis 2000, 160) St. Basil continues by saying that it is of primary importance for the spiritual director to lead with love and humility for Christ that “even when he is silent, the example of his actions may be more effective instruction than any words.” (Chryssavgis 2000, 160) St. Paul also gives us this example of leading by example when he says “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1, NKJV) It is of primary importance for the spiritual director to lead by example because not only is it the best way to teach something, but because both the spiritual child and director are on the same path of growing closer to God.

One is not forced into a relationship or in decision making. The spiritual child engages in a relationship with the spiritual director voluntarily. A spiritual director never longs to give someone advice, but rather recognizes their own inadequacies and only offers advice to others when asked. St. Ignatios Brianchaninov of the 19th century says “The voluntary giving of advice is a sign that we regard ourselves as possessed of spiritual knowledge and worth, which is a clear sign of pride and self deception.” (Brianchaninov 1982, 49) In addition, the spiritual director is not necessarily always right. St. Basil says “...it is necessary for the other brothers to admonish him [the superior] if the superior is suspected of any offense.” (Chryssavgis 2000, 158) Of course this must be done with respect and love, but it shows that the spiritual director in no way is infallible. St. Ephraim the Syrian also

warns, “If you are not yet in a great measure inflamed with the Holy Spirit, do not aspire to hear another man’s thoughts.” (Allen 2000, 36)

Just as the laity, or the royal priesthood, cannot exist without the ordained priesthood, the spiritual director and the spiritual child have a relationship that is dependent on each other. The spiritual child has the free will to choose whatever he/she wants to do. Within the context of a loving Christian relationship with the spiritual director, the spiritual child is guided along the path. The spiritual director helps the spiritual child discern this path, but the ultimate decision is up to the spiritual child. (Chryssavgis 2000, 102) If the spiritual child were not given the freedom to make his or her own decisions, “it reduces the disciple to an infantile and even subhuman level, depriving him or her of all power and judgment and moral choice; and it encourages the teacher to claim an authority which belongs to God alone.” (Ware 2000, 142) As stated earlier, the spiritual children are the ones who go to the spiritual director and recognize him or her as a spiritual director.

A personal relationship is necessary between the spiritual director and child. There is no replacement for this type of relationship. “Many things cannot be said in words, but can only be conveyed through a direct personal encounter.” (Ware 2000, 146) Each spiritual child is different, and needs different guidance and encouragement along their journey. Having a unique personal relationship with each spiritual child protects against legalism and strict adherence to the letter of the law. The relationship must be customized for the specific persons involved and situations so that the spiritual child can learn how to discover the truth for his/her own self. The spiritual director’s role is to guide him/her, not to force their free will.

There are six gifts that the spiritual guide possesses.¹ The first gift is insight and discernment (*diakrisis*) which is a spiritual attribute, not a psychic one. The use of silence and carefully chosen words with which to speak is necessary, but also listening that is done very attentively. The second gift is the ability to love others and to have compassion on them. It is the spiritual director's "task to pray for them, and his constant intercession on their behalf is more important to them than any words of counsel." (Ware 2000, 138) For language purposes of this paper, the term spiritual director was used, but in real life one would refer to their director as either a spiritual father or spiritual mother as appropriate. It is very important to recognize the full meaning of the word "father" or "mother" in the spiritual context. The third gift is the ability to transform the human environment. This refers to helping the spiritual child see the world as God created it, and as God wants it to be like once again. The fourth gift is patience. One must not try to change a person too quickly, but to be patient with them and move with them at the pace at which they are able to move. The fifth gift is frankness and honesty. Honesty is necessary on both sides of the relationship to allow for deep sincere discussion and analysis of thoughts. Without honesty, the conversation and more importantly relationship between the spiritual director and child will stay at a cursory level. The sixth gift is detachment so that the spiritual director is guided only by the will of God and the Holy Spirit and not by any other forces or temptations. These gifts are necessary for the spiritual director to be able to function in his/her role.

Jordan Aumann, a modern day writer who focuses on the topic of spiritual direction suggests seven duties that the director must do or know. They are 1) excellent knowledge of the spiritual child's character, personality, and person; 2) ability to offer instruction

¹ Based on Ware's three gifts of the spiritual guide (Ware 2000, 135-140) and Alan Jones' five qualifications of the spiritual director (Allen 2000, 53-54)

whenever possible; 3) offer encouragement and confidence in God; 4) ability to exercise control in directing the spiritual child; 5) ability to correct the spiritual child's faults without being offensive; 6) ability to maintain a progression in the spiritual life of the child; and 7) observe confidentiality. He also suggests that the spiritual child must exercise sincerity, obedience, perseverance, and discretion. (Allen 2000, 55)

All human beings have been given the gift of free-will from God. In one's daily struggle to be a Christian, one must be able to make the appropriate decisions using one's free-will to follow Christ. The role of the spiritual director is to help guide the spiritual child learn *how* to make those decisions. Bishop Ignatios Brianchaninov warns, "Conceited and self-opinionated people love to teach and give directions. ...It does not occur to them that they can cause irreparable damage to their neighbor by their misguided advice...they want to make an impression on the beginner, and subject him morally to themselves. They want human praise." (Brianchaninov 1982, 49) The advice and guidance that the spiritual director offers the spiritual child must be simply that, advice and guidance. For each person, the advice they receive and give will be different because everyone is at a different place on the journey, but all on the same journey toward Christ. St. Mark the Ascetic says "one who gives orders so as to secretly fulfill his own will is an adulterer!" (Chryssavgis 2000, 125)

Bishop Ignatios Brianchaninov reminds us that one must always follow the will of God, and not the will of a fallen-human, whether it is one's own fallen will or that of the spiritual director. Elder Macarius encourages his spiritual child to "Pray that God may grant me [Macarius] the ability to say the right words which will bring you [the spiritual child] help." (Macarius 1975, 26) Here we clearly see the fact that the spiritual child must always follow the will of God, and it is the spiritual director who merely helps the child to discern

and find the will of God. One cannot offer one's own prideful knowledge to the spiritual child. Clergy who think that they are superior to others are 'a delusion' and lack humility. (Chryssavgis 2000, 124)

The spiritual director cannot claim that the spiritual child should follow him or her with "blind obedience" for this belongs only to God alone. Thomas Merton suggests the terms "uncritical" or "unquestioning" to better describe the obedience for the spiritual child to the spiritual director. This is based on the spiritual child truly believing that the spiritual director knows the best way for the spiritual child to grow closer to Christ. (Allen 2000, 45) However, even if the spiritual child freely chooses to accept this type of obedience, and even if the spiritual director truly knows the way in which the child will walk, the spiritual child is unable to make decisions on his or her own. The role of the spiritual director and child is to help the child learn how to make sound decisions regarding their Christian life.

St. Symeon the New Theologian who comes from a monastic setting is strongly in favor of a spiritual director and child relationship. He says one must obey the spiritual director "as though he were God Himself, whose instruction you carry out without hesitation, even if what he enjoins on you appears to you to be repugnant and harmful." (Symeon 1980, 232) This advice that he offers is meant for the monastic setting where the abbot or abbess is completely responsible for the spiritual and physical care of the community. His advice is not applicable to the laity or clergy living in the world. However, he does continue and say that it is better to "be called a disciple of a disciple rather than to live by your own devices and gather the worthless fruits of your own will." (Symeon 1980, 232) St. Symeon recognizes that even for the laity, a spiritual director is needed and nothing is worse than a Christian that is on their own without a guide.

Monastic communities are communities specifically set apart from society as places of continuous and advanced prayer and devotion to God. Each monastic there has taken vows of commitment to the abbot or superior of the monastery and to a certain way of life. The abbot is responsible for the members of his or her community both physically and spiritually. Elder Ephraim of Katounakia says “Without the blessing of the elder, don’t take a step. Don’t go anywhere without a blessing, so that God will be with you.” (Joseph 2003, 86) Those in the laity however, have not committed to this advanced lifestyle of prayer and commitment towards God. The spiritual director must not treat the spiritual child as if he or she is in a monastic setting, or expect them to act in such a way. Fr. Alexander Men, a 20th century Russian priest, insisted that the spiritual child be obedient to the spiritual director as they would in the monastic setting. However, he says that this model is not applicable in the setting of a parish priest and parishioner. (Ware 2000, 142) Parish priests should not mimic services, attitudes, and disciplines as observed in monastic communities when they are in a parish setting.

When a suitable spiritual director cannot be found for whatever reason, the fathers of the church encourage us to look at the Holy Scripture and the words of the Lord Himself. Other options include making pilgrimage visits to holy sites such as Jerusalem, Mount Athos, monasteries, or shrines of saints. (Ware 2000, 147) While these other options do not take the place of a personal relationship with a spiritual director, they do offer something until a director is found.

There is also extreme flexibility with the relationship of the spiritual director. One may see one’s spiritual director every day and live with them, or one may only see him or her once a month, or even once a year. There is no specific guideline, and for each person it will

be different. Many people fail to find a spiritual guide because they are looking for a certain type. The spiritual director will be a unique type for each person, and the relationship that they have will certainly be unique. (Ware 2000, 148-149)

As pointed out in this paper, there is a necessity for each Christian to have a relationship with a spiritual director. One is called to be obedient to the church which through Christ has been established to have authority on earth. Through one's free-will one will voluntarily choose to participate in a loving caring relationship with an experienced spiritual director who will guide and advise one along one's daily struggle to Christ. Through proper obedience to God's commandments and through discernment of the advice and guidance of the spiritual director, the laity will better live a Christian life of obedience leading to their salvation.

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