

DIRECTOR'S CORNER

Spiritual Direction in Courage by Fr. John Harvey, OSFS

In the Courage Handbook, it is recommended that members seek out a spiritual director, and in the early days of Courage (1980-1983), quite a number of the South Ferry group did so. But I believe that in more recent years, this recommendation has been largely ignored by many members. Since Courage is stressing the development of spiritual life, it should try to understand the nature of spiritual direction and the qualities of a spiritual director. Perhaps the best way to explain spiritual direction is to compare it with the pastoral guidance of the priest-confessor, who hears the confession of the penitent and suggests ways of handling temptations and avoiding serious occasions of sin. At times, he will instruct the penitent about his duties in his particular vocation.

The spiritual director, on the other hand, is concerned with helping the directee to move to a higher plane of spirituality, beyond the keeping of the Ten Commandments. Through meditation, spiritual reading, daily Rosary, the recitation of the Divine Office, and Holy Mass, as often as possible, the directee seeks to draw closer to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The directee will usually follow one of the many approaches to Christ found in different schools of spirituality: the Benedictine, the Carmelite, the Franciscan, the Dominican, the Salesian, etc. Each school has a particular spirit, but all help the individual to strengthen his determination to follow Christ.

In practice, the directee meets with his spiritual director about once a month. He opens his heart to the spiritual director to receive guidance on his life in general, and especially on his prayer life. Often, the spiritual director is a priest, although there are also competent spiritual directors who are nuns, religious brothers and lay persons.

The Qualities of A Spiritual Director

In *The Introduction to the Devout Life*, part 1, chapter 4, St. Francis De Sales describes the spiritual director as a faithful friend, quoting Ecclesiasticus [Sirach] 6:14-16: "A faithful friend is a strong defence, and he that has found one has found a treasure. A faithful friend is the medicine of life and immortality; and they that fear the Lord shall find Him." Francis goes on to say that this faithful friend serves "as a medicine to ease and comfort our hearts in our spiritual disorders. He will guard us from evil and make our good still better." We need to pray for a good guide. As God sent the archangel Raphael to guide Tobias, so he will answer your prayers by sending you one that is faithful and good.

Francis asks the directee to see his spiritual director as the means by which God speaks to one's soul. He continues: "Do not place your confidence in his human learning, but in God who befriends you by means of this man, putting in his heart and his mouth whatever will be requisite for your happiness."

As you read these words, you may wonder where we can find such guides. St. Teresa says there is one in a thousand; and St. Francis believes there is one in ten thousand, adding that there are fewer than you can imagine who can fulfill this office. If spiritual directors, then are so difficult to find, should we really try to have one? I say that we should make the effort, because it is so important to have such a guide. If you cannot find one near you, then get a copy of *The Devout Life*, and ask a priest to whom you go for guidance to read it and discuss it once a month. Today, in my opinion, we have more spiritual directors than in the period when St. Teresa of Avila and St. Francis lived. Some religious congregations have priests who counsel men and women in the world who really want to lead a life of devotion. One will find in the *Magnificat* publication, given out at the 2002 San Diego Conference, a monthly guide to deeper spiritual living. The writings of Father Benedict Groeschel, and the many programs offered on Mother Angelica's EWTN are full of the wisdom of our contemporary spiritual directors.

There is a great difference, moreover, between true spiritual direction and psychological therapy. Spiritual direction requires humility and wisdom in the Director, and docility and obedience on the part of the directee. Yes, obedience. Francis says, "Would you walk in earnest towards devotion? Seek some good man who will guide and conduct you. This is the greatest of all words of advice." Teresa of Avila, also a Doctor of the Church, holds that if you are searching for the will of God, "you shall never so assuredly find it as in the way of humble obedience, so much recommended and practised by all holy persons who have aspired to devotion."

In psychological therapy, however, the person gradually comes to get deeper insight into one's mind and heart, in order to reach the level of maturity necessary to practice free obedience to a spiritual guide. Actually, such therapy can prepare a person for the virtue of docility. In this age of independence when so many do not see the need for a spiritual guide because they are preoccupied with self-fulfillment, it is prudent to realize our own need for a spiritual director and a plan of life rooted in prayer. Much more could be said about the need of spiritual direction for Courage members. It is my hope that Courage members will give serious thought to these suggestions. My final advice is to follow the one you choose as an angel from heaven.