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**HANDBOOK FOR  
SPIRITUAL DIRECTEES  
A Book of Spiritual Exercises**

by

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**Lulu Press, 2010**

ISBN: 978-0-557-77622-1

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Dove artwork on cover was designed by Chris Sharp for an earlier  
work, *Handbook for Spiritual Growth*, by Liguori Publ.

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## Preface

Gathered together in this short volume are spiritual exercises that I have found helpful in my own life and in working with spiritual directees through the years. Most are from the Christian spiritual tradition, as that is what I am most familiar with. It would be fairly easy to adapt them to other religious traditions, however, and I leave that to the creativity of spiritual directors and directees to work out.

Although a spiritual direction session is generally open-ended and without a set agenda, it can be helpful at times to work through structured exercises such as those included in this book. The first few sessions, in particular, can include time to review what spiritual direction is about, how to prepare for a session, methods of prayer, and faith history. I have included these at the beginning of the book. Other exercises can be used as the director and directee see fit. Eventually, the Mission Statement and Rule of Life exercises can pull together and focus learnings and giftings of the Spirit.

Of course, people who are not in spiritual direction can benefit from practicing spiritual exercises as well. The title of this work, *Handbook for Spiritual Directees*, is not intended to imply that those who are not in spiritual direction would find this book irrelevant: hence, the subtitle.

I take little credit for the exercises presented herein. Most of them are a re-presentation or synthesis of material I have read or otherwise been exposed to through the years. Credit is given where my dependence on specific sources is obvious; sometimes this is not so easy to do, however.

May you enjoy this work as much as I have enjoyed compiling it.

*Philip St. Romain*

## **1.**

### **What is Spiritual Direction?**

*(To be read and discussed by director and directee in the first or second session of spiritual direction.)*

It is helpful to have a companion with whom you can share your joys and struggles in living the Christian life. This companion may be your spouse, another family member, or a close friend.

When we speak of spiritual direction, however, we are referring to a relationship that is more specifically focused on helping you to grow spiritually. A spiritual director listens and gives feedback about what he or she is hearing and sensing about the movement of the Holy Spirit in your life. This feedback is for your consideration only; the spiritual director is not a guru who tells you what to do.

The ideal of spiritual direction is soundly rooted in our understanding of Christian community. The Christian journey is not meant to be an individualistic, privatized spirituality. It is in community that we discover who we are and what we have to share. Spiritual direction provides an opportunity for a friendly and discerning experience of Christian community. As a community of two, you and your spiritual director attempt to discern what the Spirit is doing in your life and how you are being called to share your giftedness.

#### **Spiritual Direction and Psychotherapy**

From the foregoing, it should already be obvious that spiritual direction is fundamentally different from psychotherapy. A counselor is not concerned with your religious commitments nor with how the Holy Spirit is leading you. The goals of psychotherapy are different:

they are usually to help you deal with painful emotions and to support you in making difficult choices about relationships.

A spiritual director may deal with the same issues but from a quite different perspective. Painful feelings may be discussed in terms of how they lead away from God or toward God. Difficult relationships are also reviewed to discern how God is calling us to love other people and ourselves as well.

Because spiritual direction and psychotherapy have different goals and emphases, it is possible to benefit from both at the same time. A person who is in counseling should not refrain from spiritual direction because of it. Nor should anyone choose a spiritual director over a counselor. In fact, spiritual directors who guide people away from psychotherapy are doing their directees a disservice.

It sometimes happens that a spiritual director is also a trained counselor. Even so, the director and directee need to be clear about precisely what is going on in their work together.

Finally, we note that psychotherapists generally meet with their clients once a week or more. Such frequent meetings are necessary to process the many feelings and attitudinal changes going on in the person's life. Spiritual directors, on the other hand, seldom meet with directees more than once every two weeks in the beginning of the relationship. After a while, once a month is usually sufficient.

### **The Agenda in Spiritual Direction**

Some spiritual directors have a set agenda for time spent with their directees; most do not. You will usually be allowed to talk about anything you have on your mind. If your sharing seems to have nothing to do with living the Christian life, the director will eventually try to steer the discussion in that direction by asking how what you have shared is affecting your prayer life or your relationship with God.

Usually, the first few meetings will be spent in becoming acquainted. The director will want to know all about your life. Telling

your story to another in this way will help you come to know yourself better. The listening presence of the director is also a source of great healing. Because the spiritual director is not in the same role as a counselor, he or she may also choose, at times, to share about his or her life and faith journey, especially in the context of giving you feedback about something of relevance to your life. This can help you see the director as a fellow pilgrim on the journey rather than as a guru with all the answers.

After getting to know each other, you and the director may decide on a few structured activities to work on, or you may agree to go through a book on spiritual growth together. Many directors are trained in the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius and use these in some manner with their directees. Others know a great deal about keeping a personal journal and may encourage you to keep one if you haven't already started doing so. Most directors these days also respect the fact that different human temperaments are drawn in different ways by the Spirit, so they might want to help you discover your personality type.

As you can see, many kinds of issues can be discussed in spiritual direction. Of paramount importance, however, is your life of prayer. A spiritual director is one who will hold you accountable for daily prayer. He or she will be interested in hearing what is happening during your prayer and what you notice happening in your life as a consequence of prayer.

### **Choosing a Spiritual Director**

We have already noted that a spiritual director is not a guru who will tell you what to do and what not to do. I would also like to make a distinction between a spiritual director and a sponsor in a Twelve Step program. A sponsor is one who has been in such a program for some time and can help new people learn how to recover from addictive involvements by using the Twelve Steps. This is a form of spiritual

companionship, to be sure, but I recommend that your spiritual director be more than just a “big buddy” for the spiritual journey.

Ideally, your spiritual director should be a person with some formal training or experience in this area. He or she should have knowledge of the Christian spiritual tradition and should be at least generally familiar with psychological development. Your director should be a person of prayer who has attended one or more extended silent retreats. Finally, he or she should also be in spiritual direction with another and should have already worked through painful issues from the past.

I consider these minimal requirements for a Christian spiritual director. Generally, the ministry staff at a retreat center are good resources for finding a spiritual director. Most religious communities also have a few qualified people. Pastors can be found who meet these minimal requirements, and more lay people than ever are functioning effectively in this role.

If you do not already have a spiritual director and don't know whom to ask, I suggest you call your local retreat house. If you know of no such center, ask your pastor for advice, or visit the Spiritual Directors International web site ([www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org)) and their “Find a Spiritual Director” search tool, which lists spiritual directors who are members of the organization. Even after choosing someone, do not think you have to stay with that person. Agree with your director to give the relationship a trial for a while. Then, after a few sessions, evaluate whether you feel comfortable enough with each other to continue.

### **Fees for Spiritual Direction**

It is typical for Christians to view ministry as something they have already paid for in the Sunday collection. This holds true for many local congregational or diocesan ministries, but not usually for spiritual direction.



Spiritual direction is really a professional service; therefore, be prepared to offer compensation to your director—especially if he or she is not an employee of an institution to which you contribute financially. Most (but not all) spiritual directors have a recommended fee for services, but would be willing to work something out if you cannot afford the full payment (do not count on health insurance to cover anything). As Jesus noted, “the laborer is worth payment” (Lk. 10:7).

### **Reflection**

1. Why did you decide to seek spiritual direction?
2. What do you hope will happen to you through the process of spiritual direction?
3. What misgivings do you have about entering into spiritual direction?
4. What would you like to know more about concerning spiritual direction? Be sure to bring this to the attention of your director in your next session.

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An earlier version of this chapter was originally published in *Handbook for Spiritual Growth*, by Philip St. Romain. Liguori Publications. 1994.

## 2.

### **Preparing for Spiritual Direction**

Most spiritual directors have no objection to their directee talking about anything s/he feels is important at this time in life, even if they don't seem to have an explicit religious or spiritual focus. Knowing the overall context of the directee's life is important to your spiritual director. Also, most spiritual directors expect you to take some ownership for what you would like to discuss during a session.

Preparation can be very helpful for making the most of your time in spiritual direction. The following questions can help you to do so. You might consider journaling responses to them, or just reviewing them in advance.

1. What has been the general spiritual “tone” of your life lately? You might express this in terms of colors, temperature, aromas— anything that helps you to articulate your experience.
2. What events, experiences, relationships, etc. have communicated to you a sense of God's presence?
3. What events, experiences, relationships, etc. have communicated to you a sense of God's absence? Consider the role of attachments and addictions, here.
4. Describe your manner of prayer lately. How well does your prayer help you to experience conscious contact with God?
5. What kinds of decisions in your life have you searching for a sense of God's will?
6. In what area of life do you sense God calling you to growth? What lessons, values, disciplines, etc. are you being challenged to grow into? What can you do to honor this?
7. What kind of feedback would you like at this time from your spiritual director?

8. Anything else you want to talk about? (Open forum. Consider using some of the resources in this handbook.)

### 3.

## Methods of Prayer

It is essential for anyone in spiritual direction (or interested in spiritual growth, for that matter) to have a regular practice of prayer. Discussing how things are going in prayer is one of the most important topics in spiritual direction.

First, let us acknowledge a distinction between prayer and prayerfulness. Prayerfulness refers to an attitude of openness to God's presence and guidance. We can be prayerful in this sense without actively saying or thinking prayers. It is doubtful that one can be prayerful without taking times for formal prayer, however. Indeed, one of the fruits of regular prayer is that it enables the deepening of prayerfulness.

Here, then, are a few basic notes and teachings about prayer from the Christian spiritual tradition.

### **Ingredients for Personal Prayer**

(from *Becoming a New Person: Twelve Steps to Spiritual Growth*, by Philip St. Romain)

1. *Solitude*: "Whenever you pray, go to your room, close your door, and pray to your Father in private," commanded Jesus in Matthew 6:6. There is indeed much to be said for communal prayer, but private prayer cannot be replaced by any other activity. We must go some place where we can be alone and undisturbed; being alone with God is what is meant by solitude in prayer.
2. *Silence*: "In your prayers do not rattle on like the pagans. They think they will win a hearing by the sheer multiplication of words" (Matthew 6:7). Prayer time should be quiet time. Any

words and sentiments exchanged with God are done in the context of silence.

3. *Time*: Jesus spent entire nights in prayer; few of us can last fifteen minutes. Any time spent in prayer is probably better than no time at all, but it is doubtful that inner silence and a receptive listening to God's Word can take root in less than twenty minutes. Prayer time should also be prime time. Do not wait until you are tired and sleepy, for example, because it will be difficult to lift your mind and heart to God.

### **Vocal, Conversational Prayer**

This is the form of prayer that comes most naturally, as it is simply addressing God either aloud or in one's thoughts in the same way we would address another person. You can do this at any time and in any circumstance. After doing so, listen to what God has to say in reply. Sometimes you can note a response in your thoughts, imagination or feeling; sometimes it is in the quality of silence that follows.

### **Praying With Scripture (Lectio Divina)**

Lectio Divina (sacred reading) is an ancient way of praying with scripture or other texts. Practicing this form of prayer daily can help you to grow in your relationship with God. Journaling a few notes about your experience after a prayer session can also help to provide material to discuss in spiritual direction.

The approach to Lectio Divina I recommend is much less rigid than those you will find described in many places. In this approach, as in the classical one, we do identify the following movements:

1. *Lectio* – spiritual reading, preferably a passage of Scripture.

2. *Meditatio* – repeating the word or phrase that speaks to you; considering what it’s saying to you if such reflections arise spontaneously.
3. *Oratio* – affective prayer; intercessions, gratitude, praise, just telling God where you are.
4. *Contemplatio* – simply resting in God in loving silence.

Many teachers have emphasized these movements, and have taught them as a four-step process, beginning with *Lectio* and proceeding in step-by-step fashion to *Contemplation*. That’s too rigid and unnatural for many, however, so here’s a more flexible format.

- a. Set aside at least 20 minutes for the process. Pick out your passage. Be sure you’re in a quiet place.
- b. Begin with vocal prayer, dedicating your time to draw close to God. Invite the Holy Spirit to lead you in this prayer time.
- c. Spend a few moments just quieting yourself, noting your breathing, the feel of your body, the sense of being where you are. Ask yourself which of the four movements you feel drawn to at this time – e.g., it’s OK to begin by resting in God if such a grace is already given, or to voice prayers of petition or gratitude, etc. You might also just want to tell God “where you are.”
- d. When you feel ready to read the passage, do so, slowly, reverently. Let the words wash over you and sink in as they will. Take a couple minutes of silence afterward and then read the passage again, slowly, prayerfully. Silence. If distractions arise, just notice them and return to the practice.

- e. If a particular word or phrase speaks to you, repeat it in your mind. Let its message really sink in until you no longer feel like repeating it. Silence.
- f. Talk to God about how this word has spoken to you. What considerations . . . questions . . . feelings . . . concerns, etc.?
- g. When you have expressed yourself to God, pause for a minute or two of silence. If you feel drawn to continue resting in silence, do so. If not, return to your passage and read from where you left off. If another word or phrase speaks to you, repeat Steps E and F.
- h. Continue doing this until you feel you have completed your prayer time.

### **Contemplative Prayer Methods**

In contemplative practice, we open ourselves to God beyond thoughts and words. As with *Lectio Divina*, it usually entails setting aside a period of at least 20 minutes for silence and solitude. What follows are four popular methods.

1. *Centering Prayer*. This popular practice can be used in the context of *Lectio Divina*, which is where it rightly belongs. It is really an adaptation of E in the practice described above, wherein one would simply repeat the particular word until it leads you to silence and resting in God, and continue to do so when distractions arise. For more information, go to <http://www.centeringprayer.com/>
2. *Christian Meditation*. Developed by John Main, this practice entails mentally repeating the word, *maranatha*, for 20 minutes. As such, it is a form of mantra meditation. You can find out more about this practice and its history by visiting the web url: <http://www.christianmeditation11step.org/howtomeditate.html>

3. *Hesychast Prayer (Quiet Prayer)*. This form of contemplative practice was widely used by the fathers and mothers of the desert in the early days of Christianity. At least two 20 minute prayer periods are recommended. Practice of this prayer may lead to feelings of warmth in the heart and perception of inner light. Enjoy. . .
  - A. Sit quietly, with back straight and hands resting in the lap, palms up.
  - B. Lovingly introduce into your mind the prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." (Note: this may be shortened as the prayer proceeds).
  - C. Let this prayer move in synchrony with your breath, praying the first part with your inhalation, the second with exhalation.
  - D. When distracting thoughts attempt to break in, persist with the Jesus Prayer. Allow yourself to feel your emotions, however.
4. *Breath Prayer*. Simply be attentive to your breathing. Do not try to breathe deeply or quickly; just normal breathing will do. Offer your breathing to God; invite the Holy Spirit to energize you with the Breath of God. When you notice your mind becoming interested in a distraction, simply return to your breathing.

One variation of this prayer is to use a prayer phrase in synchrony with your breathing, much as you would in Hesychast Prayer. You can use whatever word or phrase you wish as you inhale and another as you exhale. When your distractions cease, you can drop the word or phrase.