

# Spiritual Friend

Recovering the Gift of  
Spiritual Direction



THOMAS  
M. VERGARA

## 4. The Many Colored Coat of Spiritual Guidance

As a child I remember being fascinated with those fairy tales that centered around a lost throne.

They followed a basic pattern: A boy or girl is raised in poverty in some obscure place. However, the child really was born in the royal household; some wicked relative who wanted the throne for himself saw to it that at birth the real prince was banished to a distant place.

When the child grows up, he stumbles onto his true heritage at a particularly graced time, through sudden revelation with someone who knows the truth. Scales fall from the newly discovered one's eyes; a new dignity and purpose are born.

Finally, there is a period of struggle with the entrenched forces of evil (within and without); after much suffering and loss, the royal inheritor ascends his rightful throne, and rules with compassion, equity, and wisdom.

These stories reflect the intuition and experience of many people. They can be interpreted on many levels. Spiritually, for me, they express that basic insight found scattered throughout Christian literature that each of us is a child of royal lineage. Royal means a status that cannot be earned, only given. It is a gifted right and responsibility from the beginning, not a goal that is earned at the end, though there is struggle along the way to *realize* the full truth.

Those who would grasp for their own kingdom, however, are ignorant of the gift, or hostile toward recognition of

its royal Source beyond themselves and its broad responsibilities. Such people forcefully spread their blindness and isolating self-importance. The gift is hidden from view. Yet it cannot be destroyed; it shows itself as an inner gnawing, a yearning that cannot be satisfied by our confused and willful efforts—until the time is ripe, and the giftedness is revealed, for those who have eyes to see.

There, in broadstroke Christian terms, is the human condition. Christian spiritual guidance in all its forms exists to reveal this condition in us and encourage our reconciliation with transforming power to our royal Source, whose hidden Realm is one of connectedness and compassion. That reconciliation, to Christian faith, is unfolded in the mystery of God's gift of a royal son, Jesus Christ, through whom we inherit the Kingdom.

What is the range of guidance available to us today? If it is *spiritual* guidance, then it is guidance that is trusted to be, however veiled, from a dynamic source transcending our construction, which in Christian terms is called the Holy Spirit: a very free Force. "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit" (Jn. 3:7-8).

Thus we are dealing with an uncontrollable mystery. We cannot domesticate it through a neat system of guidance and progress. The Spirit is too free and subtle for that. It resists every label and cage. If the Spirit is willing and our spirit (unbeknownst to us) is ready, then, as an old Zen saying has it, we can look at a stone and be enlightened. Anything and everything can be our spiritual teacher.

On the other hand, if we consciously undertake every form of visible guidance year after year, nothing is guaranteed. No technique, no method, no adviser, no effort can build a bridge from the human side alone. Only the Spirit knows when we truly are ready for the truth, and we will not be given more than we can bear.

Where does that leave us? With lots of listening and experimental waiting room! We cannot make anything authentically spiritual be realized. That is a gift—a grace—for

which we can only be attentive and trust. Such an assumption underlies all orthodox Christian views of reality. However, "how" we can be attentive and nourish trust, and "where" we look for guidance, show great variety in different Christian traditions.

In most Protestant traditions forms of guidance are limited to corporate worship (including preaching), scriptural study, sometimes theology, pastoral counseling for crises and rites of passage, private active prayer, and whatever indirectly may come through active involvement with others. Roman and Anglo-Catholic and Eastern Orthodox usually include these forms today also, with Protestants having been influential (especially with Roman Catholics) in their recent fresh weight on preaching, scripture, and free individual discovery in community.

Catholic and Orthodox traditions include other forms of guidance that recently have had influence with many Protestants. Such forms include greater appreciation of the guidance of liturgical forms, the Church calendar of seasons and saints, private confession (the rite of reconciliation), retreats, silent meditation, and spiritual direction. These forms have grown in influence with Protestants especially in the years since the Second Vatican Council, as their old corruptions have been purged and as Protestants began to see that they perhaps had thrown out a lot of valuable gems at the Reformation because they had become tarnished beyond recognition.<sup>1</sup>

Thus today we have the felicitous situation of different Christian traditions' active openness to one another's gifts. In fact, there is a certain irony in the way many Roman Catholics appear to have thrown off with a sense of good riddance many of those tarnished gems of guidance after the Second Vatican Council, and now are being drawn to the sparkle of those traditional Protestant gems mentioned above. At the same time, many Protestants now sense the unnecessary limitation of their own forms, and seek to recover some of those lost at the Reformation.

Both groups now often look with awe at the mystical depths preserved in Eastern Orthodox traditions. The Or-

thodox, in their turn (at least in North America), seem influenced by the other groups' attempt to transcend ethnic boundaries and offer guidance more broadly and in the common tongue of the country.

All three groups, but especially Roman Catholics and Protestants, are at least tacitly influenced by the focus of guidance offered in the larger secular society. Since the Spirit blows where it wills, there is, for example, openness to looking beneath contemporary forms of psychological, political, and educational guidance for signs of the Spirit's fruit.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, there is suspicion and required discernment born of the Christian tradition's sense of deceptive blindness and willful self-centeredness in the world (in and out of the Church).

The openness has led to an enormous influence in the Church of these modern guides. Where there is little positive sense or valuation of the Church's own tradition, methods, and ways of discernment, this openness can take the form of indiscriminate vulnerability to anything offered up by the latest political, educational, therapeutic, or human potential populist.

On the other hand, where suspicion reigns, there can be a fundamentalist, sectarian reaction that restricts guidance to scripture and/or tradition, refusing to accept anything as of the Spirit unless born of explicit past Christian piety.

I would propose that our time calls for a "middle way," born of a renewed appreciation of neglected wisdom in Christian tradition and practice, yet, with this deep foundation, open to learning from contemporary knowledge as this can further reveal the "truth that makes us free."

The authentic history of the Church is one of constant struggle to carry on a received Truth about reality, interpreted, purged, and enhanced by whatever ways the same ultimately invisible Truth continues to clothe itself in individual and corporate human experience. Where the Church fails to discern accurately the places of continuity and discontinuity with this Truth in a given time, it falls either into one of two pits inferred above.

On the one side is overaccommodation to the culture. Then, though it has people, the Church loses its unique capacity to guide out of its own culturally transcendent resources. It can only reflect the values of the culture, and thus succumb to folk religion, becoming an indiscriminate tool of cultural affirmation.

On the other side is sectarian irrelevance. Then, though the Church has a unique sense of self as guide, it tries to be one by containing the uncontainable truth in rigidly and narrowly interpreted words and forms. The unity of truth is lost. It is imperiously reserved to the container, cut off from its fullness. People then are likely to be attracted to it not because it offers a way into the Truth, but a way into security from the Truth's ambiguities and vastness in human life.

As I earlier have implied, American Christian history appears to have seen more of these two pits than of the middle way of "open tradition." The guidance function of the Church has suffered both loss and distortion accordingly. As the dominant religious influence in the nation, society thus has suffered too. Our oversecularization is the sad fallout on one side; our national aggressive self-righteousness is fed on the other.

However, despite such crippling, the Church every day provides forms of authentic guidance that affect many millions of people, toward their own and the society's well-being. Let's look a little closer at some of these forms available to people today.

*The rite of reconciliation*, whether corporately in a liturgy, or more personally and often more effectively in private or small group confession, is one of the oldest forms of guidance. It can encourage a sense of personal accountability for and awareness of personal actions and their consequences, purge guilt, and empower a sense of reconciliation and caring with self, God, and neighbor.

Today increasingly such confession takes account of social as well as personal sins, and of psychological limitations. In the new, more informal, personal, and less legalistic Roman Catholic practice, counsel with the person after confession can involve a form of spiritual direction more uniquely

focused on the person's situation than was likely in the past. This can stimulate a person to seek direction in its fuller form (i.e., unfocused specifically on penance) apart from the rite.<sup>3</sup>

*Baptism and godparents* can empower a sense of unique personal belonging, calling, and being cared for beyond blood family and the state. Knowledge of Baptism (and Confirmation, where it is offered) is a guiding knowledge of unearned "royal lineage" that can save you from succumbing to the anxiety of having to "make a name for yourself," with its frequently accompanying idolatry of works and expedient use of people. On the other side, such knowledge can save you from the lethargy and indolence that comes from lacking any sense of purpose, of calling, of "response-ibility" in life.

In the last chapter I spoke of the guidance inherent in authentic *corporate worship* (including preaching). Such participation can provide renewal of transcendent *corporate* identity beyond our isolated egos. It also allows us to sink into a different quality of consciousness that can feed our awareness of transforming connectedness with the Real. The words and acts of liturgies serve these ends, reincorporating worshipers into the gist of the Christian experience of God. Such worship, especially in the form of Eucharist, is particularly central to the guidance of Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and Orthodox traditions, and is important to all Christian traditions. Our perspective and energy for caring and coping are then renewed.

*Guided retreats and quiet days* can extend corporate worship and its Sabbath quality into corporate solitude. Such times can provide a different perspective on community, and encourage both intimate relaxation and struggle with the Real One welling up in and around us. They can offer protected respites from the breathless drivenness of culture and ego. The structure of such times in itself can become a form of guidance as well as any human leadership.

The *arts*: religious drama, poetry, novels, music, painting, sculpture, movement, stained glass, and architecture have a long history of service in the Church. When these are

truly inspired, they can become sacraments through which our intuitive gifts can sense the Holy and its transforming power.

*Reading and studying scripture* can help us "listen" more deeply, if it is approached as a guide to the deepest truth. Our minds then are more innocently present, more vulnerable to the truth we may not hear when we are aggressively culling through "just another book." We sometimes are drawn through the surface sounds to a steady Voice that beckons us to its wellspring. We are not put off as quickly by what our egos normally would reject. This guidance sometimes can be aided by letting ourselves image particular scenes and identify, perhaps dialogue, with particular scriptural people.

*Other spiritual reading* can lead us in the same direction, if it is not exploitative of desires for sentiment and oversecurity that hide us from the Truth. These same desires in us can lead to abuse of scripture as a securing vault rather than an opening window.<sup>4</sup>

*Laying on of hands and anointing with oil*, with prayer for healing, guides toward reception of the wondrous gifts of physical, mental, and spiritual wholeness. Coming forward for such an act reinforces personal desire and initiative in asking for healing so valuable for its success. Mediation of others helps connect the person concretely with the larger resource of human community and that healing transcendent power so manifest through Jesus Christ. Its misuse is greatest when healing and grace are confused. Grace—the living, gifted, truth-evoking force of God—always is present in orthodox Christian understanding, with or without such specific healings.

The tacit guidance available in small *prayer, faith, and discernment groups* is another Christian resource. Today these take a great variety of forms (including charismatic tongues and prophecy). At their best, they provide an arena for corporate openness to the Spirit's way, personal support, the perspective of others' views, and opportunities for sharing pain, anxiety, thanksgiving, prayer for others, and surrender to God in faith. At their worst, they can provide mutual

complicity in avoiding the deeper and harder truths of spiritual life, or worse, they can damage an unconfident person's integrity and authentic direction by insisting on a particular spiritual path or interpretation.

The *prophet* also provides guidance. This is too uncomfortable and upsetting a guide to ever become "institutionalized," yet Christian tradition is clear about the importance of prophecy and its normal availability when called for.

The prophet helps reveal our corporate complicity in evading the covenant call to sharing and caring for the resources and people of the earth and for faithful relation with their Giver. He or she points to the dire consequences of this complicity, and to forgiveness and renewed life if we will repent.

The judgmental, ringing, redemptive shock of the prophet's action can wake us up to responsive, spontaneous action of our own (if out of resentment we don't turn on the prophet). The self-forgetfulness of authentic prophetic action can inspire the clearing of many cobwebs from lethargic lives, and serve a deeper sense of spiritual calling and truth-telling. All other forms of spiritual guidance can be affected and cleansed by this impelled mediator of the Holy One, the One who for the sake of human well-being will not allow truth to be buried for long.

The *calendar of saints* gives opportunity for a range of heroes to be held before us as signs of grace and "ways in" to the Holy. It is too bad that more of these are not lay and married people; this would make identity with them and hope for these states of life easier. It is also sad that so many of their biographies often are missing or prettied up. Even so, they provide the guidance of a living chain of whole human beings that are infinitely more inspiring and instructive to the average person than abstract theological ideas cut off from their human incarnations. They are complemented by the living influence of the more holy people experienced alive in Church and society today.

*The seasons of the Church year* guide people through a valuable rhythm of examination and celebration, fasting and feasting. They recycle the deep mysteries of Christian expe-

rience corporately and individually. They provide bonding and transcendent focus for the body of the Church, and indirectly for a society, aiding resistance to the temptation to fragment and focus around petty things. Sometimes the seasons seem artificial and don't "fit" our personal rhythms. Yet they always remind us of and catch us up in a larger rhythm than our own.

Guidance also is available through *teaching*: learning the experience of the Church as it is summarized and interpreted in doctrine, theology, ethics, scripture, history, and forms of prayer and discipline. Where these are connected positively with the lives and integrity of those being taught, they can provide cognitive bridges that aid an understanding of a whole, integral approach to human life. Where they are not so connected, the teachings can be stillborn, misunderstood, intimidating, or alienating.

Guidance can come in numerous ways through the everyday *relationships of members of the Church*. The Mystical Body of Christ, the priesthood of all believers, involves countless mutual gifts of transparency to the Spirit at needed times. This is most sustained in *families*, where parents have special guidance opportunities, and where over a lifetime mutual guidance is provided.

*Pastoral counseling and sustaining* by pastors and other specially designated people normally involve dealing with particular problem-centered situations in a person's life. The forefront of concern is coping with or bearing the problem and getting on with life (e.g., getting through or bearing marriage and family difficulties, job loss, or illness). Psychological understanding today often is centrally brought to bear. Faith resources can be included and often are very important. However, the pressing weight of the problem (and often the training of the counselor) encourages focus on specific ego coping.

This contrasts with a more relaxed, up-front, usually long-term focus on the way grace is happening, being resisted, and being responded to in prayer and action, a description of *spiritual direction*.<sup>5</sup> As we can see from these last few pages, that direction is one color on a many colored coat of

resources. It is meant to be part of a whole way of life, not an isolated resource. Its full helpfulness depends on a person's willingness to use it in conjunction with other mutually reinforcing and mutually correcting resources.

In this way it differs significantly from secular counseling, which cannot expect a client to share seriousness and participation in a whole approach to reality represented by Christian faith (or any other faith).

On the other hand, in its authenticity spiritual direction is not a "propagandistic" resource, seeking to mold a person into conformity with some mechanical external model. There was a more authoritarian time in Christian history when this was a real danger.

Today, however, the director dominantly functions as someone sensitive to the subtle "movements of the Spirit" in the unique circumstances of a particular person's life. These movements connect with scripture, tradition, and faith, but in a unique way discerned through the person's full current existential integrity. The director imposes nothing but seeks to listen for and evoke the unfolding image of God, the fullest, called-out humanity of the person.

#### *Reasons for the Renewed Importance of Spiritual Friendship*

The re-emergence today of spiritual companionship as an important resource for a wide spectrum of people reflects a number of current human needs emerging from recent history. Four of these I believe are particularly significant.

The *first* is the need for personal help in the growing collapse of a shared world-view within the Church, and cultural support without, for a Christian "way of life." Everyone is on his own now to choose between the myriad, sometimes contradictory visible options the Church and society offer for a way of life.

This is true in a self-conscious way even in Roman Catholic seminaries, once bastions of an enforced way. In the bulletins of two Roman Catholic seminaries in the Washington area I have read what once was an exclusively liberal

Protestant position, words which in effect say: "You are personally responsible for the development of your own formation process" (within certain broad guidelines).

In this widespread situation, it can become lonely. We need someone who can help us sort out the many options and to discern the subtle threads being woven by the mysteriously moving Spirit in our lives. Such structured opportunities and resources are particularly rare in Protestant situations, though concern is growing. In terms of congregations, Clebsch and Jaekle have remarked that "there is no place in [their] structure and rhythm where a serious discussion concerning the state of one's soul is expected."<sup>6</sup>

A *second* need calling for more weight on personal spiritual guidance today emerges from the sense of limitation in educational and professional therapeutic relationships.

Public and private education increasingly seems dominated by technical knowledge, and both ignorance and studied neglect of basic religious-philosophical questions and structures for long-term exploration of them. This leaves many hungry people, teachers and students alike, for whom a simple Sunday worship service and educational hour just don't suffice.

Many therapists along with their clients seem increasingly to sense the need for something more transcendently rooted for themselves than Western psychology normally has permitted. The increasing interest among therapists in transpersonal and Jungian therapies and in Eastern (and to some extent Western) mystical traditions attests to this hunger. Though the quest often is veiled in psychological language, and usually is limited to intrapsychic investigation, I sense in many of them a yearning for a transcendently rooted way of life.

Alienation of Western psychology from its religious-philosophical heritage, as previously described, together with the strong individualism of psychology and of the middle class from which most psychologists come, makes it extra difficult for many of them to bridge fully into the Christian communal-historical way of life. Psychologically aware spiritual direction is a potentially invaluable resource for such

people, as well as a complementary form of guidance for their clients or ex-clients.

A *third* need calling out such guidance comes from the starved half of the social activist. In the sixties most social activists (except those rising out of the black Church) were deeply suspicious of any kind of interior focus beyond confession of social sin. The personal self was to be sacrificed to the social self. In the seventies there was a clear shift with many such people. Something proved inadequate and empty about a totally exteriorized and communalized life. Something more interior and uniquely attentive to their personal situation was called for. It was not therapy they sought. It was their soul.

Some turned for help to Eastern groups, others to Western, and many still drift. Spiritual direction, with its capacity to take seriously an integral and meaningful social-personal way of life, is coaxed further to life by such people.

*Finally*, spiritual direction is receiving special attention in the face of our reawakening to the neglect of a careful oral tradition of spiritual guidance in the Church. Today we are almost totally dependent on books and scholarship for reminding us of the depths and nuances of human interior development that have been known in the light and path of Christian experience. We have been largely missing the careful, chastened, long-term, faith-grounded, tested, and intuitive person-to-person conveyance of the heart of Christian awareness. Perhaps certain parents, faithful in their child-rearing practices, especially mothers, came closest to this earlier in the twentieth century. However, little of this faith nurture seems left in the frenzied, confused, everybody-working, emotionally and materially distracted and often broken family settings that increasingly dominate our culture.

Such a situation cries out for a spiritual friend who can be with us not only through crisis, but through the more mundane times of spiritual attentiveness in our lives. Proliferation of such friendships perhaps can help shape, deepen, and stabilize the shallow spiritual infrastructure of the Church, aiding its renewal and unique service to society. As

we shall see in Chapter Six, such friendships do not require spiritual masters, just attentive faithful companions.

The remainder of this book will focus on particular resources for carrying out authentic Christian spiritual friendship today. As we do so, it is important to keep in mind the broader context of resources described in this chapter, the long and varied history of spiritual guidance in the Church, and its rhythmic frame of Sabbath and ministry. All these together provide a foundation for reawakening to our royal lineage, and living out its confidence and sharing of gifts.