

## **INSCAPE September, 2013**

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**Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:**

**May you always be consciously aware of the grace and peace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love and mercy of God the Father, and the communion of the Life-Giving Holy Spirit dwelling within your heart!**

### **SEEKING SPIRITUAL DIRECTION...A "SOUL FRIEND"**

What you and I are desperately in need of is guidance in forming our Christian life in Christ. We no longer live in a Christian society or culture. In fact, consumerism tends to exalt the individual and his or her basic sense appetites. Our senses are being constantly bombarded by enticing attractions that hypnotically fill us with a restless desire to possess them. The verse in Tone 5 of the Prokimenon in the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom awakens and warns us "Help Lord; for there is no longer any that is godly, for the faithful have vanished from among the sons of men" (Psalm 12:1).

Christians are to be a leaven in the dough of humanity, a transforming power of love and enlightenment in a selfish, dark world. But concretely, where do you go to receive your power to love and to be enlightened? This was the constant plea that Fr. Maloney heard in traveling around the country: "Where can I find a prayerful community in which I can grow in the Lord? Where can I find spiritual direction that will guide me in my Christian life? Is spiritual direction really necessary?"

I would like to look at this topic of seeking spiritual direction from a guide, learned in the laws of the spiritual life and experienced personally in holiness and submission to the inner movements of the Spirit.

At times such a guide can help us on an occasional basis in a directed retreat, through a meeting, a written article or book or compact disc or the world of the global Internet. At other times such a "soul-friend" will offer his/her loving guidance over a longer period of regular meetings. To find such a friend in the Spirit is a great grace. Yet even in such a spiritual direction situation, the last word must be given to the main director in the spiritual life, and that is the Holy Spirit, the personhood of love in the Undivided Trinity.

Everywhere Fr. Maloney would go in the United States and Canada, he heard the universal complaint: "But where can I find a good spiritual director?" Persons eager to go deeper into prayer and make continued progress in the spiritual life and in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit know that they have need of discernment other than their own insights or opinions. You can be so easily duped into thinking that God thinks as you think, that your judgments about yourself and others and even God are really objectively true. How can you be sure that you are truly listening to God's Word and following His commands in docile obedience? Petitions at the Triple Litany during every Divine Liturgy express "...we pray for our spiritual fathers and all the clergy and for all our brothers and sisters in Christ; for their welfare, peace, health, salvation, and for the remission of all their sins, and that the Lord our God, may PROMPT and HELP them in all things."

The difficulties that travelers encounter along the spiritual way are so great and each of us knows that the ignorance (spiritual darkness) within us is so vast and insidious that we all have need of having some kind of a guide. Thomas Merton writes: "The most dangerous man in the world is the contemplative who is guided by nobody. He trusts his own visions. He obeys the attractions of an interior voice but will not listen to other men."

St. Teresa of Avila advises the traveler "to consult some learned person if he can, and the more learned the person the better. Those who walk in the way of prayer have the greater need of learning; and the more spiritual they are, the greater is their need..."

## **NEED FOR A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR**

Besides the many psychological dangers that lurk along the path of those who enter the interior spiritual life, there are other perils. The traveler may be charmed and fascinated by the beauty he or she encounters: delightful experiences, voices, visions, beautiful thoughts of God, or just the restful peace that fills one's being. All these can become snares if a person clings to them. One must push on, clinging absolutely to nothing created, in order to be attentive to the living flame of love that tenderly wounds the soul at its deepest center.

You need spiritual direction just to begin the spiritual journey. Without it, there is usually no beginning at all. You will begin to travel unsteadily, unsurely, unsafely and often weighed down by many false principles. [My own experience as a licensed private pilot and the information taught by meteorology experts for an instrument rating have reinforced the importance of exact knowledge required for perfecting the skills in the art of flying an aircraft]. It is similar to the take-off departure in an airplane. Once off the ground, all is well. The airplane can then perform as it is designed to perform, that is to fly. Once the Spirit takes us on wing, all is well. But help is needed in the beginning. Just as the airplane pilot is in need of specific knowledge applied to his current situation, so does the person in his/her pursuit of perfection need, at the beginning of the spiritual journey, a concrete application of principles to his/her situation, particular temperament and disposition. When a pilot contacts, by radio-telephone on-board the aircraft, the "control tower" or "ground control center" that regulates a particular airspace, the information given to the control tower always begins with vital information..."who you are"... "where you are"...and " "what are your intentions."

Spiritual perfection, it is important to remember, takes on many different forms, depending upon the particular circumstances and the variety of conditions that surround each person. Our American culture is surely different from the Spanish culture of the 16<sup>th</sup> century during the lives of St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. St. Thomas More, ["an English lawyer, social philosopher, author, statesman and martyr executed in 1535 for opposing the Protestant Reformation"], may have been a saint for all seasons but if you were to imitate his style of life and sanctity in our modern setting it would be disastrous for you. You must meet God in your own unique personality and history and avoid any pre-imposed mold of sanctity being put upon you. You need discrimination and discretion for your spiritual growth. Merton put it very well: "Many poets are not poets for the same reason that many religious men are not saints: they never succeed in being themselves. They never get around to being the particular poet or the particular monk they are intended to be by God. They never become the man or the artist who is called for by all the circumstances of their individual lives. They waste their years in vain efforts to be some other poet, some other saint. For many absurd reasons, they are convinced that they are obliged to become somebody else who died two hundred years ago and who lived in circumstances utterly alien to their own. They wear out their minds and bodies in a hopeless endeavor to have somebody else's experiences or write somebody else's poems or possess somebody else's sanctity."

## **ADVANTAGES OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION**

Spiritual direction will often prevent us from merely going through the motions of religion. Many Christians today have almost no idea of God's immense love for them or of the personal nature of that love or of that love's power and ability to bring about a profound fulfillment in their lives. The seeds of spiritual vitality are planted by our Creator into the heart of every person. But seeds must grow, develop and mature before the harvest can be reaped. Each person needs more than an abstract knowledge of God. In a True Faith experience, one must draw near to God by a "way of life" and not by a "way of thinking". He/she needs to know first-

hand who God is. Each needs to go through an arduous process of trial and error.

The interior journey is a dangerous one and you ought not to risk traveling it alone. St. Bernard of Clairvaux said that friendship and spiritual direction demand a master other than the disciple for “Who constitutes himself his own master becomes the disciple of a fool.” Even if it is a perilous journey you ought not to be frightened. St. Teresa challenges us: “Wouldn’t it be nice if while desiring to procure a great treasure I should want to walk without danger along a path where there are so many robbers. For when you are about to gain the treasure---or steal it---since the Lord says that the violent take it away---by a royal road and by a safe road, the road chosen by our King and all His elect and saints, they will tell you that there are so many dangers and so many things to fear. How many more dangers are there for those who think they obtain this good without following a road?”

If spiritual direction only helped you to curb your self-will, it would be invaluable. In fact, your own will often becomes such a burden, such a source of misery and darkness (spiritual ignorance) that you will come to have a hunger and thirst for obedience. Merton stresses the need of obedience: “A spirit that is truly drawn to God in contemplation will soon learn the value of obedience; the hardships and anguish he has to suffer every day from the burden of his own selfishness and clumsiness and incompetence and pride will give him a hunger to be led and advised and directed by someone else. His own will becomes the source of so much misery and so much darkness that he does not go to some other man merely to seek light, or wisdom, or counsel; he comes to have a passion for obedience itself and for the renunciation of his will and of his own lights.”

But spiritual direction should go far beyond the curbing of self-will. No individual can possibly know himself/herself all alone. Even the best book on discernment is no substitute for the wisdom, prudence and loving care of a good spiritual guide. Such a one will help the directee become his/her best self. Self-deception is easy. The false ego within all of us is busy being biased toward self and prejudiced against others. Self-deception is easy. You are so often fooled since you are so easily ruled by your own defense mechanisms that help you to escape the truth about yourself.

Laziness, spiritual slothfulness, apathy and indifference are magically changed into “an easygoing, not-up-tight disposition” while anger and impatience are transformed into “righteous indignation.”

## SOUL-FRIEND

The title, “spiritual director,” seems a bit strange for us moderns. Kenneth Leech in his excellent book, *Soul Friend*, suggests the term, *soul-friend*. The Irish saw it as a necessity to have such a soul-friend. “It was seen as necessary for everyone to possess a soul-friend, and the saying, ‘Anyone without a soul-friend is a body without a head’ (attributed both to Brigit and to Comgall) became an established Celtic proverb...the soul-friend was essentially a counselor and guide, and the office was not seen in specifically sacramental terms. Often the soul-friend was a layman or laywoman.”

Among the Fathers and Mothers of the Eastern Desert Spirituality the soul-friend, the loving, caring other-self was called a *pneumataphor*, a carrier of the Holy Spirit. The title of Abbas, Father, and Ammas, Mother, was given to one who shaped the lives of his/her children in the life of the Spirit. Such spiritual “elders” taught by a loving example and not so much from clear and distinct ideas. A saying of the Fathers of the Desert illustrates this: “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.”

Such desert elders never conceived their role as spiritual leaders according to the model of a teacher. Basing their role as a spiritual father upon the fatherhood of the Heavenly Father, they experienced something of the self-giving love of the Father within the Trinity toward His Son in His Spirit who bound them together into a oneness of ecstatic love. The close relationship between the leader and the one who is being led was grounded upon the deepest movement of the Spirit, binding the two into a loving relationship that went far beyond any other relationship known in human love, since both persons were striving at every moment to be guided totally by the Spirit. Ideally and actually we should believe from the literature recalling the depth of spiritual progress, that such a school of direction produced two persons who were striving to meet each other at the deepest dimensions of their being, the ground of their being, where God dwells within them.

The saints were such soul-friends to those who came to them to share the workings of the Holy Spirit in both the director and the directee. Such spiritual guides were utterly uncalculating in their self-giving and caring for those whom they sought to help in the spiritual journey, they show us that spiritual direction involves something more than answers to problems, pious clichés and ready-made remedies that were supposed to fit most human beings without consulting the uniqueness of God's working in one's life.

Such a guide accepted a responsibility that could cost heavily since one committed himself/herself to the spiritual growth and the development of a life that fostered eternal, divine life. Each person coming to the soul-friend brought a special personhood and history that the guide had to listen to, that unique working of the Spirit in the disciple. Assurance of prayer and sacrifice on behalf of the directee was a serious undertaking on the part of the director that involved a continued remembrance of the directee before the Lord. Such a loving commitment to the true self of the directee cost the director or soul-friend sacrifice and unselfishness that could only be called a sharing in God's pure love.

Ignace Lepp [1909-1966, psychologist and psychoanalyst. He joined the French Communist Party at age 15, became communist and Marxist, converted to Roman Catholic Faith and ordained priest in 1941] captures this understanding of "soul-friending." "To meet a master who wishes to become our friend is a great opportunity in life. Thanks to him we shall be able to actualize our principal powers to the maximum. The man who has confidence in himself, far from refusing to be a disciple, freely chooses the master he believes most suited to help him become himself. If there is an art of being a master, there is also an art, scarcely less difficult, of being a disciple. The most effective masters generally began by being excellent disciples. Even Christ began by being baptized, and therefore initiated, by the Precursor."

## **CHOOSING A SOUL-FRIEND**

If you are looking for an individual as your soul-friend, the first quality that you should be looking for is that the director has personally and continually experienced, and is experiencing the dynamics of the spiritual life in order to realize what you are undergoing. Avoid someone who deals in static, pat answers to fit all persons and all situations.

Your director should be a holy, Spirit-filled person who walks in humility and gentleness and is listening with caring love to what the Spirit is doing in your life. He/she is a channel, a mid-wife, bringing you into a new birth in God's Spirit. Such a director lives only to serve and release you into the uniqueness of your true self in God's loving plan of salvation.

One should not choose a director by mere natural inclinations but by reason and faith. Besides personal holiness, there should be prudence, experience, learning, and a reverence for the mystery of each human being. It is only by faithful attention to God's confident and constant communion with Him, that a soul-friend's guidance will be effective. His loving vision of God, his self-forgetful confidence in God, his desire to give unstintingly for God's purposes,

are the source of his energies. He must see to it that he himself is a whole integrated person.

The soul-friend must be daring and decisive but at the same time extremely delicate. He must continually cope with the demands of God and with human weakness; he will need to expend a great deal of time and energy in discerning God's will. In fact, discernment of spirits is right at the heart of soul-friending. The prudent soul-friend will avoid any kind of monopoly or the exploiting of individuals for his own ends. He will never impose his own views and thus diminish the liberty of the human person under the action of the Holy Spirit. Though he must not be crippled by hesitation or undue delay, the prudent soul-friend must be prepared to wait. He must be attuned to God's pace, God's goal, and God's manner of moving in the individual's life.

## **NEED OF EXPERIENCE**

It is almost impossible to overestimate the value of experience. Techniques and methods cannot always track down the activity of God in a person. In fact, they may even hinder His action or resist it if laws of psychotherapy substitute for the freedom of God's Spirit to move as God wishes to do in the individual directee. There is no substitute for experience. All the masters of the spiritual life have stressed this important quality of a good director. "Then He called the people and said to them, Listen and understand. It is not what enters into the mouth which defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, that is what defiles a man. Then his disciples came up and said to him, Do you know that the Pharisees who heard this saying were offended? But he answered, saying to them, Every plant that My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted. Leave them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if the blind lead around the blind, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15: 10-14).

An inexperienced guide could thwart the spirit's flight or hold it down and even destroy it by imprudent mortifications or an excessive tolerance toward sloth.

Part of his experience should lie in his knowledge, not only of theology and right teaching, but also of the operations of human psychology and the science of the unconscious. St. Teresa of Avila stresses the importance of learning in a good spiritual guide: "There are opinions going around that learned men if they are not spiritual are no help to people who practice prayer. I have already said that it is necessary to have a spiritual master; but if he is not a learned man, this lack of learning will be a hindrance. It will be a great help to consult with learned men. If they are virtuous even though they may not experience spiritual things, they will benefit me; and God will enable them to explain what they must teach. He will even give them spiritual experience so that they might help us. I do not say this without having experienced it, and it has happened to me with more than two. I say that if a person is going to submit completely to only one master, he would be greatly mistaken if he did not seek one like this..."

The soul-friend must regard each individual as sacred and thus stand with reverence before the mystery of each person and the even more fantastic mystery of God in each person. St. John of the Cross is very critical of harsh spiritual guides and compares them to rough blacksmiths who only know how to use the hammer. He reminds them that the real guide of souls is the Holy Spirit.

Since God seldom leads two people by the same route, the soul-friend must be aware of the uniqueness of each person and each path. Untold damage has been done in the past by spiritual directors who have directed with a coldness, a generality that kills any creativity and stifles any originality. The lifeless systems and humorless programs that they have imposed upon the directees under their guidance have robbed these people of the foundation of any greatness or uniqueness. The whole purpose of the soul-friend's instrumentality should be to lead the directee to the degree of holiness where he or she is completely docile to the

commands of the ultimate Director, the Holy Spirit.

## THE WAY OF LOVE

The art of giving spiritual advice consists for the most part in the ability to establish a rapport between both parties. The relationship between soul-friends is unquestionably a matter of the giving or the withholding of the selves of both. The degree to which both of them are committed to their relationship in the Holy Spirit will determine the success of the whole process. A necessary part of this is an openness of the heart, particularly in time of stress and temptation.

There is only one path that leads into a person's innermost self, effects true healing and gives new creativity upon the spiritual life, and that is the way of love. One really knows the other in the only possible way by an experience of union, not by any knowledge that thoughts can provide. The only real way to full knowledge of another is through loving the other, and this love transcends words or thoughts. No amount of psychological insight can take its place. It can prepare for it, make it possible, even lead to it, but it can never be a substitute for it.

This is like the love of St. Paul when he says that he lives in Christ and that Christ lives in him. "I am crucified with Christ; henceforth it is not I who live, but Christ Who lives in me; and the life which now I live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me." (Gal. 2:20). Something like this Pauline intimacy with Jesus can be found in the relationships between soul-friends who know and love one another at a very deep level of awareness. Between soul-friends there can develop a union of minds and hearts. This can lead even further to union with Christ Himself. Thus soul-friendship can lead us to Christ-friendship. Soul-friendship with anyone is ultimately Christ-friendship, just as the giving of a cup of water to anyone is like giving a cup of water to Christ. "Whoever gives a drink to one of these little ones, if only a cup of cold water, in the name of a disciple, truly I say to you, he shall never lose his reward." (Matt. 10:42). Christ is not divorced from His members in His body. It is not as though one has to jettison all human friendships when a person reaches friendship with Christ.

In your deeper walk with God, it is uplifting and comforting to travel with "someone along the way." The pilgrimage seems less arduous as you and your soul-friend find your meeting point with Jesus who approaches you and walks with you. What wonderment and joy to discover the Triune God more intimately and more fully when as His two disciples you go forth together to seek Him. Just as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus felt their hearts burning inside of them as Jesus explained the Scriptures to them, so too do you meet Him more intimately as you pray and share with each other. "And behold two of them were going on that day to a village called Emmaus, about six miles from Jerusalem...Then Jesus said to them, O dull-minded and heavy hearted, slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken...And He began from Moses and from all the prophets, and interpreted to them from all the scriptures concerning Himself...Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him, and He vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, 'did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?'" (Luke 24:13, 25, 27, 31, 32). You are guided, inspired and led by the Risen Lord to turn around and set your heart and mind on your final destination, the Heavenly Jerusalem, where you will see Him face to face.

"And that which withers shall be no more, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him; And they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they shall neither need a candle nor the light of the sun; for the Lord God shines on them, and they shall reign for ever and ever."  
(Rev. 22:3-5).

## REFLECTIONS ON SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE FROM THE DESERT FATHERS

From: *Pilgrimage of the Heart*  
A Treasury of Eastern Christian Spirituality  
Edited, with Introduction and Epilogue  
By Fr. George A. Maloney  
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Those who wish to learn the will of the Lord must first mortify their own will. Then, having prayed to God with faith and honest simplicity, and having asked the fathers or even the brothers with humility of heart and no thought of doubt, they should accept their advice as from the mouth of God, even if their advice be contrary to their own wish, and even if those consulted are not very spiritual. For God is not unjust, and will not lead astray souls who with faith and innocence humbly submit to the advice and judgment of their neighbor. Even if those who were asked were brute beasts, yet He who speaks is the Immaterial and Invisible One. Those who allow themselves to be guided by this rule without having any doubts are filled with great humility. For if someone expounded his problems on a harp (Psalm 48:4), how much better, do you think, can a rational mind and reasonable soul teach than an inanimate object.

Discernment is a light in darkness, the return of wanderers to the way, the illumination of those whose sight is dim. A discerning man finds health and destroys sickness.

God is not the cause or the creator of evil, and those who say that certain passions are natural to the soul have been deceived, not knowing that we have turned the constituent qualities of nature into passions.

Those of us who wish to go out of Egypt and to fly from Pharaoh, certainly need some Moses as a mediator with God and from God, who, standing between action and contemplation, will raise hands of prayer for us to God, so that guided by Him we may cross the sea of sin and rout the Amalek of the passions. That is why those who have surrendered themselves to God deceive themselves if they suppose that they have no need of a director. Those who came out of Egypt had Moses as their guide, and those who fled from Sodom had an angel. The former are like those who are healed of the passions of the soul by the care of physicians: these are they who come out of Egypt. The latter are like those who long to put off the uncleanness of the wretched body. That is why they need a helper, an angel, so to speak, or at least one equal to an angel. For in proportion to the corruption of our wounds we need a director who is indeed an expert and a physician.

When motives of humility and real longing for salvation decide us to bend our necks and entrust ourselves to another in the Lord, before entering upon this life, if there is any vice and pride in us, we ought first to question and examine, and even, so to speak, test our helmsman, so as not to mistake the sailor for the pilot, a sick man for a doctor, a passionate for a dispassionate man, the sea for a harbor, and so bring about the speedy shipwreck of our soul. But when once we have entered the arena of religion and obedience we must no longer judge our good manager in any way at all, even though we may perhaps see in him some slight failings, since he is only human. Otherwise, by sitting in judgment we shall get no profit from our subjection.

It is dangerous for an inexperienced soldier to leave his regiment and engage in single combat. And it is not without peril for a monk to attempt the solitary life before he has had much experience and practice in the struggle with the animal passions. The one subjects his body to danger, the other risks his soul. Two are better than one, says Scripture. That is to say, it is better for a son to be with his father, and to struggle with his attachments with the help of the divine power of the Holy Spirit. He who deprives a blind man of his leader, a flock of its shepherd, a lost man of his guide, a child of its father, a patient of his doctor, a ship of its pilot, imperils all. And he who attempts unaided to struggle with the spirits gets killed by them.

**(Saint John Climacus)**

Brother, constantly call on God that He may show you a man who is able to direct you well, one whom you ought to obey as though he were God Himself, whose instruction you must carry out without hesitation, even if what he enjoins on you appears to you to be repugnant and harmful. If your heart is moved by grace to even greater confidence in the spiritual father whom you already have, do what he tells you and be saved. It is better for you 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. If the Holy Spirit sends you to another, do not hesitate at all, for we hear that it was Paul who planted, and Apollos who watered, and that Christ gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6). So, brother, do as we have said, and go to the man whom God shows you, either mystically in person, or externally through His servant. You should look on him and speak to him as to Christ Himself, and so revere Him and be taught by Him what is profitable...If he brings you to the mountain, climb it with eagerness, for I know well that you will enjoy the vision of Christ transfigured and shining more brightly than the sun with the light of the Godhead.

Indeed, you should also confess the thoughts of your heart to your spiritual father every hour, if possible. But if not, do not put it off till evening, but after the morning office examine yourself (1 Cor. 4:3) and confess all that has befallen you. Have unhesitating faith in him, even if the whole world reproach and abuse him. Even were you yourself to see him committing fornication, do not take offense or diminish your faith in him, for you obey Him who said, "Judge not, and you will not be judged" (Luke 6:37).

**(Saint Symeon the New Theologian)**

I complete September's Inscape with Our Lord's exhortation:

"But the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My Name, will teach you everything, and remind you of everything which I tell you. Peace I leave with you; My own peace I give to you, not as the world gives, I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled and do not be afraid." (Saint John the Theologian 14:26-27).

*Fr. John Michael Zboyovski*