

**Module Ten:
A Session of Alphonsian Direction**

Hence it is that a soul that loves God loves also all those whom God loves, namely, her neighbors; so that she eagerly seeks every occasion of helping all, of consoling all, and of making all happy as far as she can.

Alphonsus de Liguori, *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*ⁱ

The goal of spiritual direction is to help people become themselves in their faith and so deepen their relationship with God. It is a changing, constantly developing ministry, one with many traditions and practical aids from which directors and directees alike can benefit. What follows is a composite sketch of a direction session based on the Alphonsus model. Its purpose is to give both directors and those who come to them a sense of what to expect during the direction process.

From Silence.

The session of spiritual direction normally begins with a period of silence, rooted in what Alphonsus calls “solitude of heart,”ⁱⁱ a state of inner quiet that makes us aware of the presence of God within. Once we have welcomed the directees and engaged in a bit of familiar chitchat, we invite them to join us in some quiet time before the Lord. Sitting opposite one another, we bow our heads, assume a comfortable posture of prayer, and simply rest in the divine presence. During this time, we quietly tell God that we believe in him. We also ask him to have mercy on us and to give us light.

Our silent time together can last anywhere from one to three minutes (sometimes more). During it, we relax our muscles, acknowledge our emotions, quiet our minds, and allow our

spirits to flow through our consciousness. Doing this together, in the presence of one another, we become aware of the unique ties that bind us together in the relationship of spiritual direction. So many people are afraid to face the silence within them and go to great lengths to drown it out. We, instead, relish the silence that binds us together—and do so from the very outset. Without this silent time together, we would never be able to listen to God’s Word taking shape within our hearts. With it, we are able to listen, discern, and eventually act upon what we discover about ourselves and our relationship with the Lord.

This opening period of silence is an essential part of the direction process and lingers in the conversation that follows. It gives us an opportunity to center ourselves and place our relationship before God. Sitting before one another, we can sense the sacredness of what is about to take place and allow the silent, existential backdrop of our lives to come forward. It also gives us time to settle down in each other’s presence so that the spiritual direction process can begin to unfold. During this time, both of us adopt an attitude of “active listening.”ⁱⁱⁱ We open our spirits to the Spirit and ask it to dwell within us and in our midst. In doing so, we acknowledge the presence of the Lord and prepare to engage in a dialogue that is not a mere exchange of ideas, but an encounter of holy listening where one discerning heart speaks to another. When the appropriate moment comes, we end the silence by praying together the Doxology to the Lord’s Prayer: “For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Unpacking One’s Life

When our quiet time has drawn to a close, we look up and calmly acknowledge what has just taken place. The silence carries over into our conversation as we become increasingly aware of the lingering pauses between our words and our inability to fully express what we mean. After

a few moments, we ask our directees what has been going on in their lives since we last met. Very often the response is something like, “Where should I start?” or “I don’t know where to begin.” We reassure them that one place is as good as another and invite them to start with whatever is on their mind at the present moment.

Thus begins the second moment in the process of spiritual direction. The silence that binds us together leads our directees to risk revealing themselves in a spontaneous sharing from the heart. At this point, we focus entirely on what has been happening in their lives. The directees are allowed the freedom to reveal as much as they are willing to share. We in turn listen carefully to what is being said, taking in not just the words themselves, but the intricate combination of gestures, feelings, ideas, and silences that contribute to making it a unique revelation of self.

During this time, it is essential not only that we listen, but also that we let our directees know that we are listening. We do this by reflecting back what is said in our own words and by asking for clarifications if we have not picked up the particular nuances of their statements. When a particular question comes to mind, we make a mental note of it and may raise it later on in the session. We will ask a question at this point in the session only if we sense that we are being asked for help. Too many questions early on can distract directees from what is going on in their lives. At this point in the process, it is up to them to lay out their current situation in life in as suitable and dignified a manner as possible.

Finding Connections.

Eventually, directees will reach a point where it seems natural for them to pause for some feedback. They may ask if what has been said makes any sense or if we have been able to follow

them. When such comments occur, our role in the directive process shifts in emphasis from listening to “suggestive interpretation.” What do we mean by such a phrase?

This Alphonsian model takes an indirect approach to the spiritual direction process. We will rarely find ourselves in a situation where we will have to insist that our directees follow a particular course of action. Instead, it is more helpful to simply suggest a number of possible interpretations of what they have told us. At this point in the session, we consider it our job to sift through the experiences that our directees have shared with us and to identify the major motifs that the process of active listening has revealed. Because our directees may be too close to their own experiences to see what is going on in their lives, our role of pulling together and drawing connections becomes extremely important. Without our input, they may never be able to get to the bottom of their experience and find meaning in it. Still, we usually offer insights only by way of suggestion.

At this point in the session, our sentences are nearly always framed with words and phrases like “Maybe...,” “Perhaps...,” and “How about...” Our goal here is not to confuse, but to offer a wide range of possible interpretations of our directees’ experience. By laying out a spectrum of possible interpretations, we offer them a choice in how they can look upon the story they have just shared. Their present experience, of course, needs to be taken in the context of previous sessions of spiritual direction and the continuing story of their lives. They may reject our suggestions, moreover, in favor of some other intuition or insight that has come to them during the direction process. Wherever the interpretations come from, our directees are the only persons who can validate them as authentic expressions of their experience. All we can do is help them reflect on their experience, point out possible interpretations, and allow them to draw their own conclusions.

Looking for God

Only when directees have had the opportunity to share and to probe their experience do we ask, “Where might God be found in all of this?” To do otherwise runs the hurried risk of putting the cart before the horse. As “Emmanuel, God with us” the divine presence cannot be very far away from our struggle to make sense out of our lives. To be sure, much that goes on in the process of spiritual direction is a matter of appropriateness and timing. At the wrong moment, even the best question can send directees off on a tangent and cause them to lose focus. Good directors need to be patient and trusting. In time, the opportunity will eventually come for a conscious reflection on the directee’s personal relationship with the divine. However, if the various levels of our directees’ experience—the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social—have not been processed first, they will be unable to answer any questions about the Spirit’s movement in their lives in a mature, reflective manner.

As it turns out, we sometimes do not even need to ask this question. Moved by their newly found insights into their experience, directees can easily end up asking it themselves. God, of course, has been involved in the process all along. Only after doing the necessary homework on one’s experience, however, is it worthwhile referring explicitly to the divine presence in one’s life. So why ask the question? The purpose of spiritual direction is to help directees deepen their relationship with God. The deeper the relationship the more pervasive should their awareness be of God’s presence in their lives. We ask the question to help our directees come to such awareness. Not to ask it would be neglectful of our responsibilities as spiritual directors. The whole point of the process is to enable directees to open up their lives and ponder it in such a way that they will be able to discern the movement of God’s Spirit in their experience. Avoiding

the question at this point in the session is tantamount to avoiding God, something we would not like our directees to do.

Our question about how God fits into the picture provides the opportunity for the directee to share their feelings about God's presence in their lives. During this time, they are apt to share on a number of levels about such things as their image of God, how they have been praying to God, the experience of God's absence in their lives, and whether or not they feel loved by God. As they share these insights, it is essential for us, once again, to listen carefully to what they say to let them know we are listening. Only with this assurance will they feel free enough to move from their ideas about God to their feelings toward God. Once they have probed the depth of their feelings toward the divine at this particular moment, it is time to encourage them to bring those emotions to prayer and to share the experiences of their heart with the Lord. If they are at a loss about how to do so, we move from our stance of attentive listening to a mode of relating called "suggestive direction." At this point in the direction process, we would offer a number of concrete, practical aids that, in our judgment, would help them to open their heart to God and express their experiences in a sincere manner. We could say something like: "Have you ever expressed what you just shared with me to God? If not, what is holding you back? Do you think God cares about how you feel? If not, why not?" Such aids could range anywhere from meditating on a particular Scripture passage, to keeping a journal, to observing more quiet time, to reciting the Jesus Prayer. The possibilities are boundless. Whatever we offer by way of advice, however, is purely suggestive. Directees need to discover their own way of relating to God. All we can do is suggest some well-tried ways that might also work for them.

Surfacing Needs

After reflecting on their lives and engaging their feelings in the context of their relationship with God, there comes a point in the direction process when directees will be able to surface their various needs and name them. Doing so does not necessarily take place in every session, hence the importance of sustaining an ongoing relationship with a director. What is more, since our directees may not be fully aware of these needs, we must be ready to assist them in identifying them, prioritizing them, distinguishing the essential from the nonessential, and categorizing them according to the various dimensions of our human makeup: the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social. This process requires time, patience, and cannot be forced.

At the outset, we should encourage our directees to get in touch with all their needs, from the most insignificant to the most pressing, from the obvious to the hidden, from the material to the most deeply spiritual. Only by identifying these needs, naming them, and taking ownership of them, will they be able to gain perspective and be in a position to do something about them. During this process, we should help them distinguish between a genuine need and an apparent need; between what they must have and what we can do without; between what pertains only to them and what involves others. We should help them to see that all of their genuine needs are important and that they should not overlook any of them that fall along the spectrum of their human makeup. At the same time, we should also help them to see the difference between genuine surface needs (such food, clothing, shelter, work) and deep needs (such as love, friendship, family, happiness)— and help them understand how they interrelate.

The purpose here is to help our directees foster a sensitivity to the vast spectrum of needs impinging on the various levels of their complex human makeup and view them with a discerning eye. The hope is that, in time, they will come to see that their deepest need, the one

that preempts all others and that in the end is the only thing that matters, is their need for God. Getting to that point may take time and require patience both on our part and on the part of our directees. For our part, we must be willing to meet our directees where they are, help them identify their needs, and express them to God.

A Moment of Resolve.

As the direction session unfolds, our hope is that our careful listening and suggestive direction will lead our directees to make a decision about what they need to do in order to deepen their relationship with the Lord. This resolution, however, must not be something imposed from without, but discovered and embraced from within. The process of spiritual direction focuses on the directee's unique relationship with God. As such, it should eventually lead them to awareness of what concrete steps they can take in their lives to strengthen that bond.

At this point in the session, our role is to help our directees to be as realistic as possible in forming their resolution. It is best to avoid broad generalizations such as "spending more time with the Lord" and "deepening one's prayer life." If we sense that our directees have become too vague or abstract in forming their resolution, we will say something like, "Practically speaking, what does this mean for you?" or "How will this change your life?" Another possibility, of course, is that directees will make a very concrete resolution, but one that is so demanding that they will have little practical hope of ever implementing it in their lives. In such an instance, we ask them to take a good look at what they are asking of themselves and to see if they are really capable of doing it. It is much more desirable to make resolutions that lead to small incremental ways of deepening one's relationship with God, than to formulate grandiose schemes that will never be seriously implemented. Our goal here is to help directees ask honest questions about

themselves and what they are capable of doing to foster a deeper, more intimate relationship with the divine.

As spiritual directors, we seek to foster in our directees a deep sense of the importance of the continuity between belief and action. Making a resolution, however small, is a concrete way of encouraging them to bridge whatever discrepancies may surface in the direction process between what they profess and how they live. It encourages them to envision their spirituality in such a way that it embraces the concrete actions of their daily lives. In time, this “spirituality of practice” will gently lead them along the way of conversion and enable them, in time, to orient every dimension of their lives to the Lord who gives and sustains them in all things.

To Silence

As the hour draws to a close and the direction session reaches its natural terminus, we find it necessary to bow our heads in silence to show our gratitude for the gift of spiritual companionship and to thank God for whatever graces and insights our time together has brought us. The lingering silence that has formed the backdrop of the entire session, again comes forward. Before entering again into the quiet, however, we ask our directees if they would like to revisit at another time any concerns that have arisen in the past hour. Asking this question conveys to them the sense that the process continues, even as it draws to close. It reminds us to be conscious of the loose ends we are leaving behind and the work that still needs to be done.

This open-ended condition allows us to bring our session to a close. We do so ending where we began: in the gentle recognition of God’s quiet, ongoing presence in our lives. This period of silence is similar but also different from the first. It is *similar* in that it provides a boundary for the direction session, bringing it to an end in much the same way that the first one

brought it to light. It is *different* in that we find ourselves in another place spiritually than when we began. As we bow our heads, we quietly recognize that the silence in which we are now immersed has been with us throughout our journey together over the last hour and that it will accompany us as we take our leave of one another and travel our separate ways.

As we sit silently, we gather into ourselves all that has happened during our time together and thank the Lord for leading us during our process of discernment. In the silence of the Word, we recognize the limitations of our own feeble attempts to articulate our experience and appreciate even more the importance of listening to each other with attentive care. There, in the silence, we gain a stronger sense of the Lord's deep, attentive listening to our concerns. So deep is this listening that it contains within itself the unspoken beginnings of an articulated response. God's Word speaks to us in silence and sustains us in our own struggle to make sense out of our lives. It follows us wherever we go and penetrates our experience from one moment to the next. When it is time to leave we lift up our grateful hearts and repeat the same words with which we began the session: "For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen!"

Conclusion

We have come to view the direction session as a movement "from silence to silence." This motion is a spiraling rather than a circular one since, be it ever so slightly, we always end up at a different place spiritually from when we started. Between these silences, we accompany our directees as they unpack their experiences, discover connections, search for God, and make a practical resolution about deepening their relationship with the divine.

During this time, we employ such skills as “active listening,” “suggestive interpretation,” and “suggestive direction.” Knowing which to apply at any particular moment depends on timing and the appropriateness of the situation. Throughout the entire process, we make a special effort to let directees know that we are present to them and there to help. In the end, they are the ones who must listen to their experiences and determine in the midst of all the commotion if they can hear the still, small voice of God.

In conclusion, this Alphonsian approach to spiritual direction is not the only way to conduct this important ministry in the life of the Church. Nor does it claim to be necessarily the best. We have found it to work, however, and it has helped many people over the years. We have given this brief description of a typical session in the hope that others might benefit from what we have learned. If it affirms others in their own approach, or causes them to adjust it, or perhaps even to rethink it, we will consider our efforts to have been successful. Although this approach to direction is but one of many, we consider it an instrument that is both tried and true, one that has helped many to integrate the spiritual and moral dimensions of their lives and to lead them, in silence, to the threshold of the divine. In the next part of this book, we will examine the close connection between the moral life and the spiritual journey, with particular attention to how this relationship affects the direction process.

Reflection Questions

- Why should a session of spiritual direction begin and end with a period of silence?
- In what way does silence permeate the entire process of direction?
- What does it mean to “unpack one’s life” during direction?
- Why is it important to get in touch with one’s feelings and needs during direction?
- Why should a session end with some kind of practical resolution?

ⁱ Liguori, *Pratica di amar Gesù Cristo*, chap. 6, no. 1 (*Opere ascetiche* 1.54; Grimm, 6:316).

ⁱⁱ See Liguori, *La vera sposa di Gesù Cristo* (*The True Spouse of Jesus Christ*), chap. 16, sect. 2, nos. 1-17 (*Opere ascetiche* 15:136-52; Grimm, 10/11:480-90).

ⁱⁱⁱ See chapter four for the steps of this process. See also Dennis J. Billy, "Spiritual Direction and the Art of Active Listening," *Seminary Journal* 19(no. 1, 2013): 22-26.