

Module 3 Integration

When Jesus is with us, all is right with the world and nothing seems difficult; when he is missing, everything is hard. When Jesus does not speak to the heart, comfort is worthless; but if he speaks only one word, we feel great joy.

Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*ⁱ

In addition to the various relationships involved in spiritual direction, it is important for us to have a good sense of the transforming effect it can have on the human condition. Integrating spirituality and morality in the life of believers is an ongoing challenge. One way of understanding this relationship is by looking at how these two important theological moorings converge in the ministry of spiritual direction. This convergence takes place in the persons involved (we each have a unique story to tell). It continues in the process they undergo (no two journeys are the same). And it culminates in the conversion effected in them (we are all called to share in the divine intimacy). A critical examination of these dimensions reveals a reciprocal relationship between spiritual and moral knowledge. There is, in other words, a spiritual side to all moral knowledge and a corresponding moral side to all genuine spiritual knowledge.

Our Human Existence

We are physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social beings. Because it involves helping people to become themselves in their faith, spiritual direction must take account of all of these dimensions of human existence. Not to do so would be a sure sign that the genuine needs of directees were not being met and the process of spiritual direction itself had gone awry.

A brief look at the history of theology shows that many understandings of human existence have influenced the formulation of Christian doctrine. The Platonic tradition, for example, emphasizes the otherworldly dimensions of human existence; the Aristotelian combines both the otherworldly with the here-and-now, while the Humanist focuses on the present circumstances shaping our experience. The same holds true for the varying ways Christianity relates to human culture. Some say Christianity is against culture, while others insist it is a product of culture. Still others depict it as being above culture; others, as existing in tension with culture, and still others as having the power to transform it.ⁱⁱ Any one of these anthropologies and cultural models may be predominant in a particular historical epoch. At any given time, however, it is possible for several of them to be operative in and to exert various degrees of control over the same general cultural milieu—and even over the same person.

It is important for us as spiritual directors and for directees to examine our attitudes toward this great variety of human and cultural factors. Along with the operative images of God in a person's life (for example, an impersonal force, a cruel and distant taskmaster, a loving father) these attitudes go a long way in determining the direction and shape a person's growth in the spiritual life ultimately takes. A person who believes that God is above culture, for example, will act very differently from someone who believes that he manifests himself through culture. Similarly, someone who believes that God is diametrically opposed to the achievements of human culture will have a different set of values from someone who believes that he is a transformer of culture. Such attitudes provide a concrete context within which both we and directees can understand the various patterns of relations among God, humanity, and the world that provide the basic contours of all mature theological reflection on the moral and spiritual life.ⁱⁱⁱ

The relational triangle of God, humanity, and the world highlights the close connection between theology, anthropology, and culture. Questions regarding any one of these areas will undoubtedly raise concerns about the others. One's image of God, in other words, is partially determined by one's own self-understanding and conception of the world. Because the specific purpose of spiritual direction is to help a person grow in intimacy with God, it is essential that those coming to us for guidance be encouraged to sift through their operative images of the divine and to strike down any that promote dysfunctional ways of relating. As directors, we should ask directees some very specific questions: "What is your ultimate concern in life?" "What is your primary image of God?" "What is your understanding of the human person?" "How do you view the world?" "How do God, humanity, and the world interact?" "How do they relate?" Although we cannot answer such questions for those who come to us, we can do much to create a safe and welcoming atmosphere in which they feel free to share their deepest feelings without fear of judgment.

Because such images and attitudes are not formed in a vacuum, but in the wider context of familial and societal relationships, directees must take account of the culture in which they live. By doing so, they will be better able to understand the dynamics of their own way of relating and, as a result, be in a better position to do something about those areas that are in some way lacking. The wise and discerning help of a spiritual director can be invaluable in helping directees to recognize the spiritual dimensions of their everyday relationships. By helping them ponder the presence of the divine in the human and the human in the divine, we highlight the concrete ramifications that faith in Christ has for the circumstances of daily life.

As "Emmanuel, God with us," Jesus is present to those seeking guidance on every level of their makeup, and promises to lead each person along the way to sound relational wholeness.

This incarnational correspondence between the human and divine in each person involves certain similarities and differences with the human-divine correspondence in Christ. In the former, the grounds of relationship focus on a moral and spiritual communion of persons, while the connection in the latter is rooted in a unique and incommunicable essence of union in a single divine person.

It is important for us as directors and directees to keep this point of reference in mind when examining the contours of the spiritual life. Otherwise, an unwarranted merging or collapse of one into the other will obfuscate the legitimate distinction between Christology and anthropology. Such a caution, however, in no way obscures the very real and legitimate way Christ embraces those seeking guidance through the Spirit on every level of their makeup: the physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social—to name a few.

The incarnational interpretation involved in spiritual direction should give everyone concerned a deep reverence for the interdisciplinary nature of the direction process itself. It should also foster a strong appreciation of how the mystery of the Word-made-flesh brings unity to the dysfunctional relational triangle of God, humanity, and a world affected by the deeply rooted timidity of the human heart, which Christians have traditionally explained through the doctrine of original sin. In the context of spiritual direction, this incarnational interpretation is the vehicle by which the covenantal relationship between those seeking guidance and the divine is uncovered, pondered, and gradually deepened.

Our Covenant with God

Spiritual direction focuses on the covenantal relationship between the directee and God. It does so through a process of honest reflection and prayerful trust that goes on between director

and directee. While not the central concern of the spiritual direction process, this last relationship has strong covenantal overtones itself and benefits those seeking guidance to the extent it enables them to plumb the depths of their experience of the divine.

This experience is intimately related to the ongoing narrative of the person's life. By focusing on the degree of one's intimacy with God, spiritual direction provides directees with the opportunity to see how such intimacy is reflected in their other relationships. This transposing of the divine relations onto the human sphere brings an element of spiritual (almost sacramental) concreteness to the people's experience that, when seriously and judiciously reflected upon, provides them with even deeper insights into their understanding of and participation in the divine. It also provides the basis for their understanding of and participation in the experience of communion with the variously incorporated members of Christ's body.

The process used to examine this covenantal relationship with God and, through Christ, with the Church, involves a threefold movement of narrative sharing, reflective consideration, and transnarrative correspondence. Those seeking guidance are first given the opportunity to relate concrete experiences of their lives of prayer (occasions of prayer, kinds of prayer, experiences of prayer, and difficulties with prayer). They are then given the chance to step back from the narrative of their moral and spiritual life and ponder its meaning in the wider context of their vocational and life discernment. Finally, they are offered the possibility of looking for points of correspondence between the narrative of their moral and spiritual lives and the Christian tradition, particularly the Gospel narrative of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. By sharing, reflecting upon, and interpreting their lives in the light of Jesus' Gospel narrative, our directees will be better able to discern what God may be asking of them. It is our task to help them along in this process.

During this process, our role as directors is to facilitate as much as possible a thorough and mature self-reflection on the person's life of prayer. We listen, but are also willing to ask some difficult questions: "How do you pray? What do you tell God? What do you share with him? What do you ask of him? What difficulties do you encounter in prayer? Which form of prayer do you like best? Which do you dislike? Which form is God calling you to try?" Such a role means helping directees to name whatever fears may be keeping them from growing in intimacy with the divine. It also means enabling them to articulate whatever experiences of the divine are lying on the periphery of their consciousness, and encouraging them to adopt new strategies for spiritual growth that will deepen their communion with God and others. To facilitate this process, it is important for us to receive careful supervision in the subtleties of the spiritual direction relationship. To this end, regularly scheduled supervisory sessions can help guarantee the quality of the direction both given and received. They can also serve to keep the direction within the bounds of clearly thought-out, ethical guidelines.^{iv}

Like human actions, relationships are "moral" to the extent that they involve deliberated will.^v The covenantal relationship involved in spiritual direction fits this description very well. The category that reflects this important moral and spiritual phenomenon best is friendship and its three dynamic marks of benevolence, reciprocity, and mutual indwelling. Benevolence means wishing a person well and actively pursuing one's well-being. Reciprocity indicates that the relationship is mutual and not one-sided. Mutual indwelling points to the bond shared by friends and the sense of carrying one's friend within one's heart. Friendship with God is the goal of the moral life and the ultimate foundation of holiness.^{vi} It is no small matter that the saints of the early Church came to be known as "the friends of God."^{vii} Nor is it insignificant that the

Christian God has traditionally been identified with the transcendental values of Greco-Roman philosophy known as the One, the True, and the Good.

Becoming a friend of God, in other words, involves not only growing in holiness, but also sharing a deeper participation in the Good. Growth in goodness has traditionally been associated with leading a life of virtue. In the Christian tradition, this means leading a life imbued with the theological and moral virtues and open to the influence of the Spirit and the variety of gifts it bestows. Leading such a life means walking the path of conversion and allowing God to heal the wounded areas of one's life so one's capacity for mature, loving relationships with oneself, others, and God is elevated and gently transformed.

Our Transformation in God

The ultimate goal of the covenantal process of spiritual direction is deepening intimacy with the divine. Such intimacy comes about through the gradual transformation of the person's posture toward the threefold relational triangle of God, humanity, and the world. Spiritual direction seeks a renewal and a deepening of one's relationship to the vast nexus of relationships in which a person is immersed. That renewal comes about through a simultaneous turning away from dysfunctional relationships and undue attachments and a turning toward the elusive but ever present face of the divine.

The path of conversion involves stepping away from those things that prevent us from forming genuine, loving relationships with God, others, and the world, and embracing those things that further it. For most people, this path of conversion involves a threefold process typically referred to as the purgative, illuminative, and unitive way. It would be a mistake to consider these ways as single, isolated steps that are never revisited in the moral and spiritual

life. The goal of spiritual direction is not merely to help those seeking guidance over the hurdles of purgation and illumination in order to experience union with the divine. Rather, it seeks to enable them to embrace every aspect of their journey through life and to place it under the compassionate and loving gaze of the divine.

For most people, the path of conversion involves covering ground already traveled. In their journey through life, they often find themselves taking two steps forward and one (sometimes two or three) back. Just when we think we are making progress in our relationship with God, we fall flat on our faces, and suddenly realize that we can do nothing apart from God. We are humbled by our failure and seek God's forgiveness. We stand up and walk, this time a little more conscious that he is walking by our side. Before long, we lose sight of his presence in our lives and fall again. Part of this experience of repetitive loss may have to do with the fact that the closer one gets to God the more one gets in touch with those areas in life that still need to be surrendered. The greatest of saints—from Francis of Assisi, to Teresa of Avila, to Alphonsus de Liguori, to the Little Flower, to Teresa of Calcutta— have often referred to themselves as the worst of sinners. They do so not out of a pious display of humility before God and others, but because intimacy with God has caused them to see themselves as they really are. For them, the processes of purgation and illumination enter into their experience of union with the divine and are not merely left behind. For this reason, a more adequate image of progress in the spiritual life is not that of separated and isolated steps on the ladder of sanctity, but an upward spiraling movement involving purgative, illuminative, and unitive moments in the deepening process of the person's journey into the divine.^{viii}

The Eucharist is the symbol par excellence of the transformational process involved in moral and spiritual life. In it, the movements of purgation, illumination, and union are intimately

intertwined in the sacramental encounter of the risen Lord. In each Eucharist celebration, sorrow for one's sins (purgation), insight into the meaning of the Word (illumination), and communion with the person of Jesus (union) converge in a ritual enactment of the messianic banquet.

The now-but-still-to-come character of this celebration is an apt metaphor for the way the moral and spiritual spheres of the community's life converge in the process of spiritual direction. The gradual transformation involved in direction necessarily involves confronting one's shadow and turning away from sin (purgation), gaining new insights into the nature of one's relationship with God (illumination), and a deepening sense of communion with God and the members of Christ's body (union). It thus serves an important integrating function in the person's life and helps her to find important threads of meaning in her faith experience.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to consider the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways as pertaining only to the spiritual life or as touching the moral life only to the extent they build upon or presuppose it. While the classical disciplines of moral and spiritual theology were based on the hierarchical distinction between the way of the commandments and the way of the counsels, contemporary theologians are increasingly interested in how the moral and spiritual spheres of life influence each other and interrelate.^{ix}

As stated earlier, there is a moral side to all spiritual knowledge and a corresponding spiritual side to all moral knowledge. This insight comes to the fore most clearly when the relational dimensions of the moral life are emphasized in addition to the responsibilities and obligations flowing from them. Every purgative, illuminative, and unitive moment in a person's journey through life is spiritual to the extent that its ultimate goal is growth in intimacy with the divine. It is moral, in turn, because such intimacy necessarily involves a vast network of deliberated actions.

Intimacy with the divine, in other words, requires forming and living in right relationship with oneself, others, the world and, of course, God. To overlook any of these areas would risk dividing one's life into separate and unrelated spheres of behavior. It would thus run counter to the Second Vatican Council's universal call to holiness and leave the false impression that it is possible to lead a virtuous life apart from God and others. As a result, it would fail to recognize the deeply integrated nature of the moral and spiritual spheres of the Christian life and overlook the intrinsic participatory nature of human and divine love.^x

Conclusion

There are many models of spiritual direction and no one wishes to replace a balanced variety of approaches with a monolithic systematization that would rob the ministry of one of its greatest riches. At the same time, an unwarranted proliferation of models might also produce the contrary effect of disorienting directors about the purpose, scope, and method of their ministry. A deepening consciousness of the human, covenantal, and transformational dimensions of direction is meant to provide a solid basis for growth in the moral and spiritual life, one directors can refer to with confidence and without hesitation. It is also meant to be flexible enough to allow them to adapt its insights to their own special preferences regarding the approach and implementation of their ministry.

Above all, it is essential that we as directors maintain an honest, trusting, and open relationship with those seeking guidance. Only in the context of such a relationship will people feel free enough to share with us the most intimate details of their moral and spiritual experience. Once this important personal background is shared, those coming to us can engage us in serious reflection and together we can begin to ask questions about its meaning for the moral and

spiritual life. If it is not shared in an honest and open manner, then we can easily become engaged in a mutual form of self-deception. Those seeking guidance will assume a “persona” that may be acceptable to us, but does not correspond to their true experience. We, in turn, will be responding to a mask and may not have the sensitivity or wherewithal to ask directees to remove it. Rather than listening to the voice of God deep within their hearts, directors and directees may end up acting out of a false sense of self and lose sight of the whole purpose of direction. In the next chapter, we will explore how active listening can be a useful tool in helping everyone concerned remain centered on the direction process and focused on the one thing that matters.

Reflection Questions

- Do you think it is common for people today to manifest a split between their moral and spiritual lives?
- Is this split the same in everyone or is there a range of distances?
- How is it that a person can separate action in the world from one’s journey to God?
- How intrinsic is the link between moral action and a person’s spiritual well being?
- How is it that life in the Spirit can be viewed as separate from one’s daily decisions?

ⁱ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 2.8, trans. William C. Creasy, com., Dennis Billy (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2005), 86.

ⁱⁱ See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 39-44.

ⁱⁱⁱ See N. Max Wildiers, *The Theologian and His Universe: Theology and Cosmology from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), 1.

^{iv} For supervision in spiritual direction, see William A. Barry and Mary C. Guy, “The Practice of Supervision in Spiritual Direction,” *Review for Religious* 37(1978): 834-42; Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 175-91; Maureen Conroy, *Looking into the Well: Supervision of Spiritual Directors* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1995). Ethical guidelines for spiritual directors are available in Spiritual Directors International, *Guidelines for Ethical Conduct*, (San Francisco: SDI, 1999), 1-8.

^v See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 1, a. 1, resp.

^{vi} See Ibid., I-II, q. 28. a. 2, resp.; II-II, q. 23, a. 1, resp. See Also Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life*, 130-41.

^{vii} See Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 54-80.

^{viii} See William Johnston, *Mystical Theology: The Science of Love* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), 192. According to Fredrica R. Halligan, “Researchers into both psychotherapy and the stages of spiritual development today tend to agree with the spiral image of progress.” See “Keeping Faith with the Future: Toward Final Conscious Unity,” in *The Fires of Desire: Erotic Energies and the Spiritual Quest*, eds. Fredrica R. Halligan and John J. Shea (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 184.

^{ix} See for example, Michael K. Duffy, *Be Blessed in What You Do: The Unity of Christian Ethics and Spirituality* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988); Neil Brown, *Spirit of the World: The Moral Basis of Christian Spirituality* (Manly, New South Wales, Australia: Catholic Institute of Sydney, 1990); Mark O'Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy: On the Relationship of Christian Ethics and Spirituality* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995); Dennis J. Billy and Donna L. Orsuto, eds., *Spirituality and Morality: Integrating Prayer and Action* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996); Richard Gula, *The Good Life: Where Morality and Spirituality Converge* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999); William C. Spohn, "Spirituality and Ethics: Exploring the Connections," *Theological Studies* 58(1997): 109-23; Idem, *Go and Do Likewise*. See also the issues dedicated to spirituality and ethics in *The Way Supplement* 88(1997) and *Listening* 34(1999).

^x For the universal call to holiness, see *Lumen gentium*, nos. 39-42. On the role of right relationships in the moral and spiritual life, see Kevin J. O'Neil, "Forming Right Relationships," in Billy and Orsuto, eds., *Spirituality and Morality*, 97-111; O'Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy*, 75-90; Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life*, 142-67. For the various kinds of participative love, see Edward Collins Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), esp. 74-115.