

**CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION:
HOW IT CAME TO BE AND WHAT IT IS TODAY**

June 2010

Marilyn L. Buehler, M.Div.

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

"Wherever people are willing to accept the responsibility of staying in God's presence on behalf of others with the intention of assisting those persons in their ongoing discernment, authentic spiritual direction can happen."¹

This paper explores the beginnings of spiritual direction in the Christian tradition, several well-known women spiritual directors, and glimpses what spiritual direction is today. After the birth of Christianity, the role of the spiritual director developed over the centuries. The early Christian communities did not have formal spiritual directors. The community itself guided the spiritual formation of the members.

In *A Woman's Way, The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors*, Patricia Ranft observes

No where in the literature of primitive Christianity do we find the phrases "spiritual direction" or "spiritual guidance." We do, though, find many people reflecting on the reality of spiritual direction, albeit using different terminology. Early Christians talked about their obligation to bear witness, and when we examine the phenomenon we find that as a result of bearing witness, others were indeed directed toward the Christian understanding of happiness. Just as Jesus' example directed people toward spiritual perfection, every person bearing witness was potentially a spiritual director.²

According to Thomas Merton spiritual direction began as the monastic tradition developed. Those withdrawing from the community to live a solitary life in the

¹ Mary Rose Dougherty, S.S.N.D., *Group Spiritual Direction, Community for Discernment* (NY: Paulist Press, 1995), 23.

² Patricia Ranft, *A Woman's Way, The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors* (NY: Palgrave, 2000), 21.

desert required guidance.³ When individuals went off to the desert, the need for personal spiritual directors arose.

Inspired by the Psalm, "Be still and know that I am God," those called to a monastic life went into the desert to seek stillness. Men and women left the city community to live in individual cells located in the caves around Egypt. The cells in which they lived were built by hand. Their lives were devoted to silence and prayer. Desert communities formed to provide spiritual support for those who separated themselves from the city life.

Some monastics did not participate in the Eucharist. Some lived in solitude and gathered in community once or twice a week. Because the lifestyle was so severe, a novice was guided by a spiritual father, "abba," or spiritual mother, "amma." The neophyte may have lived in the same cell with the spiritual father, watching all that he did. The neophyte was to reveal his thoughts to the abba and was then instructed how to react.⁴

A young Coptic Christian, Antony of Egypt, is recognized as first desert monastic. Around the year 270 C.E., at the age of 20, both of his parents died. Anthony was left with a large farm in the Nile Valley with responsibility for a young sister. He was inspired by the teaching, "If you wish to be perfect, go and sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." He felt the scripture was speaking directly to him. He disposed of his property, ensured his sister would be cared for, and then left for life in the desert.

³ Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction & Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987), 11.

⁴ Ibid, 17.

Over time, others followed Antony. The desert became populated with these men and women living in individual cells. Living alone in the desert was not easy; the advice and help of the elders was freely given to the novice.

In this empty desert there was so much space between each of the cells that none of them could either see or hear each other. Living one to a cell there is a great silence and quietness among them. Only on Saturdays and Sundays do they come together in church, where it seems to them as if they are restored to heaven. If anyone is missing they realise that he is prevented by some bodily ailment, and each one visits with something of his own which might be welcome to one who is sick - not all at once, but they all take turns. There is no other reason for anyone to dare break into the silence of his neighbour, unless it might be for someone to be able to give a word of instruction, and like athletes in the arena anoint each other with the oil of a consoling word. Some of them come from three or four miles away from the church, so spaced out are their cells from each other. But so great is the charity among them, and so thoughtful are they for each other and for all the brothers, that they are held in admiration and as an example for all. As soon as they know that anyone else wants to come alive with them, each of them is quite willing to offer his own cell.⁵

Those not called to the monastic life sought guidance from those in the desert. People living in the cities would travel into the desert to meet with the desert ammas and abbas. The amma or abba would “welcome you as if they were welcoming the Divine itself, and they would have sat with you in your longing, listening deeply with you for where it might be leading. In the end, they would have ‘given you a word,’ the story goes, a seed thought or a teaching story inspired by the spirit to meditate on as you made your trip back to the dailiness of your life.”⁶ This is one of the beginnings of the tradition of Christian spiritual direction.

⁵ Apollonius, *Vitae Patrum, Book II*, available from <http://www.vitae-patrum.org.uk/page62.html>, accessed March 21, 2010.

⁶ Janet Quinn, R.N., Ph.D. *Spiritual Mentoring: An Ancient Practice in Modern Form* in Joan Borysenko, Ph.D. and Gordon Dveirin, Ed.D, *The Soul’s Compass, What is Spiritual Guidance?* (New York City: Hay House, Inc., 2007), 234.

Women as the First Christian Spiritual Directors

Patrica Ranft offers another perspective regarding how spiritual direction began in the Christian tradition. In *A Woman's Way*, she observes, at the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine,

His mother instructed those waiting on table, 'Do whatever he tells you.' (Jn 2:4-5). Here we also see a woman directing those without faith how to respond to Jesus. This is the first spiritual direction given during Jesus' public ministry and hence the first in Christianity.⁷

The Samaritan woman, with whom Jesus spoke with at the well, was the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus' own disciples were still confused as to whom he was. The Samaritan woman named Jesus as the Messiah and became the first Christian evangelist.⁸ Considering the role of women in society during the time of Jesus, it is remarkable that a woman could successfully convey that Jesus was the Messiah. It must have been more than her words to which people responded.

Ranft concludes that Mary Magdalene also acted as a spiritual director. Not only was Mary Magdalene the apostle to the apostles, but she was the "spiritual director of spiritual directors."

It is a woman's understanding of the meaning of the Resurrection that is at the origin of Christianity, and it is a woman's communication of that perception which guides the rest of the disciples to their fulfillment. Christian spirituality—indeed, Christianity itself—formally begins with Mary Magdalene.⁹

The role of women as spiritual directors in the Bible seems to be hidden. In her lessons on Esoteric Christianity, Rev. Carol E. Parrish sites, "The Soul, the mother, waits

⁷ Ranft, *A Woman's Way, The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors*, 10.

⁸ Ibid., 10-11.

⁹ Ibid.,12.

at the edge of our mind to speak to us however she can.”¹⁰ If we ponder these recognitions of Mary and the Samaritan woman, these stories are symbolic of inner promptings of Sophia. Sophia, the Holy Wisdom of Wisdom, speaks through these women. It is an intuitive, knowingness, not based on a rational mind analysis, but a simple recognition.

In the story of Mary and Martha, Mary sat at Jesus’ feet, while Mary tended to the details of hospitality.

The witness of these two women’s distinct approaches to Christianity were then and remain so today the two chief models upon which spiritual direction recognizes itself, one emphasizing the active life, the other emphasizing the contemplative.¹¹

Confessors or Spiritual Directors?

Spiritual direction having its roots of desert monasticism, later in the west became associated with the confessional.¹² The director, who is convinced of God’s love and mercy, even when the directee is not, is able to accept any disclosure with equanimity.”¹³ Those in the Christian tradition practicing the sacrament of confession seek a Confessor, a priest who has been granted the authority to hear confessions. The priest hears the confessee’s confession and grants him or her absolution. The grace conferred through the sacrament restores and reconciles one’s relationship with God. Confession may be a part of a spiritual direction, but a confessor is not always a spiritual director.

¹⁰ Carol E. Parrish-Harra, Ph.D., *Sophia, Holy Spirit of Wisdom, Esoteric Christianity* 102. Sancta Sophia Seminary, Tahlequah, OK. chapter 9, 7.

¹¹ Ranft, *A Woman’s Way, The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors*, 12.

¹² Kathleen R. Fischer, *Women at the Well, Feminists Perspectives on Spiritual Direction* (NY: Paulist Press, 1988), 12.

¹³ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1992), 21.

Spiritual Direction, Therapy, Counseling: Some Differences

Spiritual direction differs from counseling and therapy in that its focus is about how God moves through one's life. It is not about crisis resolution or therapy. The Shalem Institute of Spiritual Directors distinguishes the difference between spiritual direction and therapeutic relationships.

It should be noted that there are distinctions between spiritual direction and therapeutic relationships. In general it might be said that therapy and counseling deal primarily with problem areas of one's life and attempt to bring healthy resolution to issues. Spiritual direction is concerned with finding and responding to God (in the midst of pain or disorder as well as in the rest of life). Problem/issue solving is not the primary focus of direction.¹⁴

Spiritual direction differs from pastoral counseling. Pastoral counseling deals more with problems or crisis of daily life, rather than seeking to find God's guidance and movement in daily life. As Kenneth Leech in *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* explains,

Spiritual direction is essentially and centrally concerned with God, with the vision of God, with an understanding of the workings of God, and with helping human being to attain union with God. . . Spiritual direction is not primarily concerned with problem-solving or with life crisis and states of emotional distress. It is not a ministry to the deeply troubled. Pastoral counseling tends to focus very much on problems rather than on long-term guidance within an ongoing and maturing spiritual life.¹⁵

David. G. Benner in his book *Sacred Companions, The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* defines spiritual direction as “*a prayer process in which a person seeking help in cultivating a deeper personal relationship with God meets with*

¹⁴ *Spiritual Direction, An Online Version of The Shalem Pamphlet on Spiritual Direction* available from <http://shalem.org/index.php/resources/publications/pamphlets-on-spiritual-direction/spiritual-direction> access March 21, 2010.

¹⁵ Kenneth Leech, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*, (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1989), 57-58.

another for prayer and conversation that is focused on increasing awareness of God in the midst of life experiences and facilitating surrender to God's will.¹⁶

Women Spiritual Directors in the Christian Tradition

The spiritual director takes the role as a midwife when providing direction to women. Women being more intuitive possess a latent knowledge that the spiritual director can assist bring forth.¹⁷ Dream, images and symbols can be used to unfold their inner knowing.

We can turn to some of the better known spiritual directors in the Christian tradition to gain insight into ways to approach spiritual direction. A few of the well known women spiritual directors are briefly introduced to share their wisdom.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098 -1179)

As a teenager Hildegard of Bingen lived in a community and took vows to live according to the rule of St. Benedict. She was a writer, composer, and corresponded with Church leaders of her day.¹⁸ She wrote seventy-two songs and one play. At age 42 she had twenty-six visions which she wrote down revealing the mysteries of the Gospel. Her writing describes the love between God and Humanity. One of her prayers demonstrates her relationship with God is one of love and light.

O God, by whose grace thy servant Hildegard, enkindled with the Fire of thy love, became a burning and shining light in thy Church: Grant that we also may be aflame with the spirit of love and discipline, and may ever walk before thee as

¹⁶ David. G. Benner, *Sacred Companions, The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 94.

¹⁷ Fischer, *Women at the Well, Feminists Perspectives on Spiritual Direction*, 12

¹⁸ Ibid, 6.

children of light; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, liveth and reigneth, one God, now and for ever.¹⁹

St. Catherine of Siena, Doctor of the Church (1347 – 1380)

St. Catherine of Siena's spiritual direction regarded both the individual and the community. She believed that self knowledge was the key to happiness and that the lack of knowledge was cause for evil.²⁰ "Keep in mind that each of you has your own vineyard. But everyone is joined to your neighbors."²¹ As Christians it is one's duty to help others with prayer and counsel.

Catherine taught that the foundations of spiritual director lie in the principle of love for virtues. A spiritual director will lovingly correct their bad habits and planting virtues. She addressed God as she sought answers to her questions regarding spiritual direction. God as her spiritual director answered here three questions.

Specifically she wanted to know, "should I or can I judge the one to be in light and the other in darkness? Or if I should see one going the way of great penance and another not, should I judge that the one who does greater penance is more perfect than another? The second query pertained to the discernment: How is a spiritual director "to tell whether a spiritual visitation is true or false?"²²

God's instructed her to individualize the penance given to each. It was revealed to Catherine that gladness of the soul is the sign of true experience. You must never pass judgment on anyone; you must wait for God's will for them.

¹⁹ Biographical sketches of memorable Christians of the past, Hildegard of Bingen, Visionary available from <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/247.html> access June 20, 2010.

²⁰ Ranft, *A Woman's Way, The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors*, 88.

²¹ Ibid., 89.

²² Ibid., 88.

Julian of Norwich (1342-1423)

At the age of about 30, Julian began living as an anchoress in an anchorhold attached to the Church of St. Julian in Conisford, Norwich. She became so ill, that her mother thought Julian was dead. During the time of her illness, she had vision which took her many years of prayer to understand.

Phyllis Zagano in her book, *Woman to Woman, An Anthology of Women's Spirituality*, talks about one of Julian's visions. God showed Julian a hazel nut that would last forever. We need to learn to rest in the love of God. We should despise nothing. We should not rest until we despise nothing, since God created everything. Every kind of thing will be well; God takes note of great men, and simple small men.²³

People came to Julian for spiritual counsel. She believed that the fruit of prayer is to be united with God in all things. She experienced the feminine aspect of God through Jesus as the mother; she understood the motherhood of God. In her attempt to convey God's love for his children, Julian talked of Jesus as mother.

As for the first: I saw and understood that

The high Power of the Trinity is our Father
and the deep Wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother,
and the great Love of the Trinity is our Lord;
and all this we have in our human nature and in
our essential creation.

Furthermore, I saw that the Second Person, who is
our Mother in essence,
that same dearworthy Person has become our
Mother in flesh.²⁴

²³ Phyllis Zagano, *Woman to Woman, An Anthology of Women's Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 19,

²⁴ Fr. John-Julian, OJN, *A Lesson of Love, The Revelations of Julian of Norwich (unabridged) translated and Appointed for Daily Reading*, (NY: Writers Club Press, 2003), 200.

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Teresa entered the Avila Carmel when she was twenty. She became best known for her instructions on prayer and the interior life. *Interior Castle* is her work on the spiritual life. This writing describes a castle with seven mansions, at which a King resides in the center. Each mansion is a step on the spiritual life. Total surrender to God's will is the key to union with him. The soul moves through each room to meet the King in the center.

The first three focus on meditative prayer, pious reading, and the practice of love. The fourth introduces the prayer of quiet, where the Lord invites the soul to move to a contemplative life with him. The fifth and sixth further describes the state of infused contemplation, and in the sixth mansion she specifically recommends intuitive meditation on the humanity of Christ. It is in the seventh mansion that the soul experiences the mystical marriage of Christ.²⁵

Advances in Technology Impact Spiritual Direction

As we study the history of spiritual direction it is important to note the impact the printing press had on the spiritual direction. Patricia Ranft cites in, *A Woman's Way, The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors*, during the lifetime of Catherine of Bologna the printing press opened new ways for the spiritual director to communicate. She used the written word as a means for spiritual directions and "promoted reading as a means to learn life's mysteries."²⁶ Catherine authored a book called *Seven Weapons of the Spirit* to guide others and established a library for the women at the Bologna monastery.

²⁵ Zagano, , *Woman to Woman, An Anthology of Women's Spirituality*, 37-38.

²⁶ Ranft, *A Woman's Way, The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors*, 103.

With the advent of the printing press, spiritual reading became part of the practice. In recent times, the telephone, mail, email, web sites, blogs, teleconferences, webinars have changed the dynamics of spiritual direction. It is no longer limited to a face to face interaction.

Group spiritual direction has evolved out of individual guidance. As more of humanity awakens, perhaps, group direction and mentoring will become more prominent. Group work is a keynote of the Aquarian Age, so it is possible that group spiritual direction may meet the needs of some responding to the soul's promptings.

Group Spiritual Direction

The following is a format for group spiritual direction as described by Mary Rose Dougherty in *Group Spiritual Direction, Community for Discernment*. The intent is for a facilitator to hold a sacred space for the group and use this as a guideline for working with a group.

When a group meets for spiritual direction, begin with silence; this clearly delineates the beginning of the spiritual direction. Silence also helps to move out of the chattering mind and to be more receptive to the God's presence. The silence can be ended with a brief prayer, or ringing a bell.

Use of silence, prayer, group sharing, and reflection invokes the Holy Spirit of Wisdom. The group through sharing and openness receives insights greater than those of each individual alone.

1. **Opening**
2. **Silence** (about 5 minutes)
3. **One person shares** (10-15 minutes).

This sharing is expressed in terms of one's ongoing relationship with God and how it relates to what their prayer has been like around that content. *Avoid asking for information or solutions.*

The group listens prayerfully, without interruption.

4. **Silence** (3 or 4 minutes)
5. **Response** (about 10 minutes) ~ invited by the facilitator.
Trust God's caring love is present for the person in silence and in words. Questions and comments are offered to the presenter. If there is movement towards "fixing things" or idle curiosity, the facilitator or someone may ask for silence to bring the group back to where they can listen to God together. Spiritual life is ongoing, and there does not need to be closure at this session.
6. **Silence** (5 minutes)
Pray for the presenter. The presenter may want to take notes.
7. **Steps 2 through 6 are repeated until each person has shared**, with a short break midway.
8. **Pray for absent members.** (10 minutes)
Absent members should communicate to the facilitator or the group regarding their absence. Whatever is appropriate can be shared at this time of prayer. This can be placed anywhere during the meeting.
9. **Reflection** (about 10 minutes)
This group reflection is on noticing with God how the time together went. This should be done in terms of prayerfulness, what has served or what has gotten in the way.
 - How prayerful were we during the session?
 - What was the quality of our silence?
 - What seemed to take our attention from God?
 - Where did we go off track?
10. **Closing.**²⁷

A Reminder

Margaret Guenther states in *Holy Listening*, "The person sitting opposite me is always a mystery. When I label it, I limit."²⁸

A wise spiritual director must remember and communicate to those whom they direct, that the Holy Spirit is really the director. A spiritual mentor is a spiritual friend.

²⁷ Dougherty, S.S.N.D., Mary Rose, *Group Spiritual Direction, Community for Discernment* (NY: Paulist Press, 1995), 14.

²⁸ Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1929), 19.

Jesus, the way shower for the Christian way and our mentor shared with us what God taught him:

I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father. . . . I commissioned you to go out and to bear fruit, fruit that will last: . . . What I command you is to love one another (John 15:15-17).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Apollonius, *Vitae Patrum, Book II*, available from <http://www.vitae-patrum.org.uk/page62.html>, accessed March 21, 2010.
- Benner, David. G. *Sacred Companions, The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002.
- Biographical sketches of memorable Christians of the past, Hildegard of Bingen, Visionary* available from <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/247.html> access June 20, 2010.
- Dougherty, S.S.N.D., Mary Rose. *Group Spiritual Direction, Community for Discernment*. NY: Paulist Press, 1995.
- Fischer, Kathleen R. *Women at the Well, Feminists Perspectives on Spiritual Direction*. NY: Paulist Press, 1988.
- Guenther, Margaret. *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*. Boston: Cowley Publications, 1929.
- John-Julian, Fr. OJN. *A Lesson of Love, The Revelations of Julian of Norwich (unabridged) translated and Appointed for Daily Reading*. NY: Writers Club Press, 2003.
- Leech, Kenneth. *Spirituality and Pastoral Care*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1989.
- Merton, Thomas. *Spiritual Direction & Meditation*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1987.
- Parrish-Harra, Carol E., Ph.D. *Sophia, Holy Spirit of Wisdom, Esoteric Christianity 102*. Sancta Sophia Seminary, Tahlequah, OK. chapter 9, 7.
- Ranft, Patricia. *A Woman's Way, The Forgotten History of Women Spiritual Directors*. NY: Palgrave, 2000.
- Quinn, Janet, R.N., Ph.D. *Spiritual Mentoring: An Ancient Practice in Modern Form* in Joan Borysenko, Ph.D. and Gordon Dveirin, Ed.D, *The Soul's Compass, What is Spiritual Guidance?* New York City: Hay House, Inc., 2007.
- Spiritual Direction, An Online Version of the Shalem Pamphlet on Spiritual Direction* available from <http://shalem.org/index.php/resources/publications/pamphlets-on-spiritual-direction/spiritual-direction> accessed March 21, 2010.
- Zagano, Phyllis. *Woman to Woman, An Anthology of Women's Spirituality*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993.