

# Spiritual Direction in Troubled Times



*“Let those whom Jesus Christ has graciously invited to assist Him in His suffering poor, have their hearts animated with gratitude and love.”*

*— Catherine McAuley*

Always there is spiritual direction because God is always directing us. Every day is new, and we find ourselves increasingly bombarded with local, regional, global, and cosmic news of growth and destruction. It can be overwhelming. Our call, however, is not to try to figure everything out but to wake up to God’s loving initiative. And how our Loving God keeps initiating! Across the globe, people desire Love; they want to be good, caring, committed disciples regardless of race, color, or creed. Yet all of us get lost from time to time and need someone with whom we can freely walk and discern God’s voice, a God *who speaks to us as God made us*. I write this article in gratitude to and in appreciation for Catherine McAuley who modeled and encouraged spiritual direction.

Requests for spiritual direction have mushroomed in the last few years. Why? No one seems sure. COVID with its blessings and curses? Current political and social divisions? Disappointments with our Church? Searching to discern false news from truth? Desiring a deeper understanding of *Laudato Si'*? A deeper understanding of one's call? Maybe a little of each.

Individuals who call for spiritual direction put it this way:

- "This COVID thing has taken my family...I am angry with God and don't know where to turn..."
- "After the death of my child, I have lost all ability to pray."
- "I need to discern some things about my marriage."
- "God has abandoned me in my neediest hour...I need God and cannot find Him."
- "Things are basically fine; I just want to deepen my relationship with God and find my next steps..."
- "I'm losing faith in my Church and politics with all that is going on, I need to sort things through."

In truth, it is a misnomer to refer to a spiritual director as "director." More accurately, s/he is a well-trained facilitator/guide in the ways of the Spirit. Only God is the director. So, what makes an effective spiritual guide? Persons seasoned in spiritual direction have said that an effective spiritual director is engaged in an ongoing life of prayer, helps others grow in intimacy with God, other-centeredness, and fosters a contemplative stance in everyday life. Given our current complex world, there is an added quality needed in a spiritual director: *social consciousness*. Social responsibility in a spiritual director seems a pre-requisite in these troubled times, for spiritual direction is not focused on privatized spirituality to shelter one from a hurtful or violent world. Rather, a spiritual director moves toward turbulence and helps one to find God in all things.

When walking with a spiritual guide I might ponder the following questions: Am I guided in prayer and action to listen to the cries of humanity, the cries of the earth, as well as tending my individual heart? Am I made more globally aware, acting from a conviction that all of life is interconnected? Does my director begin by accepting me as I am and where I am, supporting the Spirit's action to facilitate transformation via

movements in my prayer? Is my director/guide unafraid to point-out that which is destructive or choices I make that continue to weigh me down? Can s/he distinguish between impulses that lead to life rather than death? An effective spiritual director stands in service of the larger community even as s/he works with individuals.

Both individual and communal spiritual direction/guidance can be a powerful integrating force in helping us to take a deeper dive into our commitment to Mercy's Critical Concerns. Cosmic shifts of consciousness are shaping our world today, particularly through the environmental movement with its connections to poverty, violence, and the various consequences of climate change. Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* puts things on the prophetic edge for all of us. Francis writes that God's love must extend to the wildflower, meadows of grass, the sparrow, the whale, all God's creatures as part of the heavenly realm. Through individual *and* communal spiritual direction, we allow the grief of abuse of earth, abuse of immigrants, racism, oppression of women, LGBTQ and other marginalized to awaken our souls. It is our sisters and brothers connected with Mercy Critical Concerns who teach us. Sisters of Mercy are called to be radically collaborative.

There are several dynamic processes important in spiritual guidance that help us move forward. This article will focus on three: Love, Resistance, and Discernment.

## Love

*"The only return God asks of us is a return of love." — Catherine McAuley*

It is abundantly clear that Jesus was about LOVE first and foremost in word and deed. Jesus was about relationships. Catherine too viewed relational love at the core of everything: Writing the Mercy rule in a manner loving and inviting, spiritually guiding her Sisters and associates with a focus on loving God; loving each other, and loving one's neighbor which always included the last, the least, the outsider; regularly writing and signing her letters with great affection. Catherine's loving ways are beautifully documented in the writings of Mary Sullivan, RSM, as in her *The Path of Mercy and The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley*.

Both Jesus and Catherine believed in a loving Trinitarian God, a communal God who constantly longs to communicate the Love God *is* in each of us, and send it forth, as

Jesus' sent his disciples "to all nations." Catherine's Trinitarian spirituality focused on hospitality, community, relationships (including the earth), and intimacy with God. It is *Love* that is at the core of Mercy hospitality: welcoming the stranger, offering a cup of cold water to the thirsty, feeding the hungry, tending the sick—all Works of Mercy.

Many years ago, while doing some brief ministry in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia, I had the privilege of spending time contemplating Rublev's large original icon of the Trinity, often referred to as "Hospitality of Strangers," housed in Moscow's beautiful Tretyakov Museum where icons on every biblical subject are displayed and prayed with. I thought of Catherine. The museum invites total silence.

When one contemplates Rublev's beautiful work of art, one notes an open space on the icon, a space that draws one into contemplation with the Trinity. All three members of the Trinity sit at a round table. Rublev imbedded a small mirror in the front of the table reflecting the viewer's image, emotionally drawing the viewer into involvement with the Trinity. Each person, including the viewer is looking to the other as primary, i.e., seeing oneself in another, the poor, sick, ignorant, marginalized, and all those different from the viewer. A kind of loving *perichoresis*, i.e., a mutual giving and receiving. God reveals God's inner life as dynamic, as three (now four) people in Love. It is a remarkable, telling image! One that Catherine intuitively knew. Love is core. Love is a Trinitarian dance, and we in the world are all part of it. The depth of this global connection is Christ-centered leading us to love our Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Indigenous, non-religious, agnostic, atheist, and other neighbors as ourselves.

Spiritual direction too is a Trinitarian experience. By that I mean that the spiritual director is not focused on the director-directee relationship, but rather on the directee-and-her-relationship-with-God and what is happening or not happening in that relationship, with the director serving as facilitator/guide. Anything else borders on counseling or friendship sharing, albeit there are aspects of these relationships minimally experienced in the course of spiritual direction.

## Resistance

*"Disengage your heart if it is entangled." — Catherine McAuley*

As much as most of us want to grow in love, we all encounter resistances to growth. What most of us desire are answers to our challenges. Jesus, on the other hand, asks questions over and over: “What do you want? What are you looking for? Do you love me?” There is no questioner like Jesus who knows that our *very lives will answer these questions*. Thus, spiritual directors/guides ask seekers/directees to bring to direction her/his LIFE, not what s/he feels s/he should bring to spiritual direction.

Resistances in spiritual direction to God’s initiative take many forms: Not making time for prayer; not disclosing self in prayer; not listening to God; not staying informed about church and community documents like *Laudato Si’*, *Synodality*, or “Exploring Mercy Anew, our Chapter documents of 2023; having fears or reluctance to “accept love”; fear of the demands God’s deep love will make on us, and so on.

“What we resist will persist,” say psychologists. A spiritual director will often encourage a person to *welcome* what feelings or movements one resists. When feelings and resistances are identified, it is helpful to talk in a loving, accepting way to the resistance; listen to what God has to say, then what your spiritual director might have to say. Fear not. Feelings are there for a benign purpose which one can now try to engage. Keep the dialogue going. God will help each person’s soul to arrive at the next step. The lover and beloved (individual or group) opening wider to each other and moving forward.

Spiritual crisis of any kind can be a cause for celebration in that it has the possibility of getting out of one’s own way, so that the Divine can take over. It can be a grueling process to come to this surrender. I remember reading that one of the mystics, John of the Cross, wrote that the dark night of the Soul is not only about bringing us down to our knees; it is about *unconditional Love* that wakes us up and affirms our deepest humanity. The dark night allows us to open to the nakedness of real suffering at the loss of the death of loved ones, or one’s health, or a tragedy beyond imagining. “God uses our helplessness when it arises, and few things bring our human helplessness home to us more sharply than grief,” says spiritual teacher and director, Bill Creed, SJ, Are there ways your losses or failures have transfigured your soul? It is worth contemplating them.

# Discernment

*“God does not bestow all His choicest Blessings on one person...”*

*“We hope to get on, taking short, careful steps, not great strides.”*

— Catherine McAuley

A stance of on-going discernment is a core attribute in both personal and communal spiritual direction as we, Sisters of Mercy, move forward with the ILT's (Institute Leadership Team) call to participate in a Strategic Plan for the future. Discernment is a way of *contemplative listening* to the desire of God and the greatest needs revealed in our Critical Concerns, and how these realities intersect with our current individual and collective God-given gifts and resources. We cannot do everything. We cannot do it alone. Developing a discerning heart is about sifting through interior movements, feelings, inspirations, prayer, so we can *choose* those strategies that bring us to deeper union with God and ever closer to Catherine's vision.

Such discernment is guided by:

- Prayerful consideration of the needs of our time (Critical Concerns, and Church documents)
- Gospel priorities, especially the needs of those who are poor.
- Pastoral priorities of the universal church.
- Our talents, gifts, resources, and limitations.

In this responsive openness to God, we listen to the Spirit speaking in and through our Scriptures, Constitutions, experiences, dreams, personal and communal prayer. Holding these as places of sacred revelation, we seek God's desiring. We need each other and a spiritual guide to reflect on our communal experiences in an ordered way toward *action* and not just words.

Like the blind man of the Gospels, we are not always able to see clearly. Our inner sight can be blurred by all sorts of clouds: Our fears, our attachments, overwork, not making one's gifts available, excessive individualism, absence of on-going discernment in one's life, lack of self-knowledge, ego needs, and so on. Yet also like

the blind man, we have incredible faith, hope, and know in our deepest hearts that “all things are possible with God.”

In summary, involvement in individual and communal discernment and spiritual guidance is necessary in these troubled times as the Sisters of Mercy move forward with Catherine’s vision: loving God, loving each other, tenderly loving the poor, all the while acting with justice, mercy, and humility. Our current Synodal Church also invites us to *journey together, listen more, and stay in a dialogical posture, especially with those left out in any way.* May we, Sisters of Mercy continue to discern the “dream of God” together for the common good and be unafraid to take huge risks in the building of God’s Kin-dom.

## Works Cited

1. Dean Brackley, SJ, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004). *Can assist us in reflecting on individual and communal experiences in an ordered way so as to grow deeper in our commitment to Mercy Critical Concerns.*
2. Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ. *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit. Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality.* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993). *Writes of how we on earth are poisoning our life-support systems due in part to social dualism. “...we need to realize that the natural environment is oppressed, manipulated, and abused in ways analogous to the patriarchal use of women.”*
3. Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM, and Annemarie Paulin-Campbell. *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women.* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (NY: Paulist Press, 2022).
4. Pope Francis. *On Care for our Common Home: Laudato Si’.* USCCB, Washington, DC, 2015.
5. Louis M. Savary. *The New Spiritual Exercises: In the Spirit of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010). *“God’s Christ Project” encompasses the entire evolving universe with the aim of bringing all of creation back to God, fully conscious of our origin and divine destiny. How this might happen individually and communally.*
6. Mary C. Sullivan, RSM. *The Path of Mercy: The Life of Catherine McAuley*

(Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 2012)