

Looking into
the Well
Supervision of Spiritual Directors

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Self-Awareness and Interior Freedom: Assumptions and Purposes in the Supervision of Spiritual Directors

Spiritual directors are companions with others on their journey to God. As companions, they share in others' struggles and joys. They are not detached bystanders. Rather they actively help others to develop a relationship with God. Spiritual directors serve as a resting place for those who want to savor God's loving presence and explore God's seeming absence. They become a contemplative presence for those who want to discover how God has been moving in their hearts and how God has been active in their lives. Because spiritual directors are intimately involved with others' life and religious experience, they need others to accompany them as they help and support their directees. Since they experience various interior movements while directing, they need the caring presence of another person to explore these movements. This chapter (1) discusses the assumptions undergirding spiritual direction and supervision; (2) examines the purposes of spiritual direction and supervision; (3) explores the experience of interior movements during direction sessions; and (4) clarifies the supervisory function.

Assumptions in Spiritual Direction and Supervision

Certain assumptions permeate both spiritual direction and supervision, such as the belief that God is present in all human experience. Through personal prayer and spiritual direction God's *implicit* presence becomes *explicit* in peoples' experience. God is a self-communicating God who reveals self through creation, Scripture, life experience, human relationships, solitude, and prayer. God's self-giving is eternal and can occur in a moment of time. God's transcendent presence becomes immanent in human experience, and, by staying alert, individuals can in turn become aware of God's immanent presence. God communicates self not only in universal ways but also in personal ways through individual experiences, personalities, desires, and needs. In other words, God can be experienced in hearts, minds, imaginations, psyches, and bodies.

As individuals experience God's self-communication interiorly, they come to *know* God, not only know *about* God. They experience spontaneous interior reactions, some of which correspond to God's ways and others that do not. God longs for response but ultimately grants humanity with free will. Personal brokenness, sinfulness, blindness, and life struggles can prevent individuals from responding to God's self-communication. But these challenges can also open them to God's desire to redeem, heal, and make whole.

Several important assumptions about spiritual directors affect the spiritual direction and supervision process. Spiritual directors are human beings, and as human beings they are both gifted and broken, interiorly free and unfree, accepting feelings and denying feelings. They are affected by their own and their directees' resistance. Spiritual directors' unresolved issues, such as denied or repressed feelings, can prevent them from helping directees to look deeply at their life circumstances and savor fully their religious experience. Directors' ability to notice their own vulnerable areas and feel their own feelings affects their ability to help directees explore their experiences in-depth. As they continue to acknowledge their own resistance and examine their own vulnerable areas, directors can grow interiorly free and, subsequently, empathize with directees' experiences.

For all of these reasons, spiritual directors require supervision. They need time, experience, and assistance in order to grow more aware of how their giftedness and brokenness manifest themselves in their ministry.

Spiritual directors are individuals who are in relationship with God and have a deep desire to help others grow in relationship with God. On their spiritual journey, they need to develop a capacity to be attentive to and linger with their own experiences of God. Their ability to help others do so is affected by how they linger with their own experiences. As spiritual directors learn these skills, they grow more keenly aware of other people's interior movements—both obvious and subtle—toward and away from God.

Therefore, spiritual direction and supervision are God-centered, trinitarian experiences in various ways. First, the directee, spiritual director, and supervisor are each in relationship with God as the Trinity of Creator, Redeemer, and Life-giving Spirit. That is, they each have their own vital and growing relationship with God. Second, the spiritual direction experience is the threefold communion of the spiritual director, directee, and God in a heartfelt connection with one another. Third, supervision is a triadic encounter of the spiritual director, supervisor, and God working together for the spiritual director's growth. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20). Awareness of God's presence in spiritual direction and supervision sessions is essential, resulting in spiritual directors becoming interiorly freer to linger more deeply with directees' experiences.

Purposes and Skills of Spiritual Direction

To understand the purposes of supervision, spiritual directors and supervisors need to remember the purposes of spiritual direction. The primary goal of spiritual direction is to help individuals *grow in a personal relationship with God*. Specific purposes are to assist people to

- recognize, pay attention to, and respond to God's specific self-communication in life, prayer, and relationships;
- savor, relive, and enjoy the affective touches of God;

- notice differences that take place because of their affective experiences of God;
- explore God's seeming absence;
- recognize, explore, and uncover areas of resistance, darkness, and unfreedom that prevent an individual response to God's presence;
- sift through interior movements;
- grow in deeper intimacy with God; and
- experience greater interior freedom, deeper joy, more grace-filled decisions, a more integrated life, and healthier relationships with self, others, and the world.

For these purposes to be realized, spiritual directors must develop a variety of contemplative and discernment skills that are not only verbal techniques but also inner stances of the heart and spirit. In essence these skills function as basic principles that are grounded in the interior life of directees, the spiritual focus of spiritual directors, and the presence of God. The contemplative skills spiritual directors need to develop include the ability to

- listen in a nonjudgmental and accepting way;
- be aware of God's presence during direction sessions and grow in the experiential knowledge that spiritual direction is a Trinitarian experience;
- develop a reverent attitude and an evocative approach so that directees can notice, savor, and relive particular experiences of God;
- help people pray in a personal, affective, and relational way; and
- give concrete suggestions for prayer based on the experience shared.

Spiritual directors also must develop discernment skills, that is, the ability to sift through *interior movements*. As people grow in a personal relationship with God, they experience interior movements toward and away from God, and they talk about these movements in spiritual direction. For instance, as a directee notices and savors God's embrace, he or she may experience *consolation* or *movement toward God*—peace and joy in God's embrace or a deep gratitude. On the contrary, as a directee lingers with God's embrace, he or she may experience *desolation* or *countermovement*—fear of intimacy with God or feelings of unworthiness that take the form of avoidance of prayer or distractions in prayer. Therefore, directors must help individuals to

- be attentive to movements toward and away from God;
- savor and respond to those movements that are helping growth in union with God; and
- explore, unpack, and become freer of countermovements.

Thus the purposes and skills of spiritual direction are rooted in contemplation and discernment.

Contemplation means noticing, absorbing, and savoring God's self-communication. Discernment involves exploring individuals' interior movements as they respond to God's self-revelation.

Spiritual Directors' Experience of Interior Movements

While spiritual directors are companioning others, they also experience a variety of interior reactions, such as *consolation* or *movement toward God*, in that they are drawn into the directee's experience—attracted, engaged, and resonating with the sharing of that experience. They may have a lively sense of God's presence and experience union with the directee and God. They may experience spiritual joy, gratitude, peace, love, and new life (sometimes these fruits of the Spirit are accompanied by tears). They are aware of the guiding presence of the Spirit of God and allow God to lead them.

They may experience empathy and compassion for their directees, feeling a sense of God's love for them.

Spiritual directors experience consolation because they are prayerful people themselves, drinking regularly from the living waters of God's loving presence. They strive to be attentive to God's presence in their own life and during direction sessions. The more they companion others on their spiritual journey, the more deeply they grow in awareness that spiritual direction is a trinitarian encounter—God, the directee, and the director in communion with one another as the directee grows in his or her relationship with God.

At other times, spiritual directors experience *desolation* or *resistance*, that is, a spontaneous *movement away from God* in that they feel dissonant with the directee's experience—emotionally distant, bored, frustrated, agitated, angry, anxious, or fearful, or they have little or no feeling at all. They might feel restless, become distracted, or have difficulty listening to and staying with the directee's experience. They may move away from a contemplative presence to a problem-solving, preaching, and advice-giving stance. They may feel unfocused or lost: how did we get here? where are we going? what am I doing? They may have lost sight of God's presence: where did you go, God? God is seemingly absent during the direction session. These countermovements can be very strong and obvious during a session or take place in a subtle way. Many times they occur without the directee's knowledge.

Countermovement occurs for a variety of reasons. First, the directee's resistance may be affecting the director. For example, after several months a directee still may not be taking the time to pray, causing the director to feel frustrated and annoyed. Second, the directee's growing intimacy with God may result in dissonant reactions within the director. For example, a directee may share with the director an image of being held by God; subsequently, the director spontaneously experiences an emotional distancing from both God and the directee. Third, an unresolved issue in the director may be touched. For instance, a directee who is confronting, through prayer, memories of emotional deprivation during childhood may remind the director of his or her own pain and darkness

around a similar issue; therefore, the director struggles to stay connected interiorly with the directee's experience. Fourth, the director may experience a lack of freedom in a particular area of life, such as when the directee raises issues related to sexuality, and the director unconsciously withdraws because it produces discomfort. Finally, directors may experience a struggle in a particular direction relationship because of a relational dynamic such as countertransference. For example, a directee may remind the director of a significant person with whom the director is struggling, which interferes with the direction relationship and process.

Spiritual directors' interior movements form the primary foundation for developing a discerning heart. These movements, therefore, are the arena from which to explore the purposes, process, and skills of supervision.

Purposes of Supervision

The purposes of supervision are rooted in the spiritual director's experience of interior movements while in the process of directing. The overall goal of supervision is to help spiritual directors to grow in self-awareness and interior freedom in order to stay with directees' experiences and to be attentive to God during direction sessions. Specifically, this goal has three dimensions.

Exploring Interior Movements

Supervision strives to help spiritual directors to sift out their own interior movements that occur while they are directing. Thus they develop a keener sense of self-awareness.

Supervision helps spiritual directors to explore their own *dissonant experiences* of agitation, distraction, boredom, anxiety, fear, and anger (see the first case study in learning experience 6 in Part II). For example, a directee may feel God's intimate love while the director experiences agitation and envy. Or a directee may feel distant from God while the director becomes frustrated and impatient. Such dissonant interior reactions form the bulk of supervision.

Supervision also provides an arena for spiritual directors to notice and savor *consonant experiences* of joy, gratitude, peace, and love (see the second case study in learning experience 6 in Part II). For example, a directee may share a consoling experience of God while a director experiences a felt congruence with the directee by sharing feelings of peace, joy, and gratitude. This noticing and savoring experience during supervision helps directors to

- recognize, savor, and respond to their directees' experiences of God;
- develop an attitude of attentiveness to their own interior reactions to directees' experiences of God;
- create the inner space necessary for listening deeply to directees' experiences;
- assist directees to look closely at interior facts and share feelings with God;
- help directees linger with their experiences of God in life and prayer; and
- notice God's felt presence and/or lack of affective presence in the spiritual direction session itself.

Bringing Areas of Darkness into the Light

Supervision helps spiritual directors to bring into the light areas of resistance, affective attitudes, psychological and emotional blocks, areas of woundedness, and life struggles that prevent them from helping directees explore their life experience deeply or savor their experience of God fully. Through this uncovering of darkness and unfreedom, spiritual directors grow in deeper self-knowledge.

For example, a director can become restless as the directee shares the pain of a broken relationship because he or she also is coping with similar circumstances. Or a director may feel dis-

tant and bored when a directee describes intense pain regarding childhood abuse. Supervision can uncover the director's tendency to avoid dealing with one's own abuse issues as a child. Through supervision directors can explore vulnerable issues and hidden areas in order to

- grow more aware of the impact of unfree and resistant areas on themselves as persons and directors;
- release the binding and sometimes crippling power of these areas;
- bring these areas into conscious, affective relationship with God for their own personal and professional growth as spiritual directors;
- arrive at deeper and more nuanced self-understanding;
- recognize areas of weakness and strength in directing; and
- linger deeply with their directees' life and religious experience.

Growing in Interior Freedom to Linger with Directees' Experiences

By exploring their interior movements and uncovering unresolved issues and unfree areas, spiritual directors create the inner space to be deeply present with directees. They grow in interior freedom. Their own inner space becomes uncluttered and spacious enough to be open and receptive to their directees. For instance, by discussing their frustration with their directees' resistance during supervision sessions, directors can grow more patient and accepting when their directees avoid God and prayer.

This growing inner freedom also enables directors to linger with their directees' experiences and stay with vulnerable issues. Directors can help their directees explore incidents of childhood abuse because, through supervision (and in

other ways, too, such as counseling or Twelve-Step meetings), they can become more aware of their own family dysfunction. As beginning spiritual directors explore their hesitation or fear of helping their directees savor their experiences of God and uncover their desolations, they become freer to thoroughly explore their directees' experiences. This freedom helps spiritual directors to notice more keenly movements and counter-movements in their directees and to enjoy their directees' growing relationship with God.

Supervision, therefore, focuses primarily on the interior movements of spiritual directors that are stirred and the areas of unfreedom that emerge during direction sessions in order to help them grow in greater self-awareness and freedom. As this happens, they are better able to stay with their directees' experiences.

Supervision sometimes addresses the experience of directees in order to help directors understand their own reactions more clearly and attain a greater clarity about interior movements in directees. Still, the primary focus remains the inner experience of spiritual directors.

The Supervisor's Stance

Supervisors are *companions* for spiritual directors, accompanying them on their journey toward interior awareness and personal freedom. They are *codiscerners* with spiritual directors as they grow in their ability to sift through their own interior movements that occur during direction experiences and as they develop a discerning heart. Further, supervisors are also a *contemplative presence*, inviting directors to look at how God is present during direction sessions, to savor God's affective presence, and to explore God's seeming absence. They are *reverent evokers* who assist spiritual directors in discovering their own inner truth, both the darkness and the light. They also act as a *resting place* for spiritual directors in times of discouragement, a supportive presence as they work through areas of weakness and feelings of inadequacy. Finally, they are *skilled helpers* who facilitate spiritual directors in their ability to listen more fully, savor more deeply, and embrace more completely their directees' life and God experiences.

Clarifying the Meaning of Supervision

The term *supervision* can evoke certain images in people. In the workplace supervision often involves teaching people how to perform certain tasks or telling employees what to do and how to do it. Supervisors are perceived as overseers whose main function is to assure that a job is done properly and efficiently. In the helping professions, such as counseling or social work, people may think of supervision as consulting about a certain situation: the focus is on a particular case, not the helping person's experience of the case. In its purest sense, however, supervision focuses primarily on the helping person's inner experience and responses.

Clarifying what supervision of spiritual directors is *not* can facilitate a more precise understanding of what it is. Supervision of spiritual directors is not one of guiding the tasks of spiritual direction, although the spiritual director will be learning direction skills through the supervision process. Supervision is not primarily overseeing the work of the spiritual director, although the supervisor must have a good sense of the quality of spiritual direction being done. Supervision is not consulting about the directee's situation, although occasionally a director will need to consult with an experienced director or supervisor to discuss how to handle certain situations, such as depression in a directee or how to work with someone who has been sexually abused. Supervision is not a teaching experience in the sense that the supervisor instructs a person how to handle certain situations or explains how to stay with a directee's experience. However, "teachable moments" can occur during the flow of supervision. Supervision is not therapy, although personal issues will be explored and much healing and new insights into oneself will emerge through the process of staying focused on the director's experience.

To reiterate, supervision is the processing of the inner experiences of spiritual directors that are evoked during direction sessions in order to help them grow in awareness of their reactions and responses, to allow them to respond in a God-centered and interiorly free manner, and to maintain a contemplative focus. Other tasks and benefits may occur through supervision, such as guiding, consulting, teaching, and

personal healing; however, these are secondary tasks and occur only after the primary purpose is served.

Conclusion

The experience of supervision is both a gift and a challenge for spiritual directors. It is a gift in that it enables directors to be attentive to God's presence during direction sessions, in touch with the variety and richness of interior movements in themselves and their directees, and aware of areas within that prevent them from staying with their directees' experiences. Supervision is a challenge in that it requires a precise understanding of its purposes, a constant prayerful attitude on the part of the director and the supervisor, a clear focus on the director's experience and the experience of God, a deep honesty about one's strengths and weaknesses, and a willingness to explore one's vulnerable issues and areas of unfreedom. As both a gift and a challenge supervision is an essential process in order for individuals to develop as discerning, free, and caring spiritual directors.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

For Supervisors

1. Of the assumptions in spiritual direction and supervision that apply, which are most striking to you? Would you add any assumptions?
2. The three overall purposes of supervision are (1) exploring interior movements of spiritual directors; (2) bringing their areas of darkness into the light; and (3) encouraging directors' growth in interior freedom in order to linger with directees' experiences. How do these purposes relate to your idea and experience of offering supervision? Give examples.
3. Describe your awareness of God during supervision sessions. Do you see supervision as an encounter with a

trinitarian God—that is, as a threefold experience of communion of you, the director, and God?

4. Describe your presence during supervision. Are you a companion? a codiscerner? a reverent evoker? a contemplative presence? a resting place? a skilled helper? a teacher? Which of these stances apply in your approach to supervision? Which do you need to develop?
5. What are your notions and images of supervision? How have they influenced your approach to the supervision of spiritual directors?

For Spiritual Directors

1. Which of the purposes of spiritual direction speak most to your experience of offering direction?
2. How do contemplative and discernment skills apply in your ministry of spiritual direction? Give examples.
3. How aware are you of your own interior movements while directing? What has helped you to become more aware?
4. What insights have you gained about yourself, your directees, and God through your experience of interior movements during direction sessions?
5. How does your experience of being supervised help you to explore your interior movements, bring hidden areas into the open, and grow in interior freedom? Give examples of each.
6. What are your supervisor's usual stances in supervision? What do you find helpful and/or unhelpful about each of these stances?
7. Do you and your supervisor(s) share a common understanding about supervising spiritual directors? Have you

clarified your understanding with one another at the beginning of a given supervision commitment? What could happen (or has happened) if you do not have a common perspective on the focus and purposes of supervision?

A Contemplative Moment

Enter into your interior space. Notice the darkness, the blocks, the brokenness. Ask God to hold these dark realities and help you to hold them with reverence and care. Feel God's tender touch and reverent embrace transform your blocks and brokenness. Let the living waters of God's love wash over them.

Notice, too, the growing freedom in your interior space—not a freedom that dismisses brokenness but a freedom that embraces your broken places and transforms you into a wounded healer.

Thank God for the darkness and the light, the woundedness and wholeness, that reside within you. Thank God for embracing and dwelling in both.

See your interior space being transformed into a warm home and a safe resting place for others.

Prayer for Inner Freedom

God of life-giving freedom, thank you for the privilege of being with people in such a vulnerable way as they share their brokenness as well as their giftedness, their darkness as well as their light.

I ask for the grace of awareness of my own brokenness and darkness. Give me a willing and courageous spirit to delve deeply into my own vulnerability, so that I can be freely with others in their woundedness.

Help me to see my areas of darkness so that these can come out into the light, to explore my brokenness so that it can bask in your healing touch, to become aware of my resistances so that they can be freed by your loving Spirit.

Create an open space within me so that I can receive others' brokenness and vulnerability with tenderness and love.

Help me to be a resting place where others can bring their struggles as well as their joys.

Let me find a home in you so others can find a home in me.

Thank you, God, for the inner freedom growing within me that allows others to encounter your loving presence.