

Journeying with Jesus, discovering the Father

# Spiritual accompaniment

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*Conscious that although Jesus spoke of having only one Master and to call only God as "Father" (cf. Mt 23:8-10), today there is a rediscovery of the importance of spiritual accompaniment. While there is already a need at an anthropological level, accompaniment also has specific connotations in biblical tradition where it has been further delineated over the centuries. The author is a focolarino and priest, with academic training in this area and extensive experience in the field.*

In its broadest sense, personal accompaniment is a relationship with a trusted companion or teacher to whom one can turn to in certain moments or passages of life. It is an anthropological reality that is universally present from culture to culture. I think we have all heard someone say, "The closeness and support of *that person* has been fundamental for me at certain times in my life." It is the figure of the so-called "mentor" to whom we spontaneously turn in many moments. It is enough to think of what Aristotle meant to Alexander the Great, Apollonius of Calcide to Marcus Aurelius, Ambrose to Augustine, or John Graham to Abraham Lincoln.

## In Scripture

*In Sacred Scriptures*, we see it is God, first and foremost, who is the true companion of his people. God becomes present in varying ways, both through miraculous interventions and through mediators: guides, leaders, prophets, judges, scribes... Such experienced mediators accompany and guide not only a people collectively, but also individuals, supporting them along life paths and helping them discern well in moments of important choices.

"Son, find yourself a trustworthy person who will make the journey with you" (*Tob 5:3*), Tobit says to his son, Tobias, as he prepares for the long journey to Media and the dual mission of recovering a sum of money and taking Sarah as his wife. Tormented by the demon Asmodeus who caused death to those who married Sarah, Tobias finds such a companion in the 'person' of the archangel Raphael, who helped him in carrying out both missions.

Then, there is the emblematic passage about the young Samuel, who hears himself called three times but does not realize that it is the Lord. Samuel continues to be called, until the person of the priest, Eli, suggests a way of responding, by saying: "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (*1 Sam 3:10*).

In the New Testament, Jesus appears as the 'accompanier *par excellence*'. His journey with the disciples can be understood as both individual accompaniment and accompaniment of

a community. Jesus helps them to progressively grasp the meaning of his mission and their own callings. Emblematic, too, is the experience of Jesus as the Risen one along the road to Emmaus with the two disciples. He helps them understand Scripture and instills new joy into their hearts.

Then at Pentecost we see Joel's prophecy fulfilled: "After this it shall come to pass that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" (*Joel 3:1*), so that from the very hearts of believers can henceforth flow "rivers of living water" (*Jn 7:38*).

One expression from the First Council of Jerusalem succinctly conveys the Lord's spirit and method: "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us" (*Acts 15:28*). Thus there is the principal part, which belongs to the Holy Spirit, and a part belonging to the believer, from which one cannot exempt oneself. The Spirit's impulses in the believer's heart, the flowing *rivers of living water*, demand a reading that can sometimes be done alone, other times with the help of the community, and still in other moments during conversation with a more experienced sister or brother.

## **The Church Fathers and the Monastics**

The usefulness of spiritual accompaniment has been emphasized throughout the life of the Church. It gradually developed over time, thanks to the new winds of the Spirit and, also in lessons learned from negative experiences as well.

In the first centuries of Christianity, the desert Fathers and Mothers emphasized the indispensability of this service. Saint Anthony the Abbot, a hermit among hermits, said: "I have seen monks, after much asceticism, fall and go out of their minds because they had trusted in their work and neglected the precept, which says: '*Ask your father, he will inform you, your elders, they will tell you.*'" (*Dt 32:7*)<sup>20</sup>.

In the cenobitic life, abbots played the role of spiritual guides. This was clearly visible in Benedictine abbeys, where abbots were chosen by the community of monks. But a further guarantee was offered by the fact that the bishop, as well as the surrounding Christian community, could exercise a kind of voting with regard to a particular monk, should that monk be deemed unsuitable for the task.

Spiritual friendships -- a theme dear to many writers -- is also an important help on the journey to God. Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167) spoke of it in a passionate and original way. He also referenced Saint Augustine, for whom friendship was "the best ladder to perfection." Certainly, spiritual friendship imbued with charity as an expression of Jesus' new commandment, plays an important role in strengthening our steps along the path of Christian life. However, it is good to remember that spiritual accompaniment is something which is different from spiritual friendship. Accompaniment has a certain asymmetry that does not exist in friendship. This is due to the fact that one of the two persons has greater competence and experience than the other. It remains true, however, that the characteristic of friendship favors and makes the path of accompaniment more fruitful.

## **Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Avila**

For St. Ignatius (1491-1556), whose charism specifically regarded spiritual direction, those who accompany others have the important task of helping people discern interior motions in order to

understand if their source lies in that of the good spirit, the bad spirit, or as a part of simple human nature. Accompaniment is a service in decision-making that must not exert influence, but rather aim to facilitate direct 'immediate' contact (without mediation) of the person with God and his will, as explained in the Spiritual Exercises:

"In these spiritual exercises, when seeking the Divine Will, it is more fitting and better, that the Creator and Lord Himself should communicate Himself to a devout soul, inflaming it with His love and praise, and disposing it for the way in which it will be better able to serve Him in the future. The one giving the Exercises should not turn or incline to one side or the other, but stand in the centre like a balance, to leave the Creator to act immediately with the creature, and the creature with its Creator and Lord." (*Ex 15a* annotation).

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) made great use of spiritual directors. She encouraged her sisters, walking with her on the path of mental prayer and emphasized the importance that those accompanying be "learned," that is, adequately prepared also from a theological point of view: "I repeat that a spiritual director is necessary, but if he is not a scholar, the damage is severe. It will be of much help to deal with the learned, provided they are virtuous: even if they do not have a spirit of prayer, it will be profitable, because God will make them understand what they have to teach, and will even make them spiritual, so that they may benefit us" (*The Book of My Life* 13:19).

With the development of seminaries as expressed by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), priests were assured greater formation at the doctrinal level. Such formation also made them more suitable for spiritual direction, and thus there developed over time a practical linkage to the sacrament of Reconciliation, even if the two are distinct (spiritual accompaniment and the sacrament of Reconciliation).

At this point we can also recall the definition of spiritual accompaniment found in the Dictionary of Mysticism, as: *The help offered by an experienced guide to the faithful, as they journey to the fullness of life in Christ and in the Spirit.*<sup>3</sup>

## Criteria

The requirements for becoming a spiritual accompanier (they can be lay persons or priests, as Pope Francis repeatedly emphasizes) include: specific preparation, witness of evangelical life, a capacity to welcome and listen, awareness that the one who directs is the Holy Spirit (with 'over-directing' posing a risk to open the way to various types of abuse), sufficient psycho-affective balance (which also helps prevent personal attachments), and confidentiality about what is communicated to them. It is also important that he or she is also similarly accompanied by someone else, and that experienced people are available from time to time for their own supervision around specific matters.

For those who are being accompanied themselves, it is important that they can share his or her thoughts in trust (this is generally facilitated by the person having freely chosen the person to accompany them), in order to be docile to the action of the Holy Spirit and the newness to which one is being led to discover, while also avoiding becoming overly attached to the person accompanying. Likewise, if questionable behavior on the part of the person accompanying you is noted, one should not hesitate to speak to another trusted person in order to understand what is or is not appropriate in such a relationship.

## **Accompanying the discovery of God as Father**

Is there still a demand for spiritual accompaniment today? Often the demand is expressed, but it is not answered due to a lack of people available and who are prepared for this service. Often, too, it is an unexpressed need which cannot even be formulated.

Today's society is marked by a strong sense of orphanhood, for the fact that God has often been set aside in one's life for various reasons, perhaps also because one perceives him as distant, or silent. It is as if God the Father has disappeared and therefore it makes no sense to ask for help from someone who is not there. But there is also an indelible nostalgia for a Father, perhaps very different from how we were accustomed to once conceiving God. And we constitutively need to know that we derive from someone. In this search for our origins, a companion can help a person understand the truth hidden within: That God the Father is there, waiting to be recognized, allowing a person to experience the reality of being a son or daughter. A spiritual companion can play a role in discovering God's presence, helping to identify obstacles that arise on this path of rediscovery and to make the most of the intuitions that gradually enter the person's heart. He or she is close to the one on a journey of rediscovering God as Father, a God who welcomes and is filled with amazement for the person to whom He has given life: "God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good." (*Gen 1:31*). By its nature, this movement of rediscovering a relationship as a child of God, thanks to the divine stamp imprinted within us, then tends to extend and strengthen other human relationships in which a person is immersed. In the Letter to the Ephesians, we find: " One God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (*Eph 4:6*).

## **Community Life and Spiritual Guidance**

The question of the usefulness of personal spiritual accompaniment can also come to spiritually committed believers. Can priests or laity living lives committed to prayer, the sacrament of Reconciliation, and even to community life where spiritual harmony reigns and relations are guided by the Gospel, still need spiritual accompaniment?

Yes, it may be needed. Spiritual accompaniment is sometimes used for delicate, prolonged trials, or in other moments for the need to take a panoramic look at one's spiritual life. Other times, one may need 'another' with whom he or she can confront a challenge in order to gain a different perspective from that work field in which one is usually inserted (such as accepting or declining a requested, demanding task). There are also sometimes questions of faith or morals that require specific skills to be adequately dealt with, or times of crises and confusion that are difficult to verbalize without the help of an experienced person.

In conclusion, recalling Jesus' promise to be present among those gathered in his name (cf. *Mt 18:20; 28:20*) we can say that it is always the Risen One, with his Spirit, who accompanies individuals and communities. The Spirit does so through the many faces of his presence in community and sacramental life, as well as through the Spirit's particular presence that is manifest in individual spiritual accompaniment.

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- <sup>1</sup> "Mentor" is the wise person to whose care Odysseus entrusted his son Telemachus upon his departure for the Trojan War. His name later came to mean someone who takes over from a distant or absent father. But, in a broader sense it also came to mean one able to carry out a function that often go beyond that of a natural father, one with the skills and ability to grasp hidden potentials.
- <sup>2</sup> L. Mortari (ed.), *Life and Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Città Nuova, Rome 1996, p. 91.
- <sup>3</sup> U. Goggles, *Spiritual Direction*, in L. Borriello - E. Caruana - M.R. Del Genio - N. Suffi (eds.), *Dictionary of Mysticism*, LEV, Vatican City 1998, p. 422.