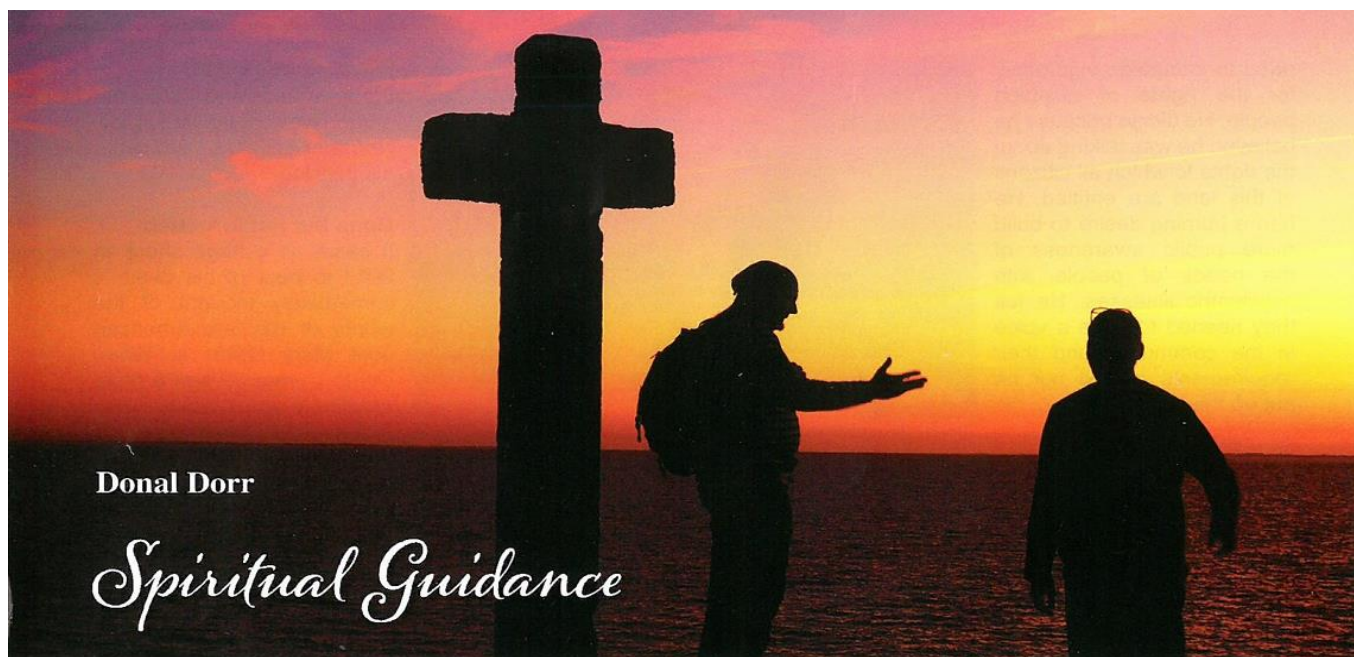
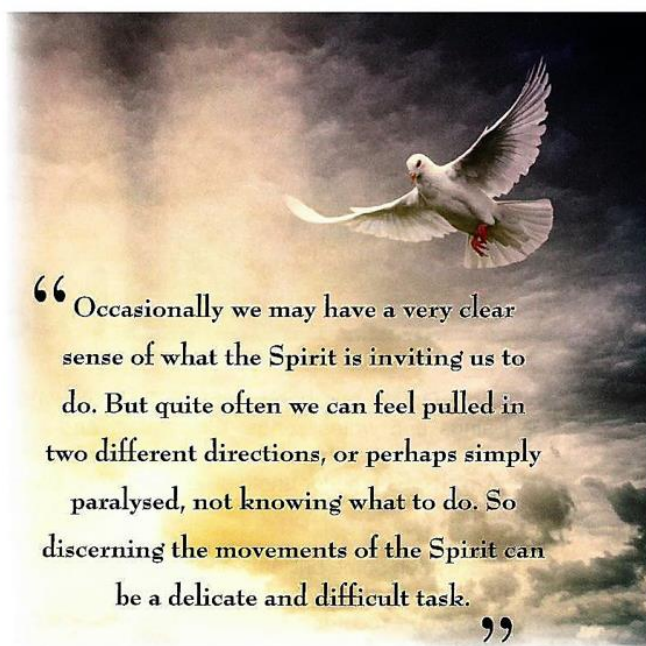


## AN EXCELLENT ARTICLE ON VALUES OF THINKING OF HAVING A SPIRITUAL GUIDE – BY THE IRISH PRIEST DONAL DORR



I ended a previous article on the Sacrament of Reconciliation by noting one of the reasons why there has been a considerable drop, in recent years, in the frequency with which even very committed Catholics go to confession. I pointed out that quite a number of people are looking for something deeper than the kind of Confession that was customary in the past. They have found that just listing their sins may not bring them a rich experience of the love and mercy of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their everyday lives. They feel that they need a more extended sharing of their spiritual questions and struggles. And they sense that their spiritual journey may be enhanced by being listened to by a deeply sensitive listener a person who may also at times be able to suggest some passage from Scripture or some poem which the person may find helpful. This is an important development in our Church. More and more people are finding it very helpful to go regularly (or irregularly) to seek 'spiritual direction' from a truly sympathetic priest or other trained spiritual guide. What they are seeking is help in how best to be sensitive to the movements of the Holy Spirit in their lives and in this way to discern where the Spirit is leading them.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR SPIRITUAL FEELINGS



But why would we need help in knowing what God wants us to do? Surely we have the laws of God and of the Church to guide us? Pope Francis spells out very clearly why such general rules are not enough. In his document *Gaudete et Exultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad) he insists that it 'is not a matter of applying rules or repeating what was done in the past, since the same solutions are not valid in all circumstances' (GE 173). It is not that we can simply ignore the general laws and rules, but that no general rules can spell out the detail of how we should act in each unique moment of our lives. So, over and above the general rules, each of us needs specific guidance from the Holy Spirit. Each of us has been given the amazing gift of being touched and moved by God's Spirit from moment to moment. These delicate movements of the Spirit within us come mostly through our feelings. I have a distinct memory of something our teacher told us when I was eight years old: 'You can feel sorry for your sins and not be sorry; and you can be sorry and not feel sorry.' In those years prior to the Vatican

Council (1962-5), it was widely held that our feelings are not to be trusted that they are of no importance when we come before God in prayer. Even when I was studying moral theology as a student in the 1950s the emphasis was all on learning about the different kinds of sins and the importance of obeying the moral laws and the liturgical

rules. It is true that alongside our classes in moral theology we also had a course in what was called ascetical theology. But this was seen as a quite minor course and it never became clear to us what it was supposed to be about. Looking back now can see that it should have been about how to help people to develop their spirituality. But even the word 'ascetical' was misleading because it puts the emphasis on the difficult and negative aspects of our journey towards God.

I still remember the sense of excited discovery had when, in the 1970s, I discovered that what was most important for me in my own personal life was learning to be sensitive to the delicate inspirations of the Holy Spirit and coming to realize that a key aspect of my ministry as a priest was to help others to do the same. And central to this new insight was learning that these inspirations from the Spirit come mainly through our spiritual feelings.

## **SPIRITUAL DIRECTION**

Occasionally we may have a very clear sense of what the Spirit is inviting us to do. But quite often we can feel pulled in two different directions, or perhaps simply paralysed, not knowing what to do. So discerning the movements of the Spirit can be a delicate and difficult task. This task of discerning the movements and 'nudges' of the Spirit is, of course, primarily something that must be done by each person. But the experience of Christians down through the centuries has taught us that we can be greatly helped by somebody who is willing to play the role of a 'spiritual director' for us.

It is important to realize that the word 'director' may be misleading. It is not a matter of giving directions about what to do or not to do. That is why have given this article the title, 'Spiritual Guidance' rather than the more common term 'Spiritual Direction' What is needed is to have a relationship with a very empathetic and spiritually sensitive person-what was traditionally called an anam-chara (soul-friend) in Ireland. The 'director' must be a good listener. But, above all, the director needs to be somebody who can facilitate the person to have a sense of where the Holy Spirit leading that person. The director may even at times, be able to gently nudge' the person to sense where she or he is insensitive to the guidance of the Spirit or is ignoring it.

## **THE RIGHT AND THE WRONG KIND OF SPIRITUAL GUIDE**

There are now available various excellent training. programmes where, over a period of several years, people are trained to play the role of a spiritual director One of the most important choices that we can over make is whether we are willing to ask for help from a spiritual guide-and, if so, whom we should ask to take on this role. It may be necessary to choose somebody on a trial basis, leaving both the 'director' and the 'directee' to get a sense of whether this relationship will work out.

Above all it is important not to put oneself in the hands of somebody who fails to respect the freedom and autonomy of the person and instead seeks spiritual control over them. The 'director' who asks a person to suspend their own judgement and submit to the guidance of the director is in fact trying to manipulate and lead the person astray sometimes this can have serious consequences.

Not all priests have been adequately trained to be good spiritual guides. Quite a lot of priests are more used to giving advice to people rather than listening, deeply to them and sensing where the Holy Spirit may be leading them. Of course, some priests have a real gift for listening and an increasing number are now undertaking specialized training in 'spiritual direction'.. However, in my experience some of the best spiritual directors are not priests - and most of them are women.

My own 'spiritual director' at present happens to be a woman. I must confess that when I have taken time to pour out my heart and soul to her, this encounter seems to have a certain sacramental character. So it can feel like an anti-climax to have to go later to a priest to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. I hope that before long Pope Francis and our Church authorities will find some way of recognizing the sacramental or quasi-sacramental character of one's encounter with a spiritual director.

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