



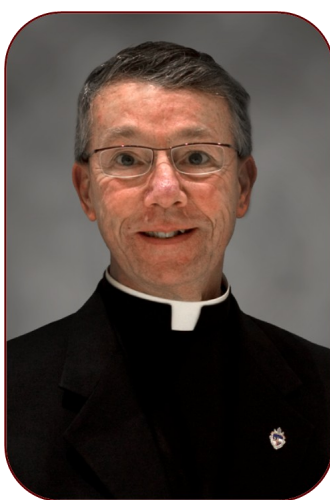
Engaging Aging

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Spiritual Direction for Elders: A Journey Undertaken in Faith

by Reverend James P. Oberle, S.S. Ph.D., S.T.L.



Rev. James Oberle, SS

Three major helping relationships are available to an individual in need of support: psychotherapy, counseling and spiritual direction. Psychotherapy is a long-term relationship, often quasi medical, that helps the person deal with a major pathology in his or her life. Counseling, most often short-term in nature, is designed to help the person deal with a crisis. Spiritual direction is a long-term relationship. It is not crisis oriented, although a crisis might be a starting point. Instead, it is designed to help an individual listen to the voice of God.

For older adults who bring with them a lifetime of religious and personal experience -- and who may be encountering new issues or unresolved concerns, as well as an urge toward ongoing growth -- spiritual direction offers important benefits. Although the term spiritual direction is used for this process, it is important to note that the spiritual director should, in fact, be nondirective. Thus it might be better to refer to the practice as one of spiritual accompaniment, companionship, friendship or guidance.

In forming this relationship, the director agrees to journey with the person seeking guidance and to help that person notice *(Continued on page 2)*

James P. Oberle, S.S., is currently serving as Director of Spiritual and Liturgical Formation at Holy Trinity Seminary, and is a member of the Theology Faculty of the University of Dallas. He has published extensively on issues related to aging.

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"In the grace margin, we invite people to share their stories in honest and authentic ways... to listen compassionately to one another's revelation... to dialogue and learn from each other..."

*Making Room for Grace,
by Eric Law*

Spiritual Direction for Elders (Continued from page 1)

and respond to the divine Spirit. Such a commitment should not be taken lightly. The spiritual guide must be available to the person receiving direction and must be willing to journey to the end: a commitment of time, energy, wisdom and emotional support. In addition, absolute confidentiality is required. A violation of that is a violation of a sacred trust. A person has put his or her life in our hands. We must treat that with respect and a commitment of lifelong confidentiality, even after the spiritual-direction relationship has ended.

Listening Is the Root

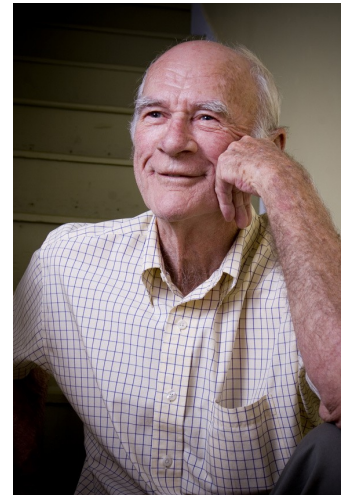
At times, it is tempting for us as spiritual guides to tell others how we discovered the presence of God in our lives. Thinking that a particular process has worked for us, we want to share it with another to make his or her journey quicker, safer and less demanding. However, each of our paths is unique. The task of the director is to help guidance-seekers discover the path that God has chosen for them.

The central part of spiritual direction is listening: What is the person we are guiding saying -- and not saying? Those avoided topics may be as important as the ones articulated. Listening thus means finding the pauses, the gaps and the nuances. Why is it that a person receiving direction does not want to discuss certain topics? Listening is hard work. One must be totally engaged, focused, non-judgmental and free of preconceived notions. One must be able to exhibit a true sense of empathy.

Spiritual direction also implies that a person has a place to go. Three questions are thus important for the person seeking spiritual direction to answer: Where am I now? Where do I want to go? How do I want to get there? Answering the first question is essential, yet it takes a great deal of self-knowledge and honesty. There are parts of our lives that we do not want to explore; there are parts that we might be ashamed of. Yet to begin the journey, we need an authentic starting point. It is only then that we can venture forth.



In each spiritual-direction relationship, there are parts of the life of the individual receiving guidance known to both the director and individual; this area is the easiest to work in. But there are also things that the director sees that the individual receiving direction does not. They can be considered “blind spots” for the individual. Conversely, there are things that the individual knows but the director doesn’t. Addressing this area is where self-knowledge and honesty come into play. Without self-revelation, no real progress can be made. However, self-revelation is hard. If I tell you who I really am, will you still respect or love me? (Continued on page 3)



Spiritual Direction for Elders (Continued from page 2)

There is a fourth quadrant in the spiritual-direction relationship that is unknown to both the director and person receiving direction: the subconscious and unconscious. As trust builds up in the relationship, both parties may begin to explore the individual's dreams, hunches and unrecognized impulses or thoughts. Exploring this area will be the work of the Holy Spirit. It cannot be rushed or circumvented.

Spiritual direction does not offer a quick fix or crisis management. Over time comes spiritual maturity, a sense of personal identity and self-acceptance. The way of spiritual direction is the way of faith and prayer. One travels in darkness into the light. One is learning a new language and a new way of listening. Patience is essential. However, when the time comes, one must act to make life-changing decisions.

Guidance for Older Adults

Spiritual direction is not only for the young, who are making life decisions with respect to employment, marriage and their relationship with God. It is critical at all life stages. The topics that elders bring to spiritual direction may appear to be different from those brought by younger people -- continued development, retirement, friendships, sexuality, hope, suffering, death and dying, life after death and legacy -- but the underlying current is the same: finding meaning and purpose in life.



In the parlance of the field of aging, examining these topics might be referred to as life review. However, it is a life review that is done in the context of faith: Where has God been present in my life? Can I expect God to be available to me in older age? How do I allow myself to be guided by the Holy Spirit? Spiritual direction is a journey undertaken in faith. It requires solitude and a contemplative attitude. It is a commitment to listen and reflect. Its fruits are inner peace and a sense of confidence in the life choices that one makes.

From Our Readers... Elders appreciate having someone to share their daily experiences and reflect with them the Spirit's movement within. Some of the spiritual tasks of those in their later years include life review, dealing with loss, grieving and being present to God's action within and around them. This can be done by one on one sharing, providing various types of retreat experiences, availability of spiritual reading material, and providing speakers and discussion groups on various topics.

*Submitted by the Pastoral Care Team,
Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Monroe, MI*



Aging Engaged



Sister Catherine Livers, SP, (right) has provided spiritual direction for Vanita Moore since March, 2009.

(Photo by Connie McCammon)

By Dave Cox

A multiple choice question for the spiritual at heart:

Being a spiritual director keeps you:

1) On your toes; 2) Up to date; 3) On your knees; 4) Out of trouble.

Actually, with not too much of a stretch of imagination, all four answers could be correct. Certainly, spiritual directors need to be alert and attentive to others' needs; they need to be up-to-date on society's demands and influences; they need to be in prayer; and, they're probably too busy to get into much trouble.

But Sister Catherine Livers, who has been a spiritual director for 25 years, says emphatically, "It keeps you on your knees."

"It seems now that many more people, maybe because of the chaotic times in which we live, are seeking a deeper meaning of life and their relationship with God," Sister Catherine said.

"It is very humbling to walk with someone on a spiritual journey. For someone to come and share her/his deepest longings or questions or anxieties about life, it does keep you on your knees. I know if I am not listening to God myself, or if I don't have a spiritual director of my own, I'm not going to be as helpful. It helps me stay honest," she added.

Sister Catherine has a background in counseling, education, spirituality and parish work. Often, when she has counseled people, she has realized she was receiving questions like who is God, or how do I pray, or where is God in this event in my life. In essence those questions form the foundation of a spiritual director's role. The key foundation question might be "What am I to learn?"

"They learn to look at their lives as events that come to them and say, 'What is God trying to show me in this event or this circumstance?' There is always a lesson. (Continued on page 5)

Aging Engaged (Continued from page 4)

How can I become more knowledgeable of God's love in this event? Sometimes it isn't easy," Sister Catherine said.

"In each person there is an inner voice. A person learns to listen more carefully to silence, or do more reading, or just take a walk and be with nature. We can find God many ways," she noted. "In our spiritual journeys, we are always growing, we are always learning more and more about God's love and grace."

It seems easy to question God's role and presence in times of stress such as tragedies, severe illnesses, natural disasters and personal challenges.

"A spiritual director can ask questions and help directees see that God doesn't want them to suffer alone. God is right there walking with them, helping them to face the challenge they are going through. God wants the best for God's children," Sister Catherine said.

When the challenge is steep and resolution seems remote, it is time to exercise the knees again. "Let me tell you, you spend hours on your knees asking God to help that person, or finding the right message to share with that person. It isn't always easy," she said.

Sister Catherine's ministry is an educational stimulant and regular consultation with her spiritual advisor keeps her focused.

"I've learned to appreciate human beings more. I enjoy walking with a person who is seeking God and wanting God to be more prevalent in his or her life. That is a profound gift. For me personally, it has made me a better listener. I know if I have nothing inside, then there is nothing I can give to help people. I meet with my spiritual director regularly. How can I give to others unless I work on my own journey? I can have blind spots. I expect my spiritual director to be honest with me."

Sister Catherine Livers, a Sister of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, participates in the life of her congregation in many ways. In addition to serving as a companion to those in the Providence Associate Relationship, Sister also does prison ministry. This article is reprinted with permission of the Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, Winter, 2010, issue of HOPE.

References for Review... Suggested by Sr. Rose Mary Dougherty, SSND

- ◆ "Spiritual Direction With The Aging: Companionship People on the Journey to a Good Death." D. Riddell, available on the internet.
- ◆ "Spiritual Direction in Later Life." Lynn W. Huber. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging*, Vol. 22, Issue 1 & 2, January, 2010.

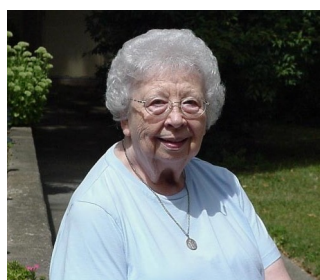


Putting it into Practice

NRRO Consultants Share Ways that Their Communities Offer Spiritual Services

Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart, Yardley, PA

An active Grey Nun professionally trained in psychology and spiritual direction spends one week per month at our retirement center visiting and conversing with Sisters. Another Grey Nun spiritual director offers her services on site by individual arrangement for direction and/or directed retreats. Sisters also access spiritual direction off site.



Motherhouse resident, Sister Frances Whitman, GNSH (pictured left) leads a centering prayer group for Sisters and laity that meets regularly on site. Anyone interested is welcome to participate.

Anyone interested is welcome to participate.

Self-initiated groups of Sister-residents plan retreats and reflection days guided by resident Sisters or others. Topics include “praying with poetry, art, and music” as well as seasonal liturgical themes.

Preached retreats are made available on site, once or twice per year, shorter than a week each, with a daily schedule geared for elders. Area opportunities available through sources such as Region 3 of the Religious Formation Conference are advertized and made available to the Sisters. The Sacrament of Reconciliation is available regularly on site.

By Sister Julia C. Lanigan, GNSH, President

Sisters of Mercy Retirement Center, St. Louis, MO

Two of our sisters in the city who are spiritual directors offer their time to the retired sisters. Since our retirement center is attached to Mercy Conference & Renewal Center, sisters are able to access those services as well.

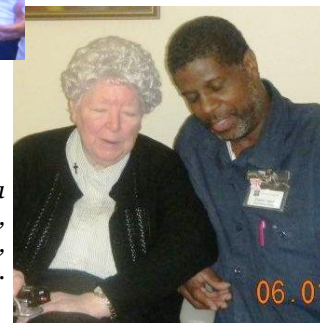
Our chaplain, Father Joseph Uvietta, makes himself available to individuals and celebrates daily Mass.

Mercy Sr. Barbara Grant, Administrator, prays with Sr. Mary Clarisa Rose and Fr. Joseph Uvietta, SM, Chaplain.



Mercy Sisters Mary Roland Bienvenu & Jeanette Noonan

Sister M. Marthalene Joines, a resident in our retirement center, prays every morning with Charles, one of our housekeepers.



Submitted by Sister M. Jonella Rhoda, RSM

Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity, Oshkosh, WI

I am one of the spiritual directors available for my own community. I offer spiritual direction monthly and days of recollection during Advent and Lent for our elders. Some also participate in directed retreats offered by others or me.

Submitted by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF

Sisters of St. Joseph, Boston, MA

At Bethany health care center we have many sisters and residents who have spiritual directors. Some have had the same person over the years and when they come to live here permanently they continue on. Some residents make a directed retreat (we provide one each year as well as a preached retreat) and they continue on with their director after the retreat is over.

Submitted by Sister Jacquelyn McCarthy CSJ, CEO



From the Offices of NRRO...

Brother Robert Metzger, SM
Associate Director of Planning & Education



Spiritual direction is described as the process of accompanying a person on their spiritual journey. This spiritual journey does not end as we get older but is a continuation of the journey we have been on our entire life. The focus of the journey may shift as we get older but the journey does continue.

Our theme in this issue of *Engaging Aging* is spiritual direction for our elder members. We hope these articles will assist your communities in having a conversation about spiritual direction.

Several of the elder care consultants for the National

Religious Retirement Office have offered some practical ideas of how their elder members are continuing to share their spiritual journey. If you have other practices within your community that you are willing to share, we would enjoy hearing from you.

Any information you are willing to share should be sent to me at RMetzger@usccb.org. We look forward to hearing from you.

From the Editor's Desk

Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D., Psychologist, Pittsburgh, PA



"The language God best hears is silent love." These words from John of the Cross have been my companions for several weeks. They were scripted on the memorial card of a dear friend, Sr. Annamae Dannes, a Carmelite prioress who died unexpectedly last month. Apt descriptors of contemplative life, I think that the words invite all of us to a deeper place where language stops and knowledge becomes desire. Whether in darkness or light, we move to a state beyond our control. We've all been there at one time or another. And we'll likely be there again... and again.

Enter, the spiritual directors. Gifted with a call to hear, companion, and guide in just such places, these men and women help us to dwell in silent love. As time moves us all toward resurrection, what is the language of your heart? What are you doing to tend the ineffable experience of God's love in your life?

Blessings on your summer, and may all be well!

NRRO Calendar

June: Distribution of Direct Care Assistance

August 4-7: CMSM Assembly; Long Beach, CA

August 10-13: LCWR Assembly; Dallas, TX

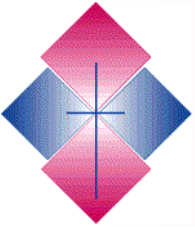
Sept. 14-17: RCRI National Conference; Anaheim, CA

Sept. 21-23: NRRO Planning & Implementation Workshop; Marriottsville, MD

Oct. 19-20: NRRO Retirement Planning Workshop for Small Institutes; St. Louis, MO

Oct. 21-24: CMSWR National Assembly; Belleville, IL





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The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes this money to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs.

The National Religious Retirement Office supports, educates and assists religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

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