

On the Value of the Spiritual Father

If we are climbing a mountain for the first time, we need to follow a known route; and we also need to have with us, as companion and guide, someone who has been up before and is familiar with the way.¹

The function of spiritual father or guide is intertwined with the institutional office of priest-confessor (and not all priests are confessors).

What the disciple brings to the relationship is sincere and willing obedience, the importance of which has long been emphasized in the Orthodox Christian tradition:

I know of monks who fell after much toil and lapsed into madness, because they trusted in their own works and did not give due heed to the commandment of him who says, "Ask your father, and he will tell you" (Deut. 32.7). If possible, for every step that a monk takes, for every drop of water that he drinks in his cell, he should entrust the decision to the old men, to avoid making some mistake in what he does.

—from the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, attributed to St. Anthony the Great

While this model of total, comprehensive obedience works in a monastic context, it must be modified in a parish or in "the world." Obedience is still very important, but a parish priest functioning as a spiritual father generally tries to recall the guidelines of the Church, orient his parishioners' lives, and help them in their inner struggles. He generally does not get into details such as the number steps one takes or drops of water he drinks.

The obedience we offer in this relationship is willing and voluntary, freely given. We offer our freedom anew every day and hour, continually. It is not a single, static gesture.

The task of our spiritual father is not to destroy our freedom, but to assist us to see the truth for ourselves; not to suppress our personality but to enable us to discover our own true self, to grow to full maturity and to become what we really are. If on occasion the spiritual father requires an implicitly or seemingly "blind" obedience from his disciple, this is never done as an end in itself, nor with a view to enslaving him. The purpose of this kind of shock treatment is simply to deliver the disciple from his false and illusory "self," so that he may enter into true liberty; obedience is in this way the door to freedom.

The relationship with a spiritual father is not one-sided but mutual and reciprocal. Both spiritual father and disciple enter each situation together and are both transformed in the process.

Nor is it just a dialogue. It is actually a triologue with God. The spiritual father is not an inerrant judge or tyrant, but a fellow-servant of God, a guide and companion along the way. The only true spiritual director, in the fullest sense of the word, is the Holy Spirit. The spiritual father is like a midwife, present mainly to help us give birth (with God's help) to our true selves.

Spiritual direction takes place in the context of a personal relationship. It is not a code of regulations or a set of techniques. This personal quality of the relationship protects the disciple against rigid legalism or slavish submission to the letter of the law.

¹ This and the following excerpts on this page are taken from "The Spiritual Guide in Orthodox Christianity" by Bishop Kallistos Ware, published in *The Inner Kingdom*, pages 127-151. Also available online at various websites.

On the Value of the Spiritual Father

“All of us are called to virtue, to union with Christ, and none of us can do it alone. To think otherwise is to be guilty of what the wisest Church Fathers called "self-delusion" (in Russian, *prelest*; in Greek, *plani*, which is the most serious of all spiritual diseases).” -Hieromonk Ambrose

“He who trusts in his own mind is a fool.” —Proverbs 28.26

“The fruits of exercise in obediences are true humility and spiritual understanding.” —St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, *The Arena*

When we are able to conquer our own will in obedience to another, we are better able to control lustful desire and extinguish anger or sulkiness, to maintain humility and unity with our brothers and sisters in faith. —paraphrased from St. John Cassian’s *Institutes*, book 4, chapters 8 & 9

“In truth those who have the skill properly to direct and heal rational souls are rare, and especially at the present time. Many, perhaps, have made a pretense of fasting and vigil (cf. 2 Cor. 6.5, 11.27), and a form of godliness, or have even achieved it in fact. As for learning many things by heart and teaching them in words, this is easy for most men, but as for eliminating the passions and acquiring the capital virtues so that they cannot be lost, very few are found who do this. Now we call ‘capital virtues’ humility, which eliminates the passions and obtains heavenly and angelic impassibility, and love, which never ceases or fails (1 Cor 13.8) but continually presses on to that which lies ahead (cf. Phil 3.13) as it adds desire to desire and love to love. It supplies perfect discernment, and by itself is a good guide to those who follow after it and infallibly carries us across the spiritual sea (cf. Wisdom 10.18). —St. Symeon the New Theologian, Discourse 20

“Love is the only thing worth living for and which gives a meaning to man’s life.” —Father Zacharias

Our chief end: to receive the love of God.

Our relationship with a spiritual father is not meant to deprive us of freedom or our capacity for good judgment (discernment). It is actually a means by which to strengthen our freedom—both *from* negative things (such as the passions) and *for* positive things (keeping God’s commandments) —and to sharpen our discernment.