

So how to pray? Help is at hand!

In this series of articles over the last few months a whole variety of different ways of praying have been outlined. The authors have been asked to take a practical “how to” approach. We hope you have been stimulated to try out one or more new ways of praying.

But how do you tell over time which may be for you? With whom can you check out and share your experience of prayer? How do you assess its effect on your life and behaviour? Help is at hand!

The aim of this piece is to encourage you to consider having a spiritual director or guide or companion – there are different terms in use. The person is there solely to help you focus on your relationship with God. I will aim to outline what spiritual direction is and maybe is not.

The first point may sound strange. It’s not spiritual and it’s not direction. It’s not spiritual in the sense of being simply about one aspect or department of your life which might be labelled spiritual- such as your prayers for example. It is about the whole of your life and your relationship with God. But one topic which may well feature is your way of praying and how it does or maybe does not lead you on in your relationship with God.

Nor is it direction in the sense of telling you what to do. It is more likely to be focussed on your search for the direction God may want you to take. On the other hand, your director may be able to offer suggestions about ways of praying which will assist you in that search and offer you instruction on how to do them and listen to your experience of trying them.

It has affinities and sometimes overlap with – counselling, psychotherapy, mentoring, coaching, befriending, coaching, life training. Within any one spiritual direction relationship aspects of any or all of these may come in to play. Your director may be multitasking and using whatever repertoire of skills and experiences she or he may have to help you answer what will become a familiar question in your conversations - to wit “where is God in all this?”.

One text book defines spiritual direction as “help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating Gospel, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of this relationship”. I like this one having come to this ministry from a background in the helping professions. But being a helper is beset with pitfalls and I still hear my course tutors saying to me “you don’t have to solve the problem, Chris, you are helping the person find God’s solution”.

So what might it be like in practice? In a real sense it’s what you make of it. It is your time. You have an hour every few weeks with someone to listen and attend to you as you explore that very question – where is God in all this? The person is there solely for you and you are unlikely to come across them outside this relationship. It is not a soul friend relationship nor a prayer partner kind of relationship nor any kind of relationship in which there is mutual sharing.

The very fact of going to see your director has its own discipline. My first director used to say to me “Chris, I don’t know why you come. You are reflective and thoughtful and give a clear account of yourself”. To which I used to reply “Seamus, if I didn’t come I wouldn’t do the reflecting and thinking”. And my experience was that as a result he could see things I hadn’t and ask things I’d not thought of.

Unlike counselling and the other ministries I mentioned above, you don’t have to have a problem, spiritual or otherwise, in order to benefit from spiritual direction. You do need some sense, however

inarticulate, of longing for more of God, a deeper relationship with and experience of the Divine. Spiritual Direction is not just for ministers but is for the whole people of God. Quite a number of directors are lay people.

If your director comes between you and God, then direction is misfiring. If she or he shoves you closer into the arms of God, then fab! We often need encouragement to persist in truly getting to know this God of ours.

If this piece whets your appetite then search out someone you know who may be receiving spiritual direction and ask about their experience. Or you might go on a week of guided prayer or a guided retreat to have a direct experience of it for yourself as a kind of taster.

Members of Reflect Executive committee may know of directors in your area and the Retreat Association office has a list of contacts and link people.

So do give it a whirl! You might smile if I relate that one day my wife burst out "if I suggest something you take no notice but if your spiritual director suggests the same then you sit up and take notice!".

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