

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER EIGHTEEN

Bernardo Olivera, ocsa

## **Light for My Path**

*Spiritual Accompaniment*

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MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER EIGHTEEN

# Light for My Path

*Spiritual Accompaniment*

*by*

Bernardo Olivera, ocsa

*Translated by*

Augustine Roberts, ocsa

*Prologue by*

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## PROLOGUE

After reading the excellent introduction that Bernardo Olivera himself wrote to the present work, I ask myself what I can add to all he has already said about spiritual accompaniment. He has explained its purpose, the need we have for it, its pastoral importance, its different possible uses, and even his intention of helping us not to waste our time reading about it if we already know what it is, especially if we have practiced it.

Since the purpose of a prologue is basically to motivate readers, that is, to spark our interest so that we read with keener attention and more lasting fruit, I will say something here that could be summed up as follows:

Spiritual accompaniment is, of itself, a beautiful subject. When we add a good treatment of it by the author, we find ourselves in the presence of a splendid book that has, I believe, a certain charm.

Something charms us when it expresses more than it says—in spite of its relative brevity, this book opens us up to a higher level of awareness. It does so by evoking this higher consciousness and then suggesting that we go there. That is its grace. It is what happens on another level with any gift worth more than its price, such as poetry, where intuition and emotion go beyond the words. It also happens with all the sacraments, the grace of which is in the Grace.

Before developing the two ideas I have mentioned, I wish to inform those who are not aware that our author is Argentine, born in Buenos Aires in 1943, and is the abbot general of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, commonly known as Trappists. Since

his election on September 8, 1990, he is in continual, personal contact with monks, nuns, and communities. Even before that time, he dealt with many persons interested in the search for God. So we have here a work that is the fruit of his experience, his reflection, and his pastoral initiative in presenting for our consideration something as beautiful and as useful as spiritual accompaniment.

### **THE BEAUTY OF SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT JUDGED BY THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ONE ACCOMPANIED**

The purpose of the present book is to clarify the proper role of the person who is accompanying someone else. When the orientations given here are prudently put into practice, the person being accompanied will enjoy the experience of something along the following lines:

1. It is beautiful to experience that you are really understood by someone, who can be anyone able to do so, and that he or she is sincerely trying to know you. This is chiefly accomplished through a welcoming atmosphere of mutual appreciation, which includes a total, silent, intelligent receptivity. The listener completely forgets self and consciously puts aside the personal impact of whatever you say. There is a silent, yet eloquent, reception of your story, in which you have time to tell all that is really essential. The result is that you exult in the feeling of having been liberated, which comes from expressing yourself freely and completely. It is like holding a big bag of potatoes upside down and having them all fall out. Not a single one is left. But if it is a big bag of flour, more time will be needed. That is, the person who has a richer, more complicated history needs more time to talk. Yet even in that case, the moment comes to finish. A good companion is aware of that and knows how to close the important first session of welcoming receptivity.

2. It is beautiful to see yourself, as in a mirror, from within the person who listens to you. Your image is returned through the



prism of his or her warm welcome. You contrast it with what you would like it to be, and then admit that it is true and accept it with good grace, realism, and even a sense of humor. From that moment on, the truer image becomes yours. You also become simpler, because the one who accompanies you has not become personally involved in your story, but has also focused on what is most important, the essential elements, and has followed the central thread of what has happened. That was what had been difficult to do, perhaps because it hurt or because you wanted somehow to hide it from yourself and not look at it. But your welcoming listener has listened well, has understood what you were asking for, perhaps nonverbally, has seen what you were overlooking and has read it in your emotions, which have come to the surface and been verbalized. Then, with your consent, your listening companion has drawn your attention to a key point, which you dealt with for a longer time. Finally the wonder occurred! You began to give it less importance until you actually let it drop and said goodbye to the very thing that had brought you to this interview of spiritual accompaniment. In the last analysis, the important thing is to discover what you are, in whatever you are living and doing: not how you are living *it*, but how you are living "*yourself*," that is, what is affecting you so strongly in the surrounding circumstances, and *why* it has such a strong impact on you. Thus you arrive at the heart of the question, or rather at your own heart.

3. It is both beautiful and useful to discover that the ultimate reason why we sometimes "latch on" to certain people or situations is inside us. That is how we grow in self-knowledge, which in turn lets us see how we can solve the problem. Each person has his or her own solution, which normally should not be sought from others. Their help will not profit us if we neither grow nor change, whereas we can and should respond to our own needs from within the global context of our own lives. That is what we are called to out of the depths of our being. When we search for the will of God on this deeper level, we enter into ourselves in order to reply freely and generously from the center of our hearts.

Growth in this response implies seeing it more clearly and carrying it through with courage and patience. Everything then becomes new, which does not mean that it will be easy, but it is now clearly faced and will produce its fruits in due time. It seems to me that the best fruit of spiritual accompaniment is that it requires you to enter into and then come out of yourself in order to move ahead, with your lamp shining bright, to meet the Lord. One's vocation becomes clearer, stronger, and more joyful. We are traveling in the right direction and accompanied from the heart, thanks to an integral spiritual accompaniment.

### **THE BEAUTY OF SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF THE ACCOMPANIST**

This is where we meet the present book. Its purpose is to help achieve fruitful work as a spiritual companion. It is usually affirmed that there are not many good companions of this kind, at least not ones of the spiritual caliber of Teresa of Avila or Teresa of Calcutta. It could be said that such persons are few and far between, and also especially gifted. Perhaps they themselves benefited from good spiritual accompaniment. There will always be persons who can accompany others in specific circumstances or with certain types of people. In any case, spiritual accompaniment is necessary, since it is part of the service rendered by confessors, superiors, formators, guest house directors, catechists, group moderators, and persons advanced in experience, wisdom, and age. It is also a normal part of all life in Christ, especially in the structural fragmentation of today's technological culture with its oceans of data and information, where each individual thinks of oneself as a self-sufficient unit with unique ideas, when in reality his or her desires are at the mercy of the latest fad or subliminal advertising, which undermine one's deepest convictions.

I have said above that the present book has a certain charm, at least for me. Let me explain.

1. The reader has already seen that the contents are worthy of a scholastic treatise, especially since this book deals with an

*initiation* to spiritual accompaniment. Throughout the book, however, the author has not remained on the surface. On the contrary, his schematic style is replete with meaning and is charmingly evocative. So we should not expect his work to have the length of an elaborate, patiently written treatise that is still an *initiation* because the field it deals with is becoming increasingly vast. To expect such a treatise would cause a frustrating desire for greater development of the subject matter. Bernardo has done the reverse: he has gone directly to his central purpose and has therefore left to one side the causes of the crisis that exists among some of us, and has avoided—as he puts it—getting involved in the multiplicity of names given to spiritual accompaniment, *or whatever you want to call it*. A pastoral concern for the void to be filled inspires him to offer us some guidelines that are more practical than theoretical.

The charm comes when one becomes aware that throughout the book it is clear that the author is *well read*, that he knows *how to read*, and that his book is well *worth reading*.

- *He is well read*, which means that he knows what is being written on the subject these days. To realize this, you can look at his table of spiritual accompaniment according to the different tendencies and religious families.
- *He knows how to read*, that is, he knows how to interiorize what he reads, synthesize it, and then rework it. This process is what lies behind his lists of items, his tables, and his sober, compact style.
- *He is worth reading*. What he has reworked and presented to us is at the service of those who will read it and can use it for discussion in workshops and study groups, above all within a monastic context.

2. There is also charm in the solidity of his orientation, which is expressed very simply. I would sum up his approach in the following four principles:

*NO to any substitute.* I say this emphatically: when it comes to accompaniment, no one on earth has been given any power to take the place either of God or of the person being accompanied. Bernardo will say in his very first remark in chapter one that this is a truth that *must never be forgotten*. There is always only one Companion and Guide—the Holy Spirit—whom we are to follow, and we should always remain *a few steps behind*. Moreover, we must *be accompanied* at every step by the person accompanied, in the sense that in him and with him we have to read and interpret God’s will in such a way that it is the person being accompanied who answers the Lord. That is why names as sacred as director, guide, counselor, catechist, angel of the church, father, mother, and companion will apply to “spiritual” men and women to the degree that they help people follow the Spirit without taking the Spirit’s place by leaning on such “titles” or on a presumed state of grace. One has to have an exquisite sensitivity to know how to disappear when the work has been accomplished and the Other Person, the Spirit, has clearly appeared. However, it is good to remember those names, so as to grow in one’s trust in the Lord and ask for the grace to carry out this service well. It is a sign of humble responsibility before God and of transparent moral authority with the person being accompanied. Bernardo insists that we should not be disturbed if the Spirit forgets us, so that the one accompanied can be alone with the Lord. As I see it, it would be a most serious matter if the lack of this sense of responsibility were one of the causes of the crisis of spiritual accompaniment.

*NO to confusion*, not only concerning roles—as happens when the one accompanying turns into the one accompanied, perhaps due to something he or she shared with the other person—but also concerning duties. This can happen when the person accompanying is strongly influenced in the fulfillment of his or her service as abbot, teacher, profes-

sor, or the like, by a lack of confidence on the part of the person being accompanied. There has to be a clear agreement to maintain the trust of the one accompanied and the freedom of the one accompanying. It should also be clarified that what is said by the one accompanied has to be related to the subject of the interview or series of interviews. In this line, the one accompanying should not expect that the one being accompanied tell his or her whole life history, and even less if it is a question of matters of conscience.

*YES to complementarity.* Spiritual accompaniment has many names. The different ones highlight complementary aspects, which are always present and are interrelated according to changing circumstances. Our author gives preference to the reality of maternity or paternity. It is easy to appreciate how the various names given to this relationship refer to different functions of a father or mother, independently of whether the one exercising it is a man or a woman. This type of complementarity is also important in psychology and psychotherapy, as well as in sacramental confession. The healthy exercise of these two qualities demands respect for their different fields of action and will lead to developing what they have in common.

*YES to involvement,* which means getting involved, showing a keen interest in the best way to grow in the art of spiritual accompaniment. It is not difficult to become aware of what needs improvement. In fact, this greater skill should be achieved without delay so as to gain new confidence in oneself and greater trust in the Lord, in whose service one wants to be a faithful instrument. In the present book, Bernardo has achieved this goal well, pointing to a new stage of development in which this traditional art will be recovered and used anew. The book is extremely useful and valuable, both for its theoretical principles and, above all, for its practicality. If I praise it here, it is not to embarrass anyone,

since the best praise will come from the reader and will be according to the harvest he or she personally reaps from it. And I repeat: the harvest depends on the reader's personal involvement.

Because of that—and to bring this prologue to a close—I mention here what I most remember from the book:

There are plenty of "small" pitfalls. He calls them small because they are lying in wait for everyone, not just for obviously deluded visionaries. They are, however, serious because they are real dangers and are only removed through humility.

In three places he uses the word "fool." What are these three foolish acts? They are: not using spiritual direction ("no one is self-directed, unless one wants to be the disciple of a fool"); letting oneself be seduced by a bad counselor ("only fools . . . mistake his forked tail for a friendly hand"); and hoping to be admitted into a community against the latter's good judgment ("only a fool could think that one can impose his or her own vocation on the community").

In two places he speaks about truths that should not be forgotten, namely, that the Spirit is the only one who accompanies us, and that grace presupposes nature. We always need to keep these principles in mind.

He mentions a particular person who was "accompanied," that is, Brother Michel Fleury of Atlas. Only a few days before his martyrdom, Brother Michel called the spiritual accompaniment he received from his superior, Fr. Christian, "a light for my path." This phrase from the Psalms has inspired the title of the present book and applies it to many lives and to many readers.

I also would like to call to mind a person whom all of us would canonize: Teresa of Calcutta. During the process of her beatification, it became known that she had passed through a *dark night*. What none of us imagined was that her night lasted fifty years! Have no doubt about it: if she remained faithful in the darkness we can be sure that she had good spiritual accompaniment. She, too, would have called it “a light for my path.”

Santiago Fidel Ordóñez Fernández  
Counselor of the Abbot General  
Rome, Easter of 2004





## INTRODUCTION

Our Brother Michel Fleury, professed monk of the monastery of Our Lady of Atlas, died in Algeria on May 21, 1996. Nine months before, on the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, and because of the violence rampant throughout the country, he had drawn up his will and testament. There we read the following reflection: "In faith, 'His Word has been a light for my path.'" Michel is clearly referring to the word of God and is quoting verse 115 of Psalm 118, but what is interesting is that he is also referring to the word of his "Superior . . . and brother," that is, Fr. Christian De Chergé, the community's prior.

At this crucial moment of his life, Brother Michel gives us a striking witness of spiritual accompaniment, direction, or guidance, and of what spiritual paternity is.

There are solid reasons to think that spiritual accompaniment—or whatever you might want to call it—is an element that is missing in the lives of many consecrated persons, including monks and nuns. It is not uncommon that many younger members of our communities feel the need for this spiritual service. Sad to say, it seems that the two generations following Vatican II somewhat neglected cultivating this art, which had been so deeply valued by previous generations and is so even now. This is not the time to enter into detail about why this has happened, but simply to point out the need.

The present book is meant to give a modest reply to this need. Its only purpose is to offer some theoretical and practical guidelines to help in initial and permanent monastic formation. I will not waste your time or mine in discussing terminology:

should we say accompaniment, direction, orientation, paternity, or maternity? Although I recognize its limits, my basic choice is the language of accompaniment, referring to the persons involved as accompanying and accompanied. I realize, however, that the language of paternity and maternity has a deeper monastic meaning, and for that reason will use these words too, along with fatherhood and motherhood.

When I speak in a monastic context about the one accompanying, I refer to the person of the abbot or abbess, the novice director and the director of the simply professed, as well as to all those who are at the service of life and accompany it toward the Life, in other words: confessors, guest directors, spiritual brothers, friends, and the like.

It is true that this book is directed to the world of monks and nuns, but it does not stop there. Much of what is going to be said can be applied to the special service of accompaniment given in monastic guesthouses. Besides, the sources of these reflections lie in the great ancient and modern Christian tradition, especially that of the West, and in the contributions of contemporary human sciences. So it will not be uncommon here that we listen to different spiritual teachers and classical humanists, to all of whom we owe a debt of gratitude. In particular we listen to:

*The great monastic tradition*, which conceives of spiritual help as a charismatic process of giving birth. A relationship is established between a father or mother and a son or daughter in the spirit, yet such an asymmetrical relationship does not block the mutual affection typical of being a son, daughter, father, or mother. The manifestation of conscience, so typical of eremitical desert spirituality, and the fraternal correction practiced among cenobites continue to be, even today, the two pillars of spiritual paternity in the monastic world.

*Cistercian tradition* as it comes through St. Aelred of Rievaulx. This spiritual heritage establishes a relationship between equals, in which any asymmetry becomes a balanced platform for friendship. The result is mutual accompaniment.

Thoughts and experiences are shared, confronted, clarified, and discerned, either together or alternately, according to circumstances. Saint Teresa of Avila and St. Francis de Sales also experienced this type of spiritual support.

*The way of the Carmelites* as inspired by Teresa and John of the Cross, and synthesized in the “little way” of Thérèse of Lisieux. The person accompanied has to run the risk of an adventure in love, one that demands deep solitude and a capacity for exposure to the ups and downs of the darkness of faith and lack of support. The one accompanying is eclipsed by this mystery and simply encourages the other to keep going, even at night. The quality of the accompaniment can be judged by one’s total submission to the work of the Holy Spirit.

*The more proactive Jesuit tradition*, in which the person of the spiritual director, while remaining secondary, occupies an important place due to his or her human knowledge and spirit of faith. The person being directed learns as much as possible, but above all exposes his or her situation for the discernment of the director. This asymmetric relationship is emphasized. Any interpersonal affection is not necessarily approved of.

*The contribution of the behavioral sciences*, especially those with a more existential, person-centered approach. The process here is, above all, the responsibility of the one being accompanied. Even though the relationship is unbalanced, this is greatly tempered by deep respect on the part of the one accompanying and by his or her abstention from any value judgment. We can almost say that the spiritual process is one of accompanied or supervised self-management.

This openness to other traditions should never forget some key features of spiritual accompaniment in a monastic context. It takes place within the normative framework of a rule—in our case that of St. Benedict of Nursia—and cannot exist without

wholeheartedly embracing the humble obedience of faith, so typical of the patriarch of the monks of the West. Moreover, the monastic way is slow and repetitive. It calls for large doses of patience and faithfulness on the part of both spiritual father and spiritual son.

On the other hand, the official role of the abbot or abbess as father or mother of the community refers above all to the community as a whole. This means that both abbot and abbess are, in the first place, spiritual accompanists of their respective communities. In the second place, they may perhaps also be such for particular persons. This makes us aware of an important principle, namely that spiritual accompaniment of the monk or nun by the abbot or abbess takes place in a concrete community context.

To develop this last statement, we will have to say something about the abbatial service, even though it goes beyond the strict limits of the theme we are discussing. What is clear, however, is that the abbot and abbess accompany their respective communities spiritually through a type of service to all their brothers and sisters. It is a role that is fatherly, motherly, pastoral, healing, formative, and administrative. In this context of multifaceted service, they also accompany those individual brothers and sisters who freely open their hearts to them in search of light and motivation for believing in the ways of the Spirit and for bringing their lives into deeper conformity to that of the Lord Jesus.

I will conclude this introduction with a piece of advice. This book is simply an introduction to the spiritual accompaniment of individuals. Its purpose is more practical than doctrinal. Those who have received the charism of spiritual fatherhood or motherhood in a more outstanding way will not need any word from me. Those who have received this charism in a more ordinary form can perhaps find something useful here, and those who wish to grow in the art of spiritual accompaniment with the assistance of the Spirit can make use of these pages without feeling that they are wasting their precious time.

## THE GUIDE AND THE GUIDED

### ONLY ONE GUIDE AND ACCOMPANIST

The first thing to bear in mind is that the Holy Spirit is the only Guide and Accompanist. It is something never to forget. The Spirit is the one who, through Christ, carries us to the Father. John of the Cross says it clearly and precisely:

Directors should reflect that they themselves are not the chief agent, guide, and mover of souls in this matter, but that the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, Who is never neglectful of souls, and that they are instruments for directing them to perfection through faith and the law of God, according to the spirit God gives each one.<sup>1</sup>

This is why the person who takes on the service of accompanist or guide must walk several steps behind the Spirit, so as to be guided by him. The accompanist's main function is to understand the Spirit's action and leadership and to help it as much as possible. Not infrequently it will be necessary to leave the guided person to walk alone, so that the Spirit guides and helps the person directly, without any human intermediary.<sup>2</sup>

1. St. John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, in *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1964), 3:46.

2. See St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. L. J. Puhl (Westminster: Newman Press, 1954), 15.

**GUIDED BY THE ONE ACCOMPANIED**

Being guided by the Spirit is absolutely essential, but there is something more. The accompanist or guide must be guided also by the one he or she is accompanying. This takes place through the latter's openness of heart and sharing of graces and disasters, needs and achievements, difficulties and charisms. Through this humble, sincere presentation of his or her lived experience, the person being guided also becomes a guide for the one doing the accompanying.

The successive sessions of spiritual accompaniment, with the dialogues that such a relationship implies, favor a growth in the intimacy and mutual trust that are the seeds of friendship. Saint Teresa of Avila puts it well: "I would counsel those who practice prayer to seek, at least in the beginning, friendship and association with other persons having the same interest."<sup>3</sup> Saint Francis de Sales agrees:

Holy Writ says that "a faithful friend is as a strong defense, and he that hath found him hath found a treasure. A faithful friend is the medicine of life and immortality, and they that fear the Lord shall find him."<sup>4</sup> These words (as you may see by the context) regard chiefly our eternal interests, in which above all we require this faithful friend, who will guide our actions by his warning and counsels, . . . let this friendship be at once loving and firm, wholly sacred, divine, spiritual, holy.<sup>5</sup>

In any case, no one is self-directed, unless one wants to be the disciple of a fool. We guide each other and we are all guided by the Holy Spirit. We must never forget that first place is held by the Spirit, and never think that he forgets us. Not only does he not forget us but he also asks for our help and even makes it a requirement. So it would be dangerous to think that our

3. St. Teresa of Avila, *Life*, VII, 20.

4. Sir 6:14-16.

5. St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 1, 4.

spiritual help, accompaniment, guidance, or friendship might be useless.

### NEED FOR ACCOMPANIMENT

Centuries of the church's experience have taught us the need for spiritual accompaniment when we want to reach the heights of holiness. In the first period of Christian spirituality, St. Anthony of the Desert told some monks who were asking him to give them a conference:

The Scriptures are sufficient for us for instruction, but it is good for us to encourage one another in the faith and to train by means of words. You then, like children, bring what you know to your father and tell him about it while I, because I am your elder in years, will share with you what I know and have accomplished.<sup>6</sup>

We find the same teaching centuries later at the beginning of "Sayings of Light and Love," which were written by John of the Cross to go with his spoken wisdom. These sayings are worth reading and meditating on:

He who wants to stand alone without the support of a master and guide, will be like the tree that stands alone in a field without a proprietor. No matter how much the tree bears, passers-by will pick the fruit before it ripens . . .

The virtuous soul that is alone and without a master is like a lone burning coal; it will grow colder rather than hotter.

He who falls alone remains alone in his fall, and he values his soul little since he entrusts it to himself alone.

If you do not fear falling alone, how do you presume that you will rise up alone?

Consider how much more can be accomplished by two together than by one alone.

6. St. Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 16, 1-2.

He who falls while heavily laden will find it difficult to rise under the burden.

The blind man who falls will not get up alone in his blindness, and if he does, he will take the wrong road.<sup>7</sup>

John is a poet, but also a theologian who stands taller than his diminutive physical height. Thus we should not be surprised that he is able to ground theologically the wise teaching contained in these sayings:

God is so content that the rule and direction of man be through other men, and that a person be governed by natural reason, that He definitely does not want us to bestow entire credence upon His supernatural communications, nor be confirmed in their strength and security until they pass through this human channel of the mouth of man. As often as He reveals something to a person, He confers upon that person's soul a kind of inclination to manifest this to another appropriate person. Until someone does this, he usually goes without complete satisfaction, for he has not received it from another man like himself.<sup>8</sup>

Even Pope Leo XIII, himself a pioneer in Catholic social doctrine, took sides in the discussion in order to dissipate any possible doubt:

There is no one who calls in question the truth that the Holy Spirit does work by a secret descent into the souls of the just and that He stirs them alike by warnings and impulses, since unless this were the case all outward defense and authority would be unavailing. . . . Moreover, as experience shows, these monitions and impulses of the Holy Spirit are for the most part felt through the medium of the aid and light of an external teaching authority. . . . This, indeed, belongs to the ordinary law of God's loving providence that

7. John of the Cross, "Sayings of Light and Love," in *Collected Works*, 5 and 7-11.

8. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in *Collected Works*, 2, 22:9.



as He has decreed that men for the most part shall be saved by the ministry also of men, so has He wished that those whom He calls to the higher planes of holiness should be led thereto by men; . . . Such guidance has ever obtained in the Church; it has been the universal teaching of those who throughout the ages have been eminent for wisdom and sanctity, and hence to reject it would be to commit one's self to a belief at once rash and dangerous.<sup>9</sup>

The unanimous teaching of the saints and the church is clear, therefore, namely that to climb high you have to do it accompanied by someone else, even though you may walk as if you were alone. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that in the years after the Second Vatican Council spiritual "direction" entered a crisis, though we must also admit that there were reasons justifying the critics. Today the climate is more peaceful. With the passage of time, we see a certain lack of health, which we want to remedy. The church's magisterium is very clear on this point:

Formation then is a sharing in the *work of the Father* who, through the Spirit, fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of young men and women. Those in charge of formation must therefore be very familiar with the path of seeking God, so as to be able to *accompany* others on this journey. Sensitive to the action of grace, they will also be able to point out those obstacles which are less obvious. But above all they will disclose the beauty of following Christ and the value of the charism by which this is accomplished. They will combine the illumination of spiritual wisdom with the light shed by *human means*, which can be a help both in *discerning the call* and in forming the new man or woman, until they are genuinely free. The chief instrument of formation is *personal dialogue*, a practice of irreplaceable and commendable effectiveness which should take place regularly and with a certain frequency.<sup>10</sup>

9. Leo XIII, Letter to Cardinal Gibbons, *Testem benevolentiae*, 22.

10. *Vita consecrata*, 66; see n. 64; italics added.

This last text shows how clearly the context and even the language have changed. We are dealing with the action of the Blessed Trinity. Accompaniment takes place thanks to the experience one has acquired and the knowledge of the behavioral sciences, especially the art of personal conversation and dialogue. One no longer speaks of needs, but of a practice that is irreplaceably effective.

The Cistercian's Statute on Formation leaves no doubt on the subject, yet we should recognize that it is still common to experience a vacuum in this regard after the period of initial formation. A simple declaration of principles or an exhortation is not enough to fill it, even though it is better than doing nothing:

Because they exercise the role of spiritual father or mother of the community, abbots and abbesses have a responsibility to guide their communities towards unity and growth in the Cistercian charism. Through their teaching they develop the identity of the community; through their administration they create the necessary conditions for formation, and through their pastoral care they aim to provide guidance, support and healing for each and every member. They share these responsibilities with all whom they appoint to help them in the service of the community, but more especially with the monks or nuns who accompany those going through the various phases of initial formation. A prolonged and regular spiritual guidance (accompaniment) constitutes an important element of formation, whether initial or ongoing. It leads the monk or the nun towards a real knowledge and acceptance of self, under the eyes of God.<sup>11</sup>

This legislative text clearly states the double dimension in our monasteries of abbatial fatherhood and motherhood. There is the communal dimension, which can never be missing, and the individual dimension, which will depend on the free opening of one's heart.

11. Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, *Ratio Institutionis*, 15–16.

### IDEAL PROFILE OF THE ACCOMPANIST

Let us see if we can sketch the ideal outline or profile of the person doing the accompanying. I say “ideal” on purpose, since it is very difficult to find someone like this in real life, but it will at least help us to know the direction in which we should tend to move.

Christian tradition offers us a fairly good portrait of the spiritual father, guide, master, director, or accompanist. When we consult some well-known masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we come up with the following descriptions:

We should take as guide or father somebody who is both well read and experienced in the things of God.<sup>12</sup>

It is very important that the master have prudence—I mean that he have good judgment—and experience; if besides these he has learning, so much the better.<sup>13</sup>

Besides being learned and discreet, a director should have experience.<sup>14</sup>

He (the spiritual guide and friend) must be filled with charity, knowledge, and discretion.<sup>15</sup>

It is easy to spot the convergence among these different opinions, even though the emphases and accents may vary. The characteristic features of the guide are good judgment, sound teaching, experience both human and divine, prudence, discernment, and charity.

In very few persons do we find all these qualities achieved to perfection. According to John of Avila, they are present in one in a thousand. Francis de Sales is less optimistic and says, “One in ten thousand!” But there is no need to be alarmed. Even in this case, perfection is the enemy of the good. My opinion is that the

12. St. John of Avila, *Audi Filia*, 55.

13. Teresa of Avila, *Life*, 13, 16; see also 18–19, and *The Interior Castle*, VI, 3:11.

14. John of the Cross, *Living Flame*, in *Collected Works*, 3:30.

15. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, 1:4.

characteristic features of a spiritual companion are present to some degree in ten thousand of every million Christians who live in the spirit of the Gospel and defend their faith.

In a monastic milieu, we can say that the qualities required for being director of novices can also be applied to every monk or nun, including the abbot or abbess, who serves as spiritual companion. These qualities are prudence, faithfulness to the monastic disciplines, ability to communicate and to guide. Perhaps all of this was in St. Benedict's mind when he said somewhat laconically that the novice director should be "gifted in spiritual guidance."<sup>16</sup>

We all realize that it is not the same thing to accompany a novice, a monk or nun in the middle of a vocational crisis, or someone who is well advanced in mystical experience of the divine mystery. One who cannot guide an advanced mystic might be able to handle a novice.

### **Only for Priests?**

In the past, many asked the question of whether spiritual accompaniment should only be given by priests. If this means that the latter have a monopoly on such a service, the answer must be a loud no. But if it is a question of whether such accompaniment is an appropriate part of the priest's pastoral ministry, then the reply is yes. This, however, does not mean that all priests receive such a charism or have the experience necessary for adequate accompaniment. I will return to this subject later, from another point of view. As for the question of whether giving spiritual accompaniment is only for men, the answer has already been given to us by the "ammas" of the Egyptian desert, by such Doctors of the Church as Catherine, Teresa, and Thérèse, and by the lives of several of you who are now reading these pages.

16. T. Kardong, *Benedict's Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 58.6.

## **SPIRITUAL PARENTHOOD**

The cosmos and all living beings have the source of their existence in the fatherhood of God.<sup>17</sup> But in the case of humans there is something special. Human fatherhood and motherhood are unique, being essentially in the likeness of God, who thus is for us both Father and Mother.

### **Divine Fatherhood and Divine Motherhood**

No clarification is needed when we affirm the fatherhood of God. What Jesus has revealed and what is contained in the whole New Testament witnesses to it. But divine motherhood has remained in the shadows through most of Christian tradition. Besides being Father, God is also Mother. Thus the Bible presents him to us as a consoling mother,<sup>18</sup> who lifts her little one up for a kiss, who can never forget the child sprung from her womb,<sup>19</sup> and has a loving, welcoming bosom.<sup>20</sup> Even Jesus compares himself to a broody mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings.<sup>21</sup> This statement of twofold parenthood is of central importance for the theme we are dealing with.

Spiritual accompaniment always implies, to a greater or lesser degree, a sharing in the divine fatherhood in its process of giving birth to sons and daughters, and nurturing them. Every type of spiritual parenthood is thus founded on the parenthood of God. Any spiritual father only works in virtue of sharing in the life of God the Father. His authority is not self-derived but received. It finds its place within the motherly authority or paterernity of the church, which is the only way we can fulfill what Jesus says: "Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven."<sup>22</sup>

17. See Eph 3:14-16.

18. See Isa 66:13.

19. See Isa 49:15.

20. See Ps 22:10.

21. Luke 13:34.

22. Matt 23:9.

## Spiritual Fatherhood

There is a good example in St. Bernard of what this type of parenting implies as the person grows in maturity. It is in Bernard's first letter, written when he was about thirty years old. A certain violence in him still seemed to prevail over mercy. The letter was addressed to his cousin Robert, one of the companions who entered Cîteaux together under Bernard's leadership. A few years later, Robert was one of the twelve founders of Clairvaux and made his profession in the hands of Abbot Bernard. The letter in question was thought to be miraculous, since it was written during a torrential rainfall without getting wet—at least, that is what William of Saint-Thierry states in his early biography of Bernard.<sup>23</sup>

What interests us most here, however, is not any miracle attached to the letter, nor its significance as an apology in favor of the Cistercian way of life as opposed to that of Cluny, nor the story of the young monk Robert, but rather what the letter tells us about its author's approach to our present theme. Over and beyond its value as literature, the letter is revealing. In fact it reveals more transparently, thanks to its high literary quality.

From the beginning to the end of the letter, Bernard says that he is acting from charity. However, it is obvious that many other feelings are involved, such as anger, frustration, sadness, possessiveness, or aggressiveness. Although the severe tone of the letter and its strong military symbolism might denote manly, even paternal, qualities, the idea of fatherhood is not what predominates. Nevertheless, in three key texts from the letter we read:

Smite thy son with a rod and thou shalt deliver his soul  
from hell. It is where he loves that the Lord bestows  
correction.<sup>24</sup>

23. See William of Saint-Thierry, *Vita Prima*, 11:50; also St. Bernard, *Letters*, 32:3.

24. St. Bernard, *Letters*, 1:2, quoting Prov 23:14 and Heb 12:6. See also 1:9, quoting Prov 1:10.

Having changed yourself, you will find me changed too. You may now embrace me without hesitation as a companion whom you used to fear as a master.<sup>25</sup>

See, my son, how I long to lead you now not any more in the spirit of slavery to govern you in fear, but in the spirit of adoption whereby we cry, "Abba, Father."<sup>26</sup>

This last text is the most important one. Bernard there promises his own conversion. He promises to be born to what he has not been, but wants to be. At the same time, he knows very well that his fatherhood has God the Father as its end. It is a human mediation that will let Robert profess with deep affection and freedom of spirit that God is his Father.

### **Spiritual Motherhood**

Several fathers of the church prolong biblical revelation and speak of God as Mother. Among them are Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. Irenaeus of Lyon, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Augustine of Hippo. This maternal concept of God and of Jesus reaches its high point during the Middle Ages. We could present many examples of it in the Benedictine-Cistercian tradition. Here is at least one example, taken from the prayer of St. Anselm, Abbot of Bec and Archbishop of Canterbury:

But you, Jesus, Good Master, are you not also a mother? Are you not that mother who, like the mother hen, gathers her chicks under her wings? Lord, you, too, are a mother, because what others have conceived and given birth to, came from you. You are the first one who died for them, and by dying brought them into the world, so that they in their turn could give birth. . . . In fact it is the desire to bring many children into life that has made you taste death and through your death you have begotten them. You did it by yourself, while they do it on your orders, helped by you. You are the

25. *Ibid.*, 1:2. See also 1:3.

26. *Ibid.*, 1:3.

author of life, they are your ministers. So it is you, Lord, who are the mother.<sup>27</sup>

As you can see, whether it is a question of fatherhood or motherhood, there is no gift of life unless you embrace death. One person is born because another dies, but the one who dies freely is born again. Isn't this what our father and mother, Bernard of Clairvaux, was teaching us a few minutes ago?

It must be stated again that the exercise of spiritual fatherhood goes hand in hand with spiritual motherhood. We can even say that Bernard seems to be—or wants to be—more *amma* than *abba*, more mother than father:

I have said this, my son, not to put you to shame, but to help you as a loving father because if you have many masters in Christ, yet you have few fathers. For, if you will allow me to say so, I begot you in Religion by word and by example. I nourished you with milk when, while yet a child, it was all you could take. And I would have given you bread if you had waited until you grew up. But alas! How soon and how early were you weaned! Now I fear that all I had cherished with kindness, strengthened with encouragement, confirmed with prayers, is even now fading and wasting away. Sadly I weep, not for my lost labor, but for the unhappy state of my lost child.<sup>28</sup>

Bernard's self-portrait as a mother reaches its extreme when he identifies himself with the prostitute in the time of King Solomon:

My case is the same as that of the harlot Solomon judged, whose child was stealthily taken by another who had overlain and killed her own. You too were taken from my side, cut from me. My heart cannot forget you, half of it went with you, and what remains cannot but suffer.<sup>29</sup>

27. St. Anselm, *Prayers*, 10.

28. St. Bernard, *Letters*, 1:10.

29. *Ibid.*



The “work” of begetting children is hard. The Abbot of Clairvaux admits it as he prays to the Lord Jesus:

You know with what agony of heart I waited upon the youth in his trials, how I beat upon your loving ears with my prayers for him, how for his anxieties, troubles, and vexations, I was on fire, and torn, and afflicted. And now, I fear, it has all been in vain.<sup>30</sup>

Actually, Bernard’s solicitude was not in vain. Thanks to the good services of Peter the Venerable, young Robert finally returned to Clairvaux, where he lived a holy life. He was sent by Bernard himself to govern the abbey of Maison-Dieu in Besançon. The *Cistercian Menology* recalls his memory on November 29.

And so we see that Bernard, knowing that God is both Father and Mother, lived and interpreted his life-giving service to his monks in a motherly key as well as in a fatherly one. We have just seen it in the letter to Robert written during his first years as abbot, but with time the Abbot of Clairvaux affirmed his convictions even more clearly. For Bernard, everyone fulfilling a ministry of the care of souls should also—and above all—possess motherly qualities such as affection, compassion, tenderness, protection, and nutrition:

Here is a point for the ear of those superiors who wish always to inspire fear in their communities and rarely promote their welfare. Learn, you who rule the earth. Learn that you must be mothers to those in your care, not masters. Make an effort to arouse the response of love, not that of fear: and should there be occasional need for severity, let it be paternal rather than tyrannical. Show affection as a mother would, correct like a father. Be gentle, avoid harshness, do not resort to blows, expose your breasts: let your bosoms expand with milk, not swell with passion.<sup>31</sup>

30. Ibid., 1:7.

31. St. Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 23:2.

Thus St. Bernard becomes identified with a long tradition that unites him to Paul the apostle. Paul thought of himself as father of the community at Corinth, since he “became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”<sup>32</sup> But he also saw himself as mother. Both experiences are joined in his first letter to the Thessalonians:

Although we were able to impose our weight as apostles of Christ . . . we were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children. With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us. . . . As you know, we treated each one of you as a father treats his children, exhorting and encouraging you and insisting that you conduct yourselves as worthy of the God who calls you into his kingdom and glory.<sup>33</sup>

In this quote from Thessalonians we can see the characteristic features of fatherhood: transmission of teaching, stimulation, and rephension, as well as the maternal qualities of care and tenderness. The result is a fatherly challenge and a motherly welcome.

When Paul wrote to the Christians of Galatia, his “children” whose unfaithful conduct had disappointed and hurt him, he did not hesitate to refer to himself as the most maternal of mothers: “My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you!”<sup>34</sup>

### **Fatherly and Motherly Attitudes**

God is Father and Mother. Thus spiritual accompaniment is a participation in this divine fatherhood and motherhood. It implies attitudes that are both fatherly and motherly because it is an instrument of the grace of a God who is simultaneously Father and Mother.

32. 1 Cor 4:15.

33. 1 Thess 2:7-8, 11-12.

34. Gal 4:19.

Obviously, each person who exercises such accompaniment has his or her graces and limits. Some are more fatherly, others more motherly. The fact of being either man or woman imposes certain conditioning factors, which, however, do not absolutely determine the type of relationship. What really matters here are the natural or acquired dispositions that each person has. But what are the basic dispositions attributed to motherhood or fatherhood in our cultural context? Briefly, they seem to be the following:

- *Motherhood*: an inclination to give, preserve, and promote life; delicate sensitivity; receptivity; and capacity to respond with affection. On the negative or immature side there can be a certain absorbing passivity and a castrating possessiveness.
- *Fatherhood*: an orientation toward initiative and action; capacity for distinguishing and confronting reality. An immature or negative expression of fatherhood is inconsiderate activism or an aloof insensitivity.

We all know spiritual companions of one type or another. Motherly ones are welcoming and understanding, though not so good at clarifying difficulties. Fatherly ones clarify and help us confront the difficulties, but their capacity to understand and accept us could be warmer and more tender.

We know by experience that it is not easy to embody in oneself, in a balanced way, both fatherly and motherly attitudes. But it is possible—even necessary—to acquire a certain complementarity. If the person who accompanies lives a true relationship with the one accompanied, he or she will know how to adapt to the latter's real needs. For example, the accompanying person will have to be more motherly with someone who received little affection in his or her infancy, but with someone who lacked a model of creative, guided action, there will have to be a more fatherly approach.

And we can say, to conclude, that experiential self-knowledge will teach us something strange about ourselves. Although both

men and women have been created in the image of God, men do not have a fatherly "instinct" in the same way that women have a motherly one. Many men are not instinctively fatherly and their human nature does not seem to orient them primarily or spontaneously in the direction of fatherhood! In other words, not every man who has children is a father! Was it God who made men like this, or was it sin that disfigured them? It is significant that Adam, after his sin, is not referred to as "father," whereas Eve is "the mother of all the living."<sup>35</sup> Eve will not credit the birth of her first child to Adam, but to God.

We agree that true motherhood is not merely the instinctive one. The maternal dimension appears to be the most complete expression of being a woman. It emphasizes the person as belonging to a particular sex, but without hypersexualizing her. Moreover, it includes both her psychological and her spiritual dimension. Human and personal motherhood assumes the maternal instinct and fulfills it by opening it to other dimensions. That is why true motherly strength communicates life, nurtures it, wants to grow with the other person, encourages the other person to affirm his or her deepest self, believes and hopes that the other will grow better and more completely than she herself will, without expecting gratitude for it. She is stronger than any contradiction or death.

It would seem that spiritual fatherhood in men lacks a natural basis, unless we go to another level and enter into communion with our welcoming, motherly *anima*. Nevertheless, if any man really wants to be a father everything we have said about personal motherhood should also be applied to fatherhood. It is worth asking ourselves whether the motherly instinct of women is an advantage or a hindrance when entering into a relationship of spiritual parenthood. It is a theme that needs deeper discussion.

35. Gen 3:20; see 4:1.

## Degrees of Spiritual Parenthood

Objectively speaking and in a sacramental context, we have to say that the only spiritual parent is the person who gives birth to the life of grace in someone else through the sacrament of baptism. In the same way, the priest who administers the sacrament of reconciliation is a spiritual father, since he restores or nourishes the life of grace in someone else.

However, when we speak of spiritual fatherhood we are referring to something over and beyond the nourishment of the life of grace. We are on the level of charisms, not necessarily that of sacraments. In this sense, experience teaches us that spiritual parenthood has different degrees. Here are three of them:

- In the *fullest* sense, spiritual fathers and mothers are those who mediate the life of Christ and teach the way to follow him, offering in their own lives an example to imitate.
- In the *most proper* sense, although it may not be so full as the previous one, we can call spiritual fathers and mothers those who give a determining impulse to the Christian life of others and continue to be a special reference point for their spiritual growth.
- The name of spiritual father or mother can also be applied in a *broad sense* to one whose function consists in accompanying someone or facilitating his or her journey toward Christ, without giving it a decisive orientation.

Although I could seem to contradict myself, I want to add an important truth, namely that the spiritual father or mother in the fullest sense, to the degree that he or she is inspired by the grace of the Spirit and makes the Lord present to us, renews us in the sacramental character of Christian life. That is why the simple presence of a spiritual father or mother is already an instrument communicating life in Christ.