

The Virgin Mary, who welcomed with serenity and love all the moments of her Son's life, will help us find the peace and joy that come from letting Jesus also be born in our hearts.

Rome, December 15, 2023

[Back to Contents](#)

Other Presentations

Class on Forming People in Spiritual Direction, Lisbon, October 8, 2023

This class recalls some ideas that we already try to live but that, as in everything, we can always improve in. Nor is it enough to recall things we already know. We should also try to draw out some specific resolutions to improve our effort to help our brothers and sisters through spiritual direction.

The first idea that may come to mind is that formation seeks to form Christ in souls. It is not primarily a matter of acquiring ideas. Of course, it is necessary to know the spirit of the Work and the figure of our Father, for we are a family and formation covers many fields. But all this is aimed at identifying ourselves with Christ.

This is a key idea that we should never forget. It is not a nice but theoretical idea; rather it is more specific than it might seem. When we try to help people to grow in virtue, what we are seeking is precisely to identify ourselves with the one who is perfect God and perfect man, Christ Jesus. We too can unite the human with the divine in our daily lives, living with supernatural outlook the realities of everyday life: family, work, rest, friendships, and so on.

We can recall what our Father said about the task of spiritual direction: "The model is Jesus Christ; the molder is the Holy Spirit, through grace." This has many practical consequences. The fact that the molder is the Holy Spirit leads us right away to the fact that, in any means of formation – receiving a

confidence, giving a circle, etc. – the main thing is to ask for light, since it is the Paraclete who forms. Naturally, we have to prepare well what we are going to say – thinking about it, making an outline, looking at sources, etc. – but in this process (both before, during and after) we can ask God for help so that he is the one who acts, who forms. And there are many ways of doing this. We can pray, for example, before having a conversation with someone: “Holy Spirit, speak through me, for all effectiveness comes not from me but from your grace.”

We are not the model; Christ is. Certainly, we have to draw on the experience we have gained in life and in our years in the Work; but it will be just that, our own experience, since we are not the point of reference. Therefore, we will not pass on personal ideas. This doesn't mean that we don't have to make our own what we say. But what we have to transmit is the Gospel and the spirit that God has wanted for the Work. Naturally, each one of us then does so in a personal way, but always being careful not to put forward ideas that are purely personal. This is where the challenge comes of knowing how to discern between making the most of one's own experience (which is very good for helping others) and transmitting ideas that can be purely personal opinions.

Not being models or molders does not take away our responsibility or our desire to help, because we are living instruments of God. And this is how we have to see all formation: we are not passing on something of our own, but we are being instruments of God.

No one gives what one doesn't have

Naturally, when we give advice, we realize that, in the first place, we should apply it to ourselves, for we also need to improve. In this regard, it is good to remember the scene in the Gospel where our Lord asks Peter three times: “Do you love me?” To each affirmative answer by the apostle Jesus replies: “Feed my lambs,” which is as if he were saying: “In order to be able to feed, guide and help others you need, first of all, to love me with all your heart.”

I remember that, in a get-together, someone asked our Father: “For those of us who are directors or who give means of formation, what is the first thing? And our founder said: “The most important thing for the director is

the director.” When we give advice or talk about a topic, we too have to struggle on that same point. No one can give what one doesn’t have, although it is true that, in the end, we end up giving more than we have, for it is the Holy Spirit who molds. That is why our own relationship with God is paramount.

Our interior life is a prerequisite, because that is what our Lord wants, in order to help others; even if so often (and this is quite normal) we have to guide people who are much better than us, who are also older or who have been in the Work longer. Since we don’t form people through our own ideas, but through the spirit of the Work, we can assist, form and help these people to grow. We can help precisely because we are not giving what is ours, but what is God’s, what is the spirit of the Work. Neither models nor molders, but with the wonderful responsibility of being instruments of the Molder and instruments of the Model.

In spiritual direction we give guidance with advice. Therefore, we cannot give orders or commands. On a few occasions these may be imperative counsels, but not on our own authority, but God’s. To give an example that is absurd because it is so obvious, we can tell a person that it is not lawful to kill. This is imperative advice, but not because one says so oneself, but because of God’s law. In any case, this is not often the case. In anything other than that, imperative advice of the “you must do this” type is not given. An attempt is made to explain the advantage and necessity of such advice, perhaps also its practical consequences, but always leaving the person free.

When giving advice and helping people to tackle the interior struggle (whether in personal or collective means of formation), it is important not to fall into casuistry. Thus we avoid forming “voluntaristic” people who act merely out of will power, and we encourage them to do things out of love for Christ. This is not just a matter of sentiments, since sometimes – and this can often be the case – love for Christ is not expressed in sensible feelings, but rather in a serious decision of one’s will and one’s freedom, in a deep conviction. In this way we foster this freedom of spirit as a capacity to love God and others. To do so, we can connect the interior life of people (our own in the first place, and that of others, to the extent that it is our task to help them) with an apostolic dimension of concern for souls. That is, we can help people

see the apostolic dimension of any of our struggles, even the smallest ones, through the communion of saints.

Along the same lines, in formation we can help people realize that we are not alone and try to console them, for life is not lacking in difficulties. Thus we sow peace and joy in others. Our Father used to say that, after a confidence, the one who has done it should always come away happier and more eager to struggle. And this depends very much on the person who receives the talk, on the way he knows how to console, encourage and demand. To demand, not as if it were a mandate, but by helping people see the beautiful reasons why it is worth struggling.

Helping the soul to want to

St. Josemaría used to stress that “the function of the spiritual director is to help the soul to want to.” That is to say, we have to try through our prayer, and also through the way we say things, to help people act not simply because they feel obliged, but because they truly make their own what God wants of them. Of course, there are things in life that are obligatory, but we can also do them freely. How? By loving. One can love one’s duty. In this way we are loving our vocation, loving the spirit of the Work. And this makes us free, because we act not out of mere routine or because we have been told to do so, but out of love for God. Because freedom does not consist in doing whatever we want – in the sense of not being tied down or setting aside our obligations – but in acting because we really and truly want to do it, out of freedom.

It is important to encourage this freedom, that people do things because they want to, even if it costs them an effort or there are times when they have to go against the grain. Our Father said that “we can’t think that it is only possible to do joyfully a job that we like doing.” Putting love into our work doesn’t mean that we feel enthusiasm for everything we do. This is a supernatural reality, but also a very human one. Parents make sacrifices for their children and do so with joy, even when things are difficult or require great effort. This reality, which is already very human, is raised to the supernatural order by God’s grace.

Naturally, we also want to help people, in what depends on their own effort, to receive spiritual direction fruitfully. And for this, it we need to facilitate sincerity, bearing in mind that no one is obliged to be sincere in spiritual

direction. One is obliged to be sincere in confession in serious matters, but in spiritual direction one is not morally obliged to say things. Freedom and, at the same time, sincerity need to be strongly encouraged, otherwise spiritual direction loses a great deal of its effectiveness and value.

How can sincerity be facilitated? First of all, the value and desirability of this virtue can be explained in collective means of formation. It can also be facilitated in the confidence by gently asking questions, not as if it were an interrogation, but by making it clear that what we want to do is to help the person to open up easily. But always, I insist, without making it seem as if one is demanding that they tell something, but rather helping them to open up. And this is achieved above all with affection and prayer. Often it may not be difficult for a person to talk about anything; but sometimes it is, either because it is a delicate subject or because of a lack of examination. A good and gentle question can help the other person to get to know themselves better. If someone never talks about an important topic, one can ask, "How is this matter going?" But always with the attitude of a brother who wants to help, not to judge.

Spiritual direction is a very effective instrument. We all have the experience of needing someone to unburden ourselves to and to tell us things. It may happen that, over the years, we already know how to solve a certain problem. However, we need someone else to shed more light on how to deal with it. Sometimes the mere fact of opening up and talking about the situation fills us with peace. This is an exercise of humility and also of faith, because we don't trust in ourselves, but in the help that God gives us through that person.

[Back to Contents](#)