

Spiritual Counseling

Not every priest is a spiritual father. Therefore, the Church doesn't allow every priest to take confessions. When the bishop finds that a priest has reached a level of maturity, he declares him a spiritual father. What actually happens is that if a priest was alone in his parish, the bishop would give him this authority and call him a spiritual father even if he wasn't able to be a counselor. The main idea is that the priest doesn't become automatically – i.e. through his ordination or a special prayer – a spiritual father. This is a grace from above. The important thing is for the priest to know his limits. If he didn't have enough knowledge in the Holy Book or didn't have enough spiritual experience, it is better if he only gives forgiveness of sins without counseling. In such case, the Gospel would be a good counselor.

Deep religious education is a condition to recognize sin and its contrary. This would become available through numerous readings in different theological fields and ascetic literature if the reader can precisely differentiate between what he reads and what he must say in the case of the believer that came for counseling. How does the spiritual father move from what he has read to what he must say? This is a big question. We wouldn't benefit people if we just repeat what we found in books. It isn't enough to direct people to sincerity; we should clarify how to live sincerity for example as a lawyer, a merchant or a person running for elections. What are the particularities of virtue in every case? It isn't enough to call people for chastity. Talking about chastity with a single person is different than doing it with a married one. We cannot just ruminate ascetic words knowing that most of them have been written for monks.

No counseling could be done by simply saying ethical and social words such as: "Why did you do that? This is wrong"; or "you pray, how could you do such a sin?" If someone cannot speak from the heart of the Gospel with Jesus' words, he must remain silent.

On a higher level, we might have a priest that has tasted the sweetness of the Lord. Such priest must not say anything except what comes from his experience. If the priest was a man of prayer, he can direct people to prayer. However, the priest that only fulfills his ritual duties cannot speak about praying. It isn't enough for the counselor to say: "Pray, son". If he hasn't tasted the beauty of prayer and understood it and knew how to fight laziness or distraction in it, it is preferred for him to remain silent. Talking generally and ambiguously doesn't take you anywhere.

All spiritual fathers must give advices and not orders. He shouldn't cancel the personality of the person who came for confession or counseling. He isn't his slave but his son and brother. We shouldn't treat him as we treat a novice in

monasticism. A spiritual father doesn't put people in templates. He can be strict sometimes but not all the times; he must be sweet and tender in all situations.

The honoring given by the repentant for his spiritual father doesn't mean that he falls in slavery to a person or that he doesn't see any benefit except in this father. If he discovered that he isn't getting a lot of benefits, he can leave him after taking permission. The spiritual father must make the bond loose because this is what this person has come to ask. The counselor must accept that his spiritual son could find another counselor. The spiritual father shouldn't fall in jealousy towards other spiritual fathers.

Of course, this doesn't mean that you can choose your spiritual father whenever you want. He shouldn't necessarily be your parish's priest. However, before leaving him, make sure that you're going to someone better. There are very wise priests. It isn't confirmed that all monks are better than them.

Metropolitan George of Mount Lebanon