A few years ago, I made a successful black bear hunt in Saskatchewan, Canada. Though I had never tracked bear or hunted in Canada, I was successful because I employed a professional guide. I already possessed basic hunting skills—developed while growing up on the family farm in Wisconsin—but the guide provided knowledge and guidance specific to hunting bear in Canada. I could not have been successful without his assistance.

What is true for hunting a Canadian bear may also be true for our spiritual lives: As we seek to be better disciples of Jesus Christ, we need the assistance of a spiritual guide.

“Bear” Necessities

A consequence of our fallen human nature is that we are in need of spiritual direction. Sin has darkened our intellect and weakened our will, making it necessary for us to seek assistance in order to progress toward our final destiny: union with God. This is one of the principle reasons that our Lord Jesus Christ established His Church in this world, so that we might have a sure and certain guide for our journey to our Heavenly Father’s kingdom.

Most Catholics receive some spiritual direction through the Church. They first receive it in the domestic Church, the family. Parents are the first spiritual directors of their children, teaching them how to pray, appreciate the Sacred Scriptures, and live according to the commandments and precepts of the Church. As we grow and mature, we should receive spiritual guidance within the parish to which we belong through catechesis, homilies, and the Sacrament of Penance. Books and other media that are faithful to the magisterium can be another source of spiritual direction.

I liken the spiritual direction that we receive from within our families, our parish life, and the Catholic culture to the basic skills of hunting that I learned growing up on the farm. But, as in hunting, there are times in our spiritual life that we seek and need more than the basics: We need personal direction from someone with knowledge of and experience in the interior life.

“As we seek to be better disciples of Jesus Christ, we need the assistance of a spiritual guide.”

Bigger Game

Spiritual direction is the assistance we receive from another person in order to advance in holiness. Every person needs spiritual direction, but not everyone may need a personal spiritual director. Many lay Catholics do very well living a holy life by listening to homilies, receiving advice and counsel from their confessor, meditating on the Sacred Scriptures, and studying the Church’s magisterial teaching. However, there are situations where a spiritual director is indispensable. Sometimes these situations are temporary, such as when a person is passing through a time of spiritual challenges and difficulties. Other times, direction may be needed on a more permanent basis, such as when a person’s work or business is particularly demanding, involving ongoing decisions of an ethical and moral nature.

My approach to spiritual direction (both that which I wish to receive and which I attempt to provide) is more practical than speculative. Occasionally, the conversation may tend in a speculative direction, but typically it deals with three matters: 1) If and how I am praying, including my participation in the sacramental life of the Church; 2) what I am reading to better my spiritual life; and 3) how I am living daily in respect to my vocation and my professional or work-related responsibilities. Many other matters can be considered in the course of receiving or giving spiritual direction, but in my estimation those three are fundamental and must be part of on-going direction.

From my experience I find that meeting once a month works well. The responsibility for what will be discussed during our time together is up to the person seeking direction. I recommend, if possible, not to bring more than three issues to be discussed in an hour-long meeting. The issues presented may be a continuation of our previous discussion or something wholly new. Some of the time is often used to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance. Penance and spiritual direction are closely related...
A spiritual director must himself be striving for and living a holy life. This does not mean that he will be saintly in every aspect of life, but at the very least it means that his priority is a desire for union with God in this world and the world yet to be revealed.

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