

Hunting Big Game

A Spiritual Compass for Your Journey to God

by Fr. Roger J. Scheckel



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.

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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

because the content of spiritual direction often relates to the matter of a person's confession.

Successful Hunting

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. Just as I would not follow the direction of a hunting guide who never hunted, likewise I would not want to be guided by a spiritual director who gives little or no indication of striving to live a holy life.

When looking for a spiritual director, one's confessor is the logical place to begin. This person will most likely be your parish priest. Do not be surprised or discouraged if he turns you down when asked to be your director. How to provide spiritual direction was not part of the required curriculum during the time that I studied in the seminary 25 years ago. This is now being addressed in some seminary formation programs. One such program is the Institute of Priestly Formation at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. While I have not personally attended this institute, I know brother priests who highly recommend it.

Traditionally, when a diocesan priest went in search of a spiritual director, he would approach a consecrated religious. This is an important service that consecrated religious provide to secular or diocesan priests. When looking for a spiritual director, a layperson may wish to inquire among consecrated religious as well, particularly if there is a priory, monastery, or convent nearby. I would, however, recommend extreme caution in seeking spiritual direction from anyone associated with a so-called "spirituality center" or any place that is involved in promoting programs such as the enneagram, tai chi, yoga, reiki, or other expressions of Eastern mysticism. Sadly, many consecrated religious are promoters of and apologists for these kinds of programs.

In spiritual direction, one should expect and never receive anything less than direction that is congruent with the mind and heart of Jesus Christ as revealed through the Catholic Church. One should never receive spiritual direction from someone who dissents in any way from the Church's teaching and should be very cautious engaging anyone who expresses views that are highly speculative or on the margins of what the Church judges to be valid and trustworthy. With this caution, I have in mind a director who may be an advocate for a spiritual movement or group that is based on private revelation yet to be approved by the Church.

Thus far, I have spoken almost exclusively in terms of the spiritual director being a priest. Having a priest as your director makes it easier to maintain the close connection between the Sacrament of Penance and spiritual direction. At the same time, a non-ordained consecrated religious, as well as a layperson, can serve very well in this capacity. If you cannot find someone for spiritual direction within your locale, it can also be done from a distance through written correspondence.

The following three considerations are most important in choosing a spiritual director, whether that person is ordained, consecrated religious, or a member of the laity: 1) Does he know Jesus Christ through personal prayer, the reading of the Sacred Scriptures, and frequent reception of the sacraments? 2) Does he give direction in accordance to the doctrinal teaching of the Catholic Church? 3) Does he receive spiritual direction himself? It is a benefit if he has had experience in giving spiritual direction to others. Also, a spiritual director should possess an appreciation of the devotional life, enthusiastically recommending Eucharistic adoration, the Rosary, devotions such as Divine Mercy and the Sacred Heart, and spiritual practices like the Way of the Cross and pilgrimages to holy sites.

Because you are entrusting your soul to your spiritual director, he must be a person whom you can trust without reservation and who can maintain the strictest confidence. It is important to choose carefully. Better that you not receive spiritual direction, relying on the basics that you receive through homilies and spiritual reading, than be misdirected. The old adage "beggars can't be choosy" does not apply when seeking a spiritual director.

I personally prefer a director who tends to be strict without being overly severe. I avoid anyone who is lax in their approach to direction. I recall meeting with a priest who I was considering as my spiritual director, who told me: "When you sin, do it boldly!" I never went back to him. I desire a director who will spur me on when I have grown complacent and who will tell me to slow down when I am combating every windmill in sight.

When looking for a spiritual director, first pray to God that you will find the right person, and then go in search of him. I wish you a successful hunt.



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