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An ancient and contemporary pathway to God

by Tom Gallagher



(Pat Marrin)

Mission Management

The Catholic church in the United States is facing a daunting challenge in trying to reach and provide spiritual formation for its estimated 65 million members.

According to a recent survey, 64 percent of U.S. Catholics do not attend Mass on a weekly basis. The survey, published in 2009 by Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., indicates that the fastest-growing segment of U.S. believers is the "Nones," those who are "spiritual" but practice no formal religion. In 1990, the Nones accounted for 8.1 percent of the population, or 14 million people. By 2008, that number had risen to 15 percent, or 34 million people. And of that group, 35 percent identify themselves as former Catholics.

So how can the church serve Catholics and reach former Catholics who say they still want to be spiritual

people?

One group believes it has the answer: spiritual direction.

“Spiritual direction is not for the pious few, but for everyone who is seeking a relationship with God,” said Liz Budd Ellman, executive director of the Bellevue, Wash.-based Spiritual Directors International. This 20-year-old organization is a global learning community of many faiths and many nations committed to advancing spiritual direction around the world. Spiritual Directors International operates on six continents and has over 6,500 members, of whom some 2,500 are Catholic spiritual directors.

At its 20th anniversary conference in April 2010, cofounder Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Scofield described how Spiritual Directors International was formed as a grass-roots effort. “We sent out a ‘search party’ across the country to determine whether there was a need for an organization,” Scofield said. The response to a letter of invitation to join Spiritual Directors International was “immediate, overwhelming and most heartening,” she said.

“Spiritual direction is an ancient practice in the church and was recovered and renewed by Vatican Council II,” said cofounder Mercy Sr. Janet Ruffing, an author and a professor in the practice of spirituality and ministerial leadership at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn.

“SDI serves as an access point to the many spiritual directors who have been trained since the early 1970s and as a place to find a spiritual director,” Ruffing said. “Spiritual direction gives individual attention to enable a person to grow into God and the experience of God.”

Many seek spiritual direction in times of challenge and change in their lives. But where does one find spiritual direction?

Some parishes have renewal and faith-sharing programs. Others frequent retreat centers if they are available. Spiritual Directors International offers a “Seek and Find Guide.” Yet, the demand for spiritual direction outstrips the number of spiritual directors available, said Ruffing.

Ruffing said she believes that more can be done to make spiritual direction visible at the parish level. People in the pews represent all stages of the spiritual life. Parishes could have a spiritual director on staff or several parishes could share a spiritual director.

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“Spiritual direction is a kind of preaching that goes beyond moral exemplars to a life in God to which we are all called,” Ruffing said.

“Spiritual direction has proved vital to the everyday person, as inner development through prayer leads to outer development in the way one engages his or her family members, neighbors and the world,” Ellman said.

Many Catholics already use spiritual direction, said Jesuit Bishop Carlos Sevilla of the Yakima, Wash., diocese. Sevilla himself offers spiritual direction as much as his schedule allows and he has a spiritual director.

The Yakima diocese offers an annual Ignatian retreat, and many laypeople are trained in the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, founder of the Society of Jesus.

“Spiritual direction allows people to deepen their relationship with God and affects other dimensions of their lives as they carry forward as committed Catholics,” said Sevilla, who added that he hopes to offer spiritual direction on a more full-time basis when he retires.

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR*'s regular Mission Management column.]

Online resources

Spiritual Directors International
www.sdiworld.org

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The following are recommendations Spiritual Directors International offers to guide a person's search for a spiritual director:

Seek and find

Contact at least two spiritual directors to interview. Ways to find spiritual directors include:

- Use the Internet. “Seek and Find: A Worldwide Resource Guide of Available Spiritual Directors” is available on the Spiritual Directors International Web site.
- Call local churches, theology schools, spirituality institutes and retreat centers and ask if they have a list of spiritual directors. Ask an ordained minister, deacon, vowed religious or local spiritual director for names of spiritual directors they recommend.

Ask every potential spiritual director you interview:

- What is your training, formation or theological education specific to spiritual direction?
- How do you tend your own prayer, meditation and contemplative life? Asking about the director's understanding of spiritual direction helps you discern if it fits with your own hopes and desires.
- What ethical guidelines do you abide by, such as those published by Spiritual Directors International?
- How do you describe a healthy spiritual direction relationship?
- Do you have a specific fee? Some spiritual directors serve on the staff of a church or retreat center, and although there is not a fee, it is customary to offer a donation. Other spiritual directors charge a fee. Often the fee is flexible, and sometimes a sliding fee scale may be offered.

Reflect and pray

- Pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit to assist you in your search for a good spiritual director.
 - Tell the spiritual director about your understanding of spiritual direction and what brings you to spiritual direction at this time in your life.
 - Be attentive to the way God is guiding you to find the spiritual support you need to deepen your relationship with God.
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- Wednesday: Take a deep breath, By Denise Simeone
- Thursday: The 'buying diapers, keeping cheerful' quest, By Melissa Musick Nussbaum
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