

Some souls do see their way before them far better than others, and therefore do move fewer questions. The instructor therefore is to behave himself towards them all according to the quality and need of each spirit, always remembering that his office is not to teach his own way, nor indeed any determinate way of prayer etc., but to instruct his disciples how they may themselves find out the way proper for them, by observing themselves what doeth good and what causeth harm to their spirits; in a word, that he is only GOD'S USHER, and must lead souls in God's way and not his own.

That is surely a blueprint for anyone aspiring to become a spiritual director. It is daunting. Baker will not let us rest content with anything less, however. If we are to lead others in the realms of prayer it can only be by the grace of the Spirit, whose mysterious ways are indefinable, and can alone be sensed and complied with in and by faith:

The great riches, the elevations and motions of the Holy Ghost (to which the soul is called), are so subtle, so pure and delicate, that neither the soul herself nor he that governs her doth understand them, but only he that sends them (which is God), to make the soul more pliable, still, quiet and ready.
(From 'Doubts and Calls' - based on John of the Cross).

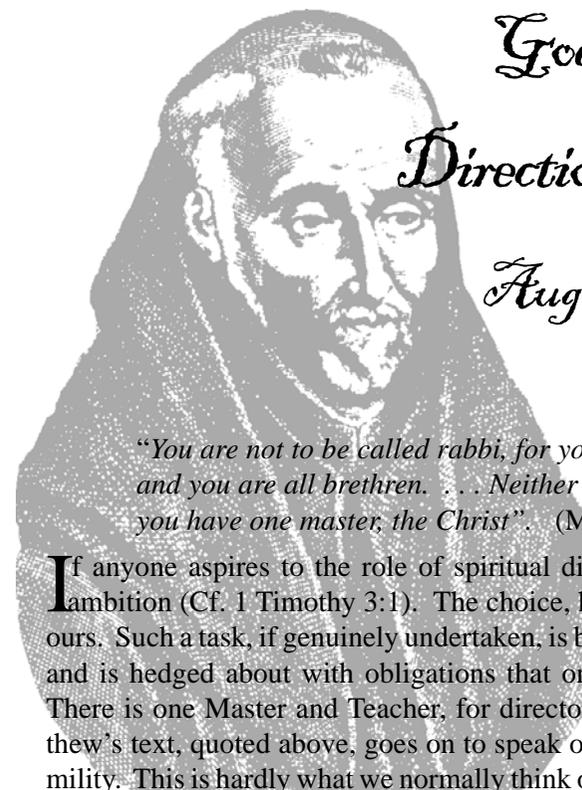
It is unlikely, perhaps, that we shall be rushing away to enrol for a course on spiritual direction! We know our measure. There is no question of our being thought of as rabbi or master, in view of all we have been saying here. And yet if God calls he gives grace. Maybe the first step is to put ourselves in Father Baker's school and learn of him.



Holy Cross Series FE18C

Holy Cross Convent, Rempstone Hall, Nr Loughborough LE12 6RG

Community of the Holy Cross. A Registered Charity



God's Usher.

Directions for directors.

Augustine Baker 5

"You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. . . . Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ". (Matthew 23: 8 and 10).

If anyone aspires to the role of spiritual director it is certainly no mean ambition (Cf. 1 Timothy 3:1). The choice, however, in the long run is not ours. Such a task, if genuinely undertaken, is by invitation only – from God – and is hedged about with obligations that only he can enable us to fulfil. There is one Master and Teacher, for director and directed alike, and Matthew's text, quoted above, goes on to speak of self-effacing service and humility. This is hardly what we normally think of in connection with ambition. For the Christian, as we know, worldly values are usually turned upside down and there is no exception here.

We will phrase it again, then: If anyone senses that God is leading him or her to undertake the task of guiding others in the ways of prayer and the spiritual life, let that person pray, ask for the grace of discernment, seek to live a disciplined and holy life, day in day out. Nothing less will do. All this we know from the experience and teaching of the church throughout the ages. One of the clearest expressions of this awareness is to be found in the writings of Dom Augustine Baker, 17th century monk of the English Benedictine Congregation. What he has to say is decidedly to the point for present day Christians whatever their background or church allegiance.

The gift of discernment, or discretion, is the lynch pin to much of Fr. Baker's teaching. If there is ultimately only one Guide, one Master, then every believer needs to be able to recognise his authentic voice, distinguish between

true and false spirits, both for himself/herself, and for others too, as the need arises. There must be wisdom to know when to act or when to forbear and the ability not to be drawn aside into extremes. The relevance of all this to the subject of spiritual direction is clearly apparent. In his work entitled 'Doubts and Calls' Father Baker draws on the teaching of a certain Seraphinus Firmanus (Canon Regular of the Lateran., 1496-1540) to define the virtue of discretion succinctly, describing it as '*a supernatural light had by conversation with God*'.

He goes on to say:

Since a man doth not know without this virtue of discretion how to rule and guide himself, far much less is he able to give counsel to others'.

A few lines later Baker, quoting Firmanus still, gives three signs by which we might recognise in ourselves the presence and action of the gift of discretion. Without this evidence, he claims, it would be perilous for anybody to try to direct somebody else. Firstly, if confronted with a spiritual dilemma, '*a doubtful case*', to use Baker's phrase, the would-be guide must have the know-how to find a way forward, and this not from merely natural resources:

The first token is, that in doubtful cases presently you will see and know what is expedient for you to do, and what side is securest for you to take.

And then, when unexpected troubles and problems arise there must be peace of mind and quiet acceptance of God's providence:

Secondly, when adversities come upon you, you will remain in a quiet and untroubled mind, knowing well that all things do happen by the divine providence or permission for thy spiritual good or profit.

Then in the last place there must be ability to pass all of this on to the one seeking direction, in the way **God** wills and according to the person's capacity:

The third and last is, that thou wilt be able to impart this light unto others, and to give unto each man wholesome and ready counsel according to his condition or need, and the will of God.

What may surprise us, after reading this, is that Father Baker does not restrict the role of spiritual guidance to priests or religious or even to men. The laity,

light, I say to the man, that he himself ask and beg counsel of God, and God will give it him.

How many of us would be humble enough or sufficiently strong in faith to do that, yet it is as it should be. Indeed Baker consistently reminds us that merely natural judgement, book learning or even a degree of personal experience are not in themselves sufficient to supply the discernment needed to guide others in the spiritual way – rather, as he expresses it: '*an actual supernatural illumination will be requisite and necessary*'.

If in fact we are truly called to lead others in the contemplative way, the internal guidance of the spirit, together with the insight gained from our own prayer-experience, will be vital. Otherwise we should be out of our depth. Paranormal experiences should be known for what they are and handled wisely. They are but steps on the way, non-essentials and certainly not met with by all. On the other hand those who **are** led by such paths must be treated with understanding and gentleness, though there is *sometimes* place for wise and discerning reprimand when purely natural or other wrong motivations are being taken blindly on board. Supernatural discernment is a *sine qua non*.

Baker's teaching here is fully in harmony with that of St. John of the Cross, as he acknowledges. Extraordinary visions and revelations are to be passed over, both by the one experiencing them **and** the director, for what is truly being sought is oneness with the will of God in love. However, the director must be patient and gentle in his approach:

. . . those spiritual fathers must not show any ill countenance towards those souls, nor disgust them, nor despise them, nor use them in such sort that the poor souls dare not discover themselves unto them, but do hold in those things which being well-handled they would have imparted and laid open to those their fathers . . . (From 'Doubts and Calls') (Cf. John of the Cross: *Ascent* 2:22, 16-19)

Such a situation obviously shows up the shortcomings of the director and endangers the spiritual advancement of the one he or she seeks to guide. An acute degree of discernment and no little personal giftedness in prayer is required, as we have already seen. No two souls are alike and, as with St. Paul, the one who seeks to show the way must know how to become all things to all people (1 Corinthians 9:22). Baker shows this clearly in a passage found in 'Holy Wisdom' (Sect. 2 Chap.2):

Therefore a superior must above all things suppress and mortify in his heart all domineering spirit, all greatness, all commandingness, and all love to command and exercise greatness, and in lieu thereof to retain a fear and a certain unwillingness to command or exercise any superiority. Let him or her do it with as much interior fear and humility as may be, and with a kind of unwillingness to exercise any greatness . . .

How much care we should take, therefore, not to thrust ourselves into the role of spiritual guide. Who is sufficient for these things? The measure of our reluctance may well be the measure of our success, for then God will be all in all.

However, if we should find ourselves *given* the task we would be duty bound to look well at ourselves to discern our strengths and weaknesses and to apply ourselves to overcoming any impediments, by the grace of God. As Baker puts it, in 'Doubts and Calls': 'A superior, if he look not well to it, may be as impertinent and vain as another'. He then goes on to remind us that human power in this sphere is by no means absolute. Souls have to be led to God according to *his* will and not our own. If we look carefully at ourselves the corrections we give to others can very often stem from our own uncontrolled passionate reactions rather than being truly God inspired:

Certainly if we would look well into ourselves, we should find that those our reprehensions or admonitions of others, which we pretend to give out of zeal or charity, do most commonly proceed out of passion (though secret), [such] as envy, etc. or other immortification, and not from a good or divine spirit.

Modern psychology would have little to quarrel with here one senses.

Consistently, Father Baker reminds us that self must not be inserted when others seek our counsel. We must wait on the Holy Spirit and if no insight seems forthcoming, commit the soul to God and hold our peace. He illustrates this vividly by quoting John Tauler:

Though I be by degree a doctor of divinity, yet when I hear any man's confession, I enquire of him how the matter stands, and by what means he fell into the sins; which after that I have heard, yet dare I not as yet give sentence on it, but I heave up my mind unto God, who if he do not yield me any counsel or

women included, are often better at it, he claims:

Laymen and women, though they be not allowed by the Church to preach publicly, yet are they not forbidden but allowed to give private instructions to any that shall desire it. And often times it happens that better instructions come from such than from some who through their state, (as of priest-hood, or being religious) [ie monks and nuns], are presumed to know more.

Here indeed are some forward-looking insights which we certainly go along with nowadays. Speaking as he is to Benedictine nuns, Baker continues:

Do not stand either on the state or the quality of the person or on the sex of the adviser, if you see that he or she through experience, or otherwise, can give you better or as good advice as another. And it may well be that sometimes it may be far more convenient for you to be advised by one of your own sex than of another. As for example, that she is nearer at hand to you, knows you better through conversation with you . . .

There certainly is a modern ring about all that, and it is something Baker says more than once.

He stresses, particularly, the need for the director and the one seeking help to get to know each other well, as we can read a few pages earlier in the same treatise. This time Baker is substantiating his teaching from the writings of John Tauler:

The director must for some time live or converse with the soul directed, else he can do no good on it; and therefore a few transitory conferences will not suffice, but there must be frequent conferences for a good long space together . . .

Father Baker goes on to liken the process to an apprentice learning a trade. Frequent and consistent practice is needed which is watched over until the skill becomes second nature. The guide must also, of course, 'be experienced', ie be a person of prayer, living a life of recollection and self-discipline. Moreover there should be evidence of enlightenment by the Holy Spirit. Baker describes this latter grace as:

a certain supernatural light or discretion which the said

director hath from God, through his internal life and familiarity with God, by which he is illuminated not only for the guiding of himself, but also of others, who through the providence of God are come to be under his guiding and direction.

Such light, Baker tells us, comes through God-inspired experience and is vastly superior to 'bare experience', as he terms it. All the same this cannot be had to order, so there are often times when even the best of directors seems, to himself, to have to rely on his own judgement and the recalling of past experience. Even so he prays for light and then '*remits the soul unto God to be directed by him*'.

There is need as well, Baker realises, for the director to know where to draw the line between asking legitimate questions and impertinently probing into matters that are not of his concern, merely from curiosity, or even worse because of a certain perverse gratification that might be involved. This would more easily be the case where the consultation was taking place between members of the opposite sex. As Baker, rather quaintly, but nevertheless realistically, puts it:

In your questionings and consults be brief, and take heed of falling into extravagancies and impertinences (especially you dealing with a different sex), lest that be consummate in flesh (Cf. Colossians 3:5) (viz. by contracting inordinate affections), which was begun in spirit.

This remains sound, proven advice, however much we might be tempted to smile.

We turn for a moment or two to Baker's 'Holy Wisdom' the book in which most of his teaching has come down to us. Here a similar point is concisely stated:

The instructor must use great wariness that he do not raise doubts and scruples in his scholars' minds by moving needless and indiscreet questions, or by impertinent discourses concerning spiritual matters. (Sect.2, Chap. 2)

Meeting up for spiritual guidance is therefore not simply an occasion for either side, or both, to talk non-stop about the things of the spirit for any ulterior motive. It must be a controlled and disciplined business, especially from the side of the director. Sometimes it may be the one *seeking* counsel who has to

machinate to end the proceedings Baker knew this well enough.

Although the beginner needs opportunity to talk and listen at length, as we have seen, later on things are different. From the director's angle there will be far less need to probe. If he has successfully guided his 'pupil' in the ways of interior discernment then this will be quite clear from the external behaviour of the person concerned. If, by contrast, something turns up that cannot be resolved by that person, the guide will perceive it and will know it is necessary to intervene – '*for*', Baker explains, '*it is impossible for a soul to be in a wrong way interiorly, but of itself it will break out exteriorly, especially to the eyes of those who themselves are in a right way, as the spiritual director is supposed to be*'. (Ibid)

There is always the temptation, all the same, for a director to want to hold on to the one he or she is guiding for far longer than is necessary. Any seeming power over others can have a magnetic attraction for our self-esteem. This may not be, needless to say. Obviously Father Baker also had to correct this tendency sometimes:

It is too general a humour in directors nowadays to make themselves seem necessary unto their disciples, whom they endeavour to keep in a continual dependence, to the great prejudice of their progress in spirit. (Ibid)

So there we have another trap for the unwary would-be spiritual guide to avoid.

In fact pride and self-assertiveness are ever close at hand and Father Baker speaks against them in no uncertain terms. In the following passage from 'Doubts and Calls' he is talking of religious superiors in convents and monasteries but what he has to say applies just as much to anyone called to exercise spiritual authority over others. The language is strong:

Whoever by the providence or permission of God is in any prelacy or authority over others ought . . . to avoid and cut off all seeking of self-honour, and to bestow it only on God whose vice-regent he is . . .

If this is not adhered to, then God is robbed of his honour and those under direction gain no profit, unless God himself acts directly, and in despite of the one in authority. And so Baker continues: