

Then too, a sound director will lead the disciple away from wallowing too much in any unusual spiritual experiences that may be granted. Such things are only the means to a far greater end and are not all that important anyway. In fact they can actually get in the way, and, as Baker expresses it, the person ‘will become incapable or indisposed to receive the impression of God himself into her soul, being fore-possessed with affection to inferior, created things’.

A third benefit of sharing matters with a director involves getting things in proportion. Whether or not we *want* to talk about the things of the spirit, actually doing so, in private and in confidence, brings us down to size and helps us overcome any unhealthy diffidence or pride. In the long-run what matters is finding God and uniting our will with his in love. Any impediments that can be overcome or any bubbles pricked by bringing them out into the open can only be matters for rejoicing.

So whether we feel we are just starting off or rather are well on the way, Father Baker has much to teach us. We could do far worse than take *him* as our guide. The last word will be left to his disciple and biographer Father Peter Salvin:

Father Baker’s doctrine tends to nothing else but to make us tractable to God and his holy grace, or fit to be taught by it. (Cf. John 6.45) . . . But if we will understand this doctrine aright and the true meaning of it, we must seriously apply ourselves to the exercise and practice of it. For no more than we exercise or practise shall we understand.

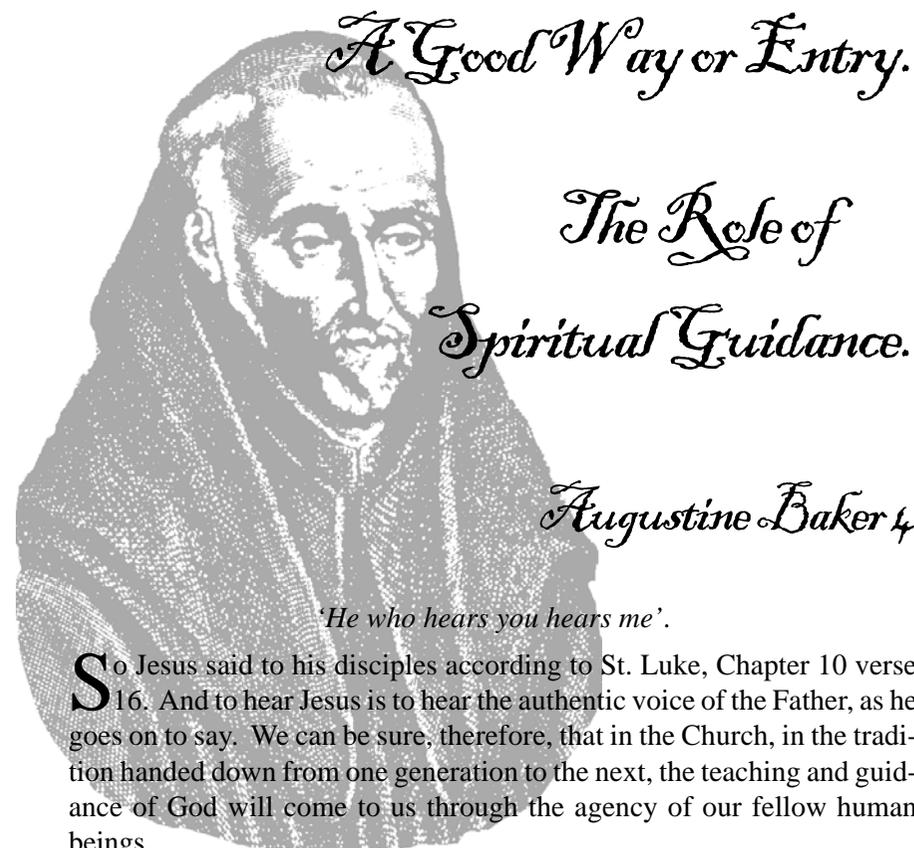
May the same guiding Spirit, who so richly inspired Father Baker, enlighten our hearts and minds also, that being truly taught of God ourselves we might in our turn draw others to him.



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Community of the Holy Cross. A Registered Charity



A Good Way or Entry.

*The Role of
Spiritual Guidance.*

Augustine Baker 4

‘He who hears you hears me’.

So Jesus said to his disciples according to St. Luke, Chapter 10 verse 16. And to hear Jesus is to hear the authentic voice of the Father, as he goes on to say. We can be sure, therefore, that in the Church, in the tradition handed down from one generation to the next, the teaching and guidance of God will come to us through the agency of our fellow human beings.

This is both comforting and at the same time disturbing. We are not left high and dry, yet how can we really trust other people like ourselves to be the infallible oracles of God? We need, of course, to look elsewhere in Scripture. Jesus also promised us the Holy Spirit to teach and direct us. Speaking again to his disciples, on the eve of his passion, he says: “*the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you*”. (John 14:26). There is, therefore, a special grace of the Holy Spirit to keep us from straying from the right path. Does it only apply to a few, though, we might query, to those who in some kind of way have succeeded the apostles?

The answer here is both yes and no. There *is* a specific charism of ministry whereby church leaders through the ages are enabled to discern true

and false doctrine and pass on the fullness of the faith. But there is also a 'priesthood of all believers'. Every baptised Christian receives the gift of the Holy Spirit and can expect to have that same Spirit as an internal guide in all things related to the spiritual way. St. John states this quite categorically in his first epistle: *'The anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true and is no lie. . . '* (1 John 2:27).

That is frightening at first. We are rightly apprehensive about being able to discern the true directives of the Spirit in face of the many contradictory whims and urges competing for the mastery within us. But we can take courage by looking back in Christian history to see how things have actually worked out. All the great people of prayer have stressed that beginners in the spiritual journey must of necessity find an experienced guide to direct them on the way. Only if this proves an impossibility is it safe and wise to count solely on the intervention of God (yet of course he remains sovereignly free to do as he wills with those he has made for himself). Even the reading of spiritual books normally needs the help of an experienced interpreter and so it is that there has grown up in the Church a whole tradition of spiritual guidance, from the monks of the Egyptian desert and before, right up to the present day.

It is tricky ground, however, and full of pitfalls, so we need to know when and how to find the right sort of spiritual father or mother, a soul friend, as it is sometimes put. Also we need to know what to look out for in such a person. One of the most helpful people we can turn to in this respect is the 17th century Welsh-born Benedictine monk Father Augustine Baker. He makes no bones about stressing the pre-eminent role of the Holy Spirit in this area which is not always understood even by so-called spiritual guides. He is writing mainly for contemplative nuns but his advice is sound for all who pray:

Let not a soul, therefore, be discouraged from committing herself to God's internal direction, though it should happen that those who pass for the most spiritual persons . . . and usurp the conducting of souls to perfection. . . should declaim against it . . . No wonder is it if such, being strangers to the contemplative ways of the

examples, who would draw us from the divine calls to their exteriority and distractions . . . both master and the scholar should pay dear for it, both of them being blind and fallen into the pit. (Matt.15:14, Luke 6:39).

All the same, we should not be too fearful. God often uses the most unlikely people to show us the way. Baker knew well enough that truly spiritual guides were not plentiful, and today they are perhaps even less so, despite, or maybe even because of, the abundance of courses in spiritual direction that are on offer. If there really is nobody at hand for counsel in depth, then someone else may be the appointed person to help – a simple confessor, as Baker, quoting John Tauler, puts it. There is such a thing as the grace of office. God supplies what is lacking on the human level to those he calls to a special function in the Church:

. . . if such a singular friend of God cannot be had or found out, then will a simple confessarius suffice, though he were never so ignorant. For even by such men doth the Holy Ghost speak, by reason of their office, although they sometimes be ignorant and do not know or understand what they say, and therefore you may submit yourself and (securely) obey such a one.

A *confessarius*, Baker tells us in 'Holy Wisdom', is one who has '*only to hear faults confessed, to give absolution and there an end*'. With a spiritual director it is different. He is '*to instruct the disciple in all the peculiar [ie particular] duties of an internal life*'. Thus he must be listened to and his advice accepted and acted upon. Obedience is axiomatic. The benefits will not accrue without the price being paid.

In 'Doubts and Calls' Baker enumerates some of these benefits. Firstly, through seeking advice, enlightenment and assurance are gained about spiritual matters which otherwise would be new and baffling to the person concerned. Experience then proves that perception of the guidance of the Holy Spirit can be meted through another person. The presence and influence of the Spirit is almost tangibly felt and then recognised, mysteriously, for what it is. Thus that inner light and guidance, towards which Baker is leading us, begins to be perceived by the disciple, through the mediatorship of the spiritual guide.

ria does he supply us with for deciding which person to turn to for help? Writing about this in 'Doubts and Calls' he says firstly that there will be times when God makes it quite clear who will be best, but if not, then we must work it out for ourselves, while bearing certain things in mind:

In a good spiritual counsellor these three qualities are to be wished: 1. A good natural judgement; 2. Learning gotten by study; 3. Experience. . . .But because it is very hard or impossible, to find one that is complete in these, you must be contented to take the best you can find.

He remarks that most probably the sort of people we consider will at least have some degree of human prudence and discernment. That being said which of the remaining two qualities matters most in a spiritual guide? Baker decides on experience, citing other writers in support and using examples from the past:

How many saints (think ye) were there in the time when our (Benedictine) Order most flourished, who were unlearned? And were not only saints themselves, but also brought up and guided others to sanctity. And by what rules did they it, think ye, but only by their experience and their illumination from God. Our Holy Father himself [ie St. Benedict] and thousands of others under him and his Rule, became saints and guided others to sanctity with little or none of all that which nowadays is called learning.

A spiritual guide is therefore not so much an academic theologian but rather a theologian in its original meaning, ie a man of prayer gifted by the Spirit.

It is vital therefore that we should not flit about from director to director, being blown about by every wind of doctrine as St. Paul puts it (Ephesians 4:14). Also those being drawn by God into the ways of contemplative prayer must beware of being led aside from this by incompetent, often self-appointed spiritual guides:

We must take heed of all persons, and their sayings and

spirit, should be ignorant of these secret paths by which God leads souls to perfection; in the which none can tread, or at least make any considerable progress, till, quitting a servile dependence on external teachers, they rely upon the divine guidance.

(Holy Wisdom: Section 2 Chap.8)

Happily, however, this degree of total abandonment to the Spirit is not Hour starting-off point, but the passage does give us a salutary reminder that choosing the right sort of guide is vital. Baker says something similar elsewhere:

. . . you must have your directions from within yourselves; I mean, each one from her own interior, which she is diligently to note and observe; or if you need the direction of any other, you must take it from him or her that liveth and abideth within him or her self [ie from one who lives a life of recollectedness and prayer], and therefore can the better help another that is in the like contemplative course. . . (From the treatise, Discretion)

All the same even the most experienced contemplative will sometimes need help, will be faced with what Baker terms a doubtful case. Even here it should not be a spur of the moment decision but should come from a quiet assurance that it is what God wants. The right choice of a guide and the right motivation are again emphasised:

And now about the person whom you shall choose for your adviser in your case of doubt . . . first you shall determine not to ask questions of another without (absolute) necessity, and that you be urged to it either by interior bidding from God, or by your natural judgement. And take heed that you do it not out of immortification or to rid yourself . . . of some desolation or other cross that God hath laid on you.
(From: 'Doubts and Calls')

We are not allowed to seek for soft options or canvass for a sympathetic ear if God is decreeing otherwise! Baker, in fact seems hard on us, but it is only part of the story. Having established that we are serious in our

search for God he recognises that a guide will indeed be required to start us off. Simply being told what to do or reading things in books cannot suffice. To discover how to recognise God's own inner guidance some sort of human agency is called for:

. . . it is most certain that all the books in the world will not alone suffice for the directing and guiding of a soul in the way of perfection; no, nor yet all the external obediences that can be imposed by superiors, with the execution of them . . . will suffice, unless he be immediately illuminated and directed by God, or else mediately by some man who will instruct him in guiding him for his interior. (Ibid.)

In 'Holy Wisdom' (Sect.2 Chap.2) Baker is actually quite emphatic about the need for spiritual guidance at the outset:

A soul . . . that aspires to a state of perfection, at the first ordinarily will stand in need of an external instructor and guide for most matters that concern her in that way.

Though such a person might be experienced in living the Christian life – avoiding grave sin and trying to live a good life – the inner ways of discernment in prayer will still be new territory. Thus common sense suggests that help from those more experienced should be sought. This matter of fact conclusion is nevertheless a response to God's prompting:

. . . not knowing as yet how to dispose themselves for the receiving supernatural lights from God, . . . grace directs them to use the mediation of others, and to hear and obey God, speaking and ordaining by them. (Ibid.)

Looking again to the treatise 'Doubts and Calls' here we find Baker comparing guidance in the art of prayer to training at school or in an apprenticeship:

. . . the supreme Master is God himself, the journey-man or inferior teacher is some man whom it shall please God to employ and enable in the business, who commonly and properly is one that is experienced in it. And

these two masters, which are the supreme and the inferior, do teach and direct all things in order to the perfection of the soul . . .

But in his usual way Baker goes on to add that after a while the pupil is able to stand on his own feet:

. . . the spiritual scholar having some instructions for the first time, and continuing in practice with some questions now and then, comes at length to be able to proceed and work with few or no questions at all.

Later in the treatise Baker puts the same thing in different words. Ultimately God, the perfect Master, can alone teach us the ways of prayer. Human agents simply set us off in the right direction:

God is the only teacher of perfect prayer, though for a time a man may serve as to the putting one into A GOOD WAY OR ENTRY.

This is all set out for us quite clearly in 'Holy Wisdom'. Once we have embarked on the way, Baker stresses, it is important not to keep harking back and looking for the preliminary props which then would be more of a hindrance than a help:

The necessity of an external instructor is generally only at the beginning of a contemplative course. For after that souls . . . have been once put and conveniently settled in a right way how to seek for more light from God alone, they must not afterwards, out of levity, curiosity, or a foolish proneness to discover [ie reveal] their interior, nor without a just necessity, continue to seek instructions from without.

Only in 'doubtful cases' and at God's inspiration should this rule be broken: '*in which case it is indeed their divine internal Master that they obey, who speaks unto them by the external director appointed unto them by God*'. Once again we have Baker at his most demanding but the advice is sound for those enabled by God to take it.

Still, however reluctantly on one score, Baker does allow us sometimes to seek guidance. At times, in fact, he makes it an imperative, so what crite-