

MOVING IN GOD'S DIRECTION

*Essentials of Christ-centered
Spiritual and Vocational Direction*

A guide for spiritual directors, directees, and the spiritually hungry,
including topics worth exploring in the direction session,
plus questions for personal reflection

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AWAKENING VOCATIONS

Eugene, Oregon

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Essentials of Christ-centered Spiritual and Vocational Direction

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EMBRACING THE BEATTITUDE LIFE

Who in the World are You?

Was Jesus a revolutionary? A reading of the Gospels leads us to see how he ruffled feathers and challenged the social order, mainly in its oppressive interpretations of the Mosaic law. Many of his parables, in which he seems to both coax and challenge his adversaries, show us the complete absurdity of oppressive systems of governance, commerce, and the social strata in his time. The foolish inequities of his day discomfortingly resonate with our own.

But this is one important thing about Jesus: He was not the center of any revolution. He was not replacing one corrupt social system with another equally corruptible social system. Even at his arrest, when his band of followers was confronted by armed soldiers, he had to be picked out from the others by a betrayer's kiss. Jesus was no revolutionary. Rather, he was the *catalyst for restoration of the original divine social order*, sent on a mission to restore our world from the Land of the Upside Down to the Land of the Rightside Up. Following his execution and burial, the risen Lord was mistaken as one who

might be tending the garden. Indeed he was! We are not encountering here any revolutionary but the long awaited Redeemer.

Fast forward to, say, the second decade of the twenty-first century (although any decade of any century would do). Look around you, listen to what's going on, read the news. Has much changed from life in first century Palestine? Not really. Nor should we feel worried. Not because today's injustices and glaring inequities do not matter—they most certainly do. But worry merely undercuts the power of Jesus' instruction to his followers on who they are to be and how they are to act in a world that still stubbornly resists its original loveliness and purpose. Redemption demands a letting go of what is old and a receiving of what is new, a dying and a rising. Redemption demands the hard work of the paschal mystery. Redemption demands our releasing what we falsely cling to for security and protection, in order to receive new life in God who is our justice, our mercy, and, in the midst of ongoing chaos, our enduring peace.

As Christ-centered men and women we acknowledge that the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, hold a preeminent place in the canon of sacred Scripture precisely because they clearly proclaim the redemptive mission of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and speak clearly of this rhythm of dying and rising to new life which distinguishes all of Christian life. Many newly discovered "gospels," usually billed as "sensational" or "shocking," have elbowed their way onto bookshelves usually reserved for serious biblical scholarship. There is a very good reason why these newly discovered accounts of the life of Jesus are not included in the body of sacred Scripture: They lack this distinct and elemental dimension of the dying and rising—the paschal mystery—uniquely expressed in Christian faith.

Jesus' great body of teaching, most extensively presented in Matthew's Gospel (chapters 5 through 7), and including the Beatitudes (5:3–12), holds a unique place within the Gospels. Along with Jesus' teaching in the parable of the Judgment of the Nations (Matthew 25:31–46), the inaugural teachings present the foundation and proper context for the formation of *personal* conscience.

More deeply, these inaugural teachings, along with that culminating parable of the Judgment of the Nations, provide the context for formation of *social* conscience, where a living Christian faith meets the challenge of our common humanity and the world's anguish. These teachings are so challenging, and so contrary to the status quo, that those approaching Baptism—or presenting their infants for Baptism—should be warned: *This life is not for the timid*. Jesus taught us as much in the Beatitudes. We would do well to take a closer look.

The First Beatitude: What is Your Poverty?

Blessed are the poor in spirit, Jesus begins in his inaugural Sermon on the Mount, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 5:3). Poverty is what you and I might strive mightily to avoid—certainly financial poverty, but also the poverties that touch every dimension of life: poverty of knowledge, poverty of connections or of opportunities for advancement; poverty of health, or mobility, or independence; poverty of incompetence or inexperience. There is no limit to our human poverties. Not only does Jesus *not* rescue us from this core dimension of the human condition, but he himself embraced it, so that we might embrace it, too, as gift. St. Paul writes: “[F]or your sake [Christ Jesus] became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).¹

A question worthy of conversation in spiritual and vocational direction is this: What *are* your particular poverties? What is your inadequacy? Where do you not measure up? What is gone that you can never restore? What holds you back, or puts you out of the running altogether? These questions—and the honest answers to them—are important not only for directees but for spiritual directors as well.

¹ The New Testament canticle praising Jesus' selfless offering affirms his willing embrace of the poverty of the human condition: Although “he was in the form of God, / [he] did not regard equality with God / something to be grasped. / Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, / coming in human likeness, / ... becoming obedient to death” (Philippians 2:6–8).

You might resist your poverties, curse them, or compensate or deny or try to hide them as imperfections. But if we read the Beatitudes correctly, Jesus sees our particular poverties as a blessing. The poverty itself is simply what it is, resulting from whatever cluster of circumstances, bad choices, or injustices that have visited and shaped our lives. But it's what you do with it interiorly—*in spirit*—that determines the blessing. You can mask your poverty in anger or victimhood or shame, and rail against God for this unearned curse from which you cannot hide. Or you can accept it as a condition that has not escaped God's notice, defend its space, and let it speak to you its inner wisdom and its power to conform you to Christ through a uniquely burnished compassion for your fellow human beings.

Most importantly, Jesus would have us understand, blessed are you when your poverties lead you to a more honest and radical dependence on God. Then, Jesus says, *then* the reign of God is yours—*the reign of God!* Your honest and humble embrace of your particular poverties gives you unexplainable access to the riches of God. Letting go the anger, the shame, the sense of defeat, or feelings of self-pity, is the hard work of conversion. And when you undergo this conversion with all your heart, and all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength, you expand your capacity to receive this hidden blessing which is far more precious than any earthly riches.

The Second Beatitude: What in Your World Needs to be Mourned?

When your time comes to journey your way through the land of grief, you may discover something. Honest grieving, real and honest mourning, presents a problem: It means that you have lost something that nothing in the world, and no human being on the planet, can replace. Honest grieving is an obstacle to life as we imagine it should be. It is the irrepressible admission that our world is made of humble clay, not impenetrable steel. Our world indeed is

where we pitch our tent, but not permanently, as Peter learned.²

Irreversible loss can drive a stake through the human heart. And our culture's remedy of choice to ease the pain of mourning is distraction—through entertainment or food or alcohol or pills, through shopping, a cruise, a “new you.” *Good grief*, our world seems to tell us, *get over this dreadful mourning*. The subtext here is easily understood: “You are making the rest of us uncomfortable.”

But in this second beatitude, Jesus clearly says, *Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted* (v. 4). Comforted how? With entertainment, a cruise, a “new you”? *Comfort* means to “be with” (*com*) the other, “in strength” (*fortis*). Comfort is a word denoting relationship. It expresses the willingness to abide faithfully with your own situation of brokenness or loss with a strength that comes not from you nor from the distractions of escape, but from God. But to receive God's comfort and strength, you first have to honestly acknowledge your mourning, embrace it, and enter wholeheartedly into it in order to receive the blessing.

So the critical question here is this: What in *your* world needs to be mourned? What in your inner world, your world of work and vocational engagement, your world of relationships, your world of meaning and hope, needs to be mourned? And what in this complex, terror-driven, anxious and careening twenty-first century world in which you live needs to be mourned? You can watch heartbreaking images on the nightly news, and before your mind can even register the insanity, pain, and injustice of what you have seen, you are bombarded with ads for luxury cars, earth-friendly laundry soap, pills to relieve constipation, and hair products that wash away the gray.

What in your *world* needs to be mourned? Let the question soak in. Allow the human anguish to rise up—perhaps along with unexpected anger, vulnerability, compassion, and the cracking open of the parched crevices of soul

² See Mark 9:5; Matthew 17:4; and Luke 9:33 for parallel accounts of Peter's desire to set up camp in the glow of Jesus' transfiguration.