

Rivendell Community  
Study & Formation - Unit E

Hospitality and Community  
Part 4: Spiritual Direction and Confession

*From the Rule of the Rivendell Community:*

**SPIRITUAL DIRECTION:** We will each have a spiritual director.

**CONFESSION:** We will make sacramental confession at least twice a year.

In all of these relationships, we commit ourselves to as much transparency, integrity and undefendedness as we are currently capable of sustaining, and intend by God's grace to deepen these qualities.

In this unit we have been considering hospitality and community life as aspects of mutual love and interdependence. This is a good place to consider the practices of spiritual direction and sacramental confession, since they are ways in which we live out our interdependence with one another. In these graced relationships, we welcome another person into the sacred space of our souls, and find ourselves welcomed in the hospitality of God. Both call for a degree of “transparency, integrity and undefendedness” which we are likely to find both difficult and liberating. Although neither practice is expected of all Christians, both have been found, through centuries of experience, to be powerful means of grace for those seeking to progress in the spiritual journey, and they may be almost indispensable at certain junctures. All of these are good reasons for building them into the pattern of our life in Christ.

In many cases one's spiritual director and confessor will be the same person, an arrangement which usually seems natural when the director is a priest. Confession and spiritual direction often are not sharply distinguished: confession may arise intentionally or spontaneously within a spiritual direction conversation, while in the Christian spiritual tradition confession frequently has been considered the usual setting for spiritual direction. However, this is not always preferable or even possible (for example, if the spiritual direction relationship is mainly at a distance, through correspondence, or, if the director is a lay person or deacon, one may want to receive sacramental absolution from a priest-confessor). Though they may often coincide, we will consider spiritual direction and confession sequentially.

*Spiritual direction*

Spiritual direction relationships may be as unique as the persons involved; one size does not fit all! The director may be referred to as a spiritual advisor, a spiritual guide, or a “soul friend”; the relationship may be described as accompaniment or companionship or friendship. At various times the director may serve as resource, counselor, additional pair of eyes, coach, midwife, adjunct memory, and simply companion. He or she may challenge, comfort, question, and listen quietly. The person seeking direction may bring specific issues, such as vocational questions, interest in a disciplined spiritual life, problems in prayer, or experiences of God (and/or the “absence” of God), but it is not necessary to have a particular agenda: a desire to listen and respond to God as fully and faithfully as possible is sufficient. The director and directee may laugh together, have lively discussions, weep, sit in silence, drink coffee or tea, and pray—often in rapid sequence.

Although spiritual direction does not need to be particularly formal, and may often include some chatting about current events, personal circumstances and such, it does need to be focused and intentional. There is some advantage in having as a director someone who does not have other major roles in one's life (such as day-to-day colleague, teacher, or close friend), whose only interest will be serving God's purposes in you. On the other hand, it can also be an advantage to have a spiritual director who sees and knows you somewhat in your “natural habitat”; this may serve as a reality check, and also is some protection from the notion of “spirituality” as concerned with a particular department of life, rather than the whole of it. If there are other dimensions of the relationship, however, both parties will need to work to protect the space and time for spiritual direction, not letting it be dissipated in other shared interests and concerns.

The director's role is to assist in the process by which “Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19), to work for your

particular sanctification, to listen with you to the invitations and call of Jesus Christ. He or she is not primarily a problem solver, even a “spiritual” one, but may often quietly seek to listen simultaneously to you and to God. The director may also help make the connections between the Gospel and the riches of scripture and tradition and your own circumstances and experience. Unlike the usual conception of counseling or psychotherapy, in which the therapist is “working for you”—for your health, well-being and wholeness—the spiritual director is “working for God”—seeking the fulfillment of God’s purposes for you. (These, of course, include your health, well-being and wholeness, though of course, in the Christian perspective, we are brought to these by the self-emptying way of the Cross.) The real Director, of course, is the Holy Spirit. The job of the human director, a fellow pilgrim who is also led by the Spirit, is to help you pay attention, discern, and respond.

The role of the person receiving direction is to bring forward issues and concerns which have arisen, but also to be open to God’s agenda, which may turn out to be different from whatever we came with! Sometimes the tradition speaks of the aim of “manifestation of the heart”—being sufficiently transparent that one’s “heart” (that is, in biblical terms, the center and core of one’s personhood) can be exposed and visible. Sometimes this takes the form of talking until one says something true enough. This is a daunting prospect, since all reasonably functional human beings develop some defenses around the vulnerable heart, some of which we’re aware and some of which we’re not. It is made more possible, and “safe,” by three factors characteristic of good spiritual direction relationships: First, the spacious, accepting, graced hospitality of the director, second, the willingness of the one seeking direction to risk seeing, and being seen, for the sake of freedom to move Godward, and third, the fundamental trust that our heart is God’s chosen dwelling place, and, whatever else we may find, God will be there. Obviously, developing the trust required—trust between the two human parties, and trust in the process and how God uses it. For this to happen usually takes time, though it is expedited by both parties’ serious willingness to be present and available, and sometimes by crisis and suffering.

What issues from spiritual direction sometimes seems wildly disproportionate to what we might reasonably have expected. The Holy Spirit seems to use these relationships far beyond anything we may say or do, gracing both persons in surprising ways, meeting our small, ambiguous efforts with lavish generosity. As with other means of opening ourselves to God, like retreats, spiritual reading, and silent prayer, often the effects are manifested some time later, as the pieces fall into place around a new pattern.

By this time you have probably chosen a spiritual director and begun, at least, to discover how best to take advantage of this special relationship. There are many variations on how the relationship is developed and sustained, depending on the persons involved and the circumstances. For example, although a typical arrangement is to meet approximately once a month for a period of an hour or hour and a half, some people find after a while that less frequent meetings are appropriate; while occasionally you might arrange to meet more often for a limited period, particularly in an intense time of vocational discernment, or a difficult transition. If the director lives far enough away that travel is a challenge, less frequent meetings, possibly for a somewhat longer time, may make sense. Face-to-face conferences may be supplemented by phone conversations or e-mail exchanges. In fact, although it usually seems less than ideal, the long and illustrious tradition of “letters of spiritual direction” demonstrates that spiritual direction can be fruitfully carried on mainly by correspondence. Writing provides space for thinking and praying through what you want to say, gives the director time to listen, reflect, and pray in response. The contemporary option of e-mail can give more immediacy to the process. In this case, however, intentionality about focus and transparency is particularly important.

Since the “spiritual” dimension is simply our whole lives, viewed in relationship to God, almost anything can appropriately be material for spiritual direction. Some topics are obvious: for example, progress and challenges in living out one’s rule of life, vocational issues which arise, experiences, obstacles, and new developments in prayer. Naturally, during postulancy and novitiate, you will want to share something about the Rivendell Community and provide a copy of our Rule if your director is not already familiar with it, discuss how you are implementing and experiencing its various practices, and work on discernment as you approach profession.

While theological or philosophical questions might be discussed, ordinarily the focus would be on how such questions are arising from or manifested in one’s actual life and experience, rather than keeping the conversation on a more general or abstract level (however interesting!) Similarly, our faltering efforts to love our neighbors—especially the everyday ones like family, friends, fellow parishioners and coworkers—are a such a key dimension of the spiritual journey, interpersonal issues often come up; and when they do, the focus will be on what God asks of us, or is doing with or through us, rather than on how to fix the person with whom we’re having the issues.

Though we often focus on problems, and may even feel we ought to present some (preferably big or at least

interesting!) to justify the time, attention and energy involved in spiritual direction, it's also fine to share and celebrate the blessings we recognize, the ways grace comes to us, the insights, the wonder of the love of God, and those occasional glimpses of glory. These, too, can sometimes call for costly transparency; many people find it harder to disclose the "bright" and holy aspects of their lives than the darker ones. And of course it's fine when there's nothing particularly spectacular to bring in; plodding along through the same old temptations, minor difficulties, lapses and unspectacular dryness is an important part of the journey. In any case, as mentioned before, it often turns out that God's agenda is not what we had planned, so we should be open to whatever may come up in a spiritual direction conversation.

Remember, too, that while people sometimes feel that they're "imposing" on a spiritual director's time, energy and care, someone called to this ministry will almost certainly find it nourishing and blessed (despite their best efforts to offer disinterested selfless love!) To be invited into the sacred precincts of a human soul, to glimpse something of the operations of the Holy Spirit in another's life, and to serve as a companion on the way is one of the greatest privileges a person of faith can have.

### *Confession*

Sacramental confession is now known in the Prayer Book as the Reconciliation of a Penitent, and is also known as "auricular" and "private" confession. Though it has long been familiar to many Episcopalians (and Christians of some other traditions, especially Roman Catholic and Orthodox), for others it comes as a surprise that it's available as part of our tradition. For some, there is a kind of "mystique" about it, picked up, maybe, from movies and mysteries that hinge on the "seal" of the confessional. Some Rivendell Companions have found the provision for at least twice annual Confession the most daunting part of our Rule. Sometimes, having finally brought themselves to venture it, they become its most ardent fans. (Others, especially those who grew up Catholic, have funny stories to tell—like having required weekly confession at school, for which one week they'd make up some sin to have something to say, and the following week, confess having made it up!)

This practice goes back to the first centuries of the Church, which faced the problem of how to deal with serious post-baptismal sin. How, for instance, could a person who had committed apostasy, perhaps renouncing the Christian faith under threat of torture and death, be restored to the fellowship of the Church and baptismal life in Christ? The development and variations in the practice of Confession makes an interesting study in church history, but one beyond the scope of the topic at hand. It will be sufficient here to note that through the centuries it became a very significant means of pastoral care, despite distortions and abuses.

Most people who have been around the Episcopal Church for a while have heard the old adage about Confession, "All may, none must, some should." Though it has never been required in this tradition, it is available to everyone—and "some should" take advantage of it. The "some" who "should" include people in at least a couple of circumstances: First, those who are troubled with guilt, because of some serious sin they have committed or an act which has had unforeseen devastating consequences, or because their consciences are sensitive (sometimes but not always overly, "scrupulously" or "neurotically" so). In this case, confession and absolution can be a potent means of healing and restoration. Second, regular use of this sacrament can be a very effective means of grace and spiritual growth. It is for this second reason that the practice of Confession is included in our Rule.

It is not necessary, of course, to resort to private Confession in order to obtain God's forgiveness for our sin. Confession and absolution is a normal part of most Sunday liturgies. And in any case, we tend to put the cart before the horse: It is not that our confession (or our degree of penitence and contrition, our making restitution or doing penance, or anything else we might do) induces God to forgive sin. God has already done that, freely, generously, decisively. Our ability to be penitent, our being moved to make confession, our freedom to embrace amendment of life, all are made possible by God's forgiveness. However, though the forgiveness is already freely given, we can use the freedom we have to accept and appropriate it, and to let it become liberating and transformative for us. How powerful a gift sacramental Confession can be in accomplishing this is borne out in the experience of countless Christians.

If you are making a first Confession and are uncertain about how to prepare and go about it, you may well want to sit down ahead of time with the priest who will be hearing it and discuss the matter. There are various helpful books and pamphlets on the subject, of which probably the best known in recent years is Martin Smith's *Reconciliation*.

There is no single right way to prepare for Confession. Some find it helpful to use a guide, such as the brief explication of the Ten Commandments in the Catechism (BCP, pp. 847-848), the Litany of Penitence in the Ash

Wednesday Liturgy (pp. 267-268), or one of the many available forms for examination of conscience. (Cursillistas may have picked up one of these; Anglo-Catholics may be familiar with the one in the St. Augustine Prayer Book; and your church library is likely to have something.) If you do use such a form, don't let yourself be derailed by the "quaintness" of some older ones, or become obsessed with detail. Or you might use the "Great" Commandments as a guide, and consider in what ways you have fallen short of loving God, your neighbor and yourself. Or you might simply ask for God's guidance and open yourself to it (a good way to begin, in any case), and try to see what comes between you and God, what tends to draw you away. Some people find it helpful to make a list, to help remember what they intend to mention.

If you have not looked at them recently, read through the two forms provided in the Prayer Book (pp. 446-452). Notice that the second form, with its beautiful allusions to the parable of the Prodigal Son, is somewhat more elaborate, while the first by comparison is rather matter-of-fact. The second is particularly appropriate for someone returning to faithful life after an absence; it has more of the awareness of being "reconciled" following an impaired relationship, and specifically asks for adherence to Christ as Lord, and for the intention to forgive others. Some may want to use this form regularly, beautiful and moving as it is, though probably the majority of those who make confession regularly use Form One.

Notice, too, that the notes on this rite (p. 446) suggest ways in which it might be celebrated: you might prefer the somewhat more "formal" arrangement of kneeling at the altar rail, or in a pew or other private place, or the more conversational "face to face spiritual conference" leading to absolution. In the latter case, you may not actually use the rite except for the absolution, or you may first discuss the matters which concern you, and then move into the rite. Priests will generally be happy to do whatever seems to work best for you.

Any priest should be willing to hear a confession when asked, although some are more experienced, and more comfortable, with it than others. Note, too, that a deacon or lay person may be asked to hear a confession, though will not give absolution; a "declaration of forgiveness" is provided for this case. (This might happen either in a crisis or emergency, or because the person is especially gifted, experienced, and/or trusted for this ministry.) It is desirable to find a regular confessor, who may or may not also be your spiritual director. If he or she is, the note that "the content of the confession is not normally a matter for subsequent discussion" may not be so applicable, since the penitent may wish to discuss issues related to the content later.

Giving a "psalm, prayer, or hymn to be said, or something to be done, as a sign of penitence and act of thanksgiving" (or "penance") is optional. If you would like to be given something and the confessor doesn't offer, you should feel free to ask. (In our tradition, penances are usually either token acts of contrition and gratitude, or intended to be healing or "therapeutic" in some way.)

Many people have been startled and amazed at an immense sense of relief, lightness and freedom resulting from a confession—as though one had been laboring under a heavy burden one only realized was there by its removal. Whatever you may feel or not feel, however, remember that making a confession and accepting absolution means that you are free, you have accepted God's forgiveness—and you have agreed, at least implicitly, to surrender your sins into God's hands and let God deal with them. How God "deals with" them is up to God; whether by casting them "into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19), by redeeming and transforming them, by making our contrition and our struggles to resist sin the seed of some beauty and virtue, or whatever.

There are other gifts that may come with Confession. Sometimes we receive new insight into our particular patterns of sin, even several days later. Sometimes acts and circumstances of which we felt only guilt or shame get reconfigured for us. Often the hold which sin (or particular forms of sin) has over us is loosened—usually gradually, bit by bit, but sometimes dramatically. And often, too, either in the confession itself or subsequently, we see that what there is in us to confess is not only sin, but also faith, and hope, and love.

Questions for reflection and possible conversation:

- n What do you find most helpful in your current spiritual direction relationship?
- n How often do you meet with your director? Is it always face to face, or do you use e-mail or other forms of communication?

- n Are there ways it could be made better? If so, how might you go about helping this to happen?
- n Do you have any stories or experiences you'd be comfortable with sharing?
- n Was the practice of sacramental confession familiar in your background? If so, how? If not, do you remember how you viewed it?
- n -- Have you ever had negative experiences with confession? How about particularly grace-filled ones? (Other stories, funny or moving or edifying, to tell?)
- n If you have settled into a regular rhythm of making confession, what have you found helpful? (e.g., When/how frequently? How do you usually prepare? etc.)
- n Are you able to identify your typical "besetting sin"? What has helped you get at this awareness, if so?
- n Does it make sense to you to connect spiritual direction and confession with Hospitality and Community, as this unit does? If so, what connections do you see?
- n What questions do you have at this point about spiritual direction and/or confession?