

# SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT

## In Movements & New Communities

Aiding Human and Supernatural Growth

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Proceedings of the First Study Week on Movements  
and New Communities hosted by Santa Croce

*Prologue by His Eminence Kevin Cardinal Farrell*

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# The Difference Between Governance and Spiritual Accompaniment

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## 1. The Need to Define Terms

Since this is a matter of distinguishing the differences between the roles of spiritual director and authorities of a community or church movement, it is fitting to begin by attempting to clearly define the two different terms.

### 1.1. Spiritual Direction or Accompaniment

The topic of spiritual direction is already the subject of careful study in other papers at this conference, so there is no need to go into its nature here. However, it seems appropriate to emphasize some aspects of spiritual direction that may help to clarify how it is different from governing authorities' tasks.

The changes in terminology for referring to this formative practice is significant. The classic expression is that of "spiritual direction," while today people prefer to use the term "accompaniment" or other similar terms. Some avoid the term "direction" because it might evoke the idea—that should certainly be rejected—of an imposition of criterion by the director or a passive attitude on the part of the person being guided, who would seem to have to limit himself to doing what he is told to do by his director. The expression "accompaniment," in turn, has the limitation of not sufficiently indicating the role of guidance and direction to be exercised in this formative practice.

From these reflections on terminology, it is clear that spiritual direction/accompaniment intends to guide a person on his spiritual journey, orienting and enlightening his conscience and urging him to go in a certain direction to reach a goal—a goal which can only be the Christian perfection willed by God for the believer at hand. Since the call to be holy is universal, all believers can take advantage of this helpful practice. However, it is clear that in order to be able to accompany someone on his spiritual journey, it is necessary to know his specific spiritual life, which can only happen through mutual, voluntary trust concerning one's Christian life. Spiritual direction occurs in an environment where a person speaks about his private, inner world; therefore, one can assume there is confidentiality.

Spiritual direction/accompaniment invokes the idea of a certain continuity. The frequency, depth, and comprehensiveness of spiritual direction can gradually progress, depending on how much the believer exposes his inner self and how much he wants to reach his goal. In short, it is a privileged means of spiritual formation, in the sense that the person concerned is directly involved, which makes this guidance especially effective. This is evidenced by the fact that it has been practiced and recommended so often since the beginning of Christianity.

Spiritual direction only makes sense to the extent that the believer wants to achieve a spiritual goal. He is directed toward an end goal, and he is accompanied on a path of spiritual progress. Just as any prudent person goes in search of the necessary information and helpful resources that will help him to reach a goal, so too the believer, interested in becoming holy, seeks information and wants to receive advice that will help him in his personal efforts to advance on the path toward that goal. Holiness, then, depends on the generosity of personal response to grace and divine callings, and thus the Christian faithful himself is directly responsible for reaching his goal. Therefore, spiritual direction moves within the framework of the virtue of prudence. It is

an aid aimed at discerning the moral good and deciding on the proper means to achieve it.

Indeed, holiness is personal, depending on the person's free choices made in the privacy of his own conscience. No one can replace him—not even his spiritual director. So, spiritual accompaniment can, in no way, nullify the personal responsibility of the one receiving this guidance. His freedom is a gift from God that enables him to glorify God in a personal way, with a dignity ontologically superior to that of any other visible creature. The exhortations and advice given in spiritual direction should be evaluated by the person concerned to behave prudently or make a prudent decision. In other words, the practice of spiritual direction does not undermine personal freedom and the moral relevance of one's conscience. It actually promotes decisions being made with a more conscious freedom and a better-informed conscience.

The purpose that must motivate the spiritual director is not to succeed in obtaining a result in the external conduct of the one he accompanies, but rather to succeed in making that person want—that is, to put at the center of his free and personal will—what he *should* want. Therefore, the spiritual director's role is not to command but to enlighten the conscience: "*Ut veritas pateat, veritas placeat, veritas moveat.*"<sup>1</sup>

However, we often speak of "obedience" to the spiritual director.<sup>2</sup> I think a distinction should be made between advice and exhortations of a declarative nature—meaning those that do no more than recall pre-existing moral tenets, and those that are real advice on how to act. The former are morally obligatory insofar as their content is obligatory; the explanation, reminder, or exhortation to fulfill a pre-existing moral precept adds to the moral obligation of the precept by relying on greater certainty about the existence of that moral tenet.

1. St. Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana* ("On Christian Teaching"), IV, ch. 28, no. 61, MPL 34, cols. 15-122; col. 119.

2. It may be helpful to read St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*'s explanation of this virtue (II-II, qq. 104 and 105).

As for the obligation of mere advice, it refers to the formation of the prudent act: The moral duty is not to follow the advice but to evaluate it seriously (i.e., “in one’s conscience”).

As a path to holiness, a believer might choose the path of voluntarily submitting to and obeying a certain person, who might be the spiritual director himself. I think that in such a case, the duty of obedience—which never eliminates the responsibility to confront one’s conscience—is an added commitment. However, I believe that it does not exactly belong to the practice of spiritual direction.

Therefore, the virtue, in itself, that is at stake on the part of those who utilize the tool of spiritual formation is not obedience in the strict sense, but docility, the virtue that helps a person to learn as it makes him open to Christian formation. Spiritual literature insists on the need to distrust one’s own judgment and trust that of the spiritual director because it is more objective, and he is often more experienced. Such docility, based on the virtue of humility, does not, however, lead one to deny the role of one’s own conscience in the preparation of a free decision, since moral conduct ultimately depends on conforming to one’s own (duly informed) conscience.

### 1.2. The Role of Governance in a Church Community

The task of governance, on the other hand, is directed toward the good of a community. The community, like a ship, needs a course of direction, distribution of individual tasks, and an organization of its activities.<sup>3</sup> He who has the responsibility to govern exercises a social duty that serves the good of the community. His power is not domineering and is not for his own benefit, but rather an ability to exercise a duty that the members of the community need.

Governance consists of instructing a community and guiding

3. The word “government” comes from the tool that directs a ship. See M. Cortelazzo–P. Zolli, *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana* (“Etymological Dictionary of the Italian Language”), vol. 2/D-H (Bologna: N. Zanichelli, 1980), 512.

its activities toward a certain goal, which is nothing other than the common good. To instruct a community means to indicate the (rational) order that should be followed by the community members’ free conduct. Governing is not the same as putting material objects in order, since it is a matter of ordering the actions of free persons in such a way that the command or instruction addresses the community members’ sense of reason to motivate them. In civil society, communities can use physical force to ensure order, but the essence of government is not coercion but order. Even in the Church there is a certain coercive capacity (consider the possibility of imposing canonical sanctions, but, as in civil society, the essence of the government’s activity is to indicate the order that can lead to achieving the good of the community.

A governing act may constitute a new situation (for example, appointment to a particular office) or establish binding rules of conduct, which create a duty of obedience, since the members of the community must follow the rule established by the one who holds that responsibility (so as not to hinder the achievement of the common good). Faced with such an act of governance, the subject is obliged to comply and practice the virtues of obedience and justice toward the community.

Since it is a matter of ordering free conduct, one governs not only by establishing laws, but also with declarations, directions, and exhortations. What Vatican II states about the bishops’ duty to govern<sup>4</sup> actually applies, with proper adaptation, to every authority in the Church: One must govern “by counsel, persuasion, and example, but also by authority,” which is to be exercised in a spirit of service for the edification of the community to which they are entrusted, rather than for their own personal advantage. Therefore, those who are tasked with governing should have, along with the *potestas* to do so, the moral authority to do so effectively, to the extent that those who hold public power are also usually said to have a certain authority.

4. See Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium*, 27.

## 2. Ethical and Legal Implications of Spiritual Direction and Governance

Once we have established the framework of spiritual direction and the practice of governance in the Church (even in small communities or movements), it is worthwhile to explore moral and legal aspects of these two activities.

Spiritual direction is a practice and tool that is highly regarded in the Christian mission to become holy people. In certain contexts, such a means of formation is especially necessary to the point that being able to receive it might be an actual right. For example, there is no doubt that a candidate for the priesthood has a right to spiritual direction, and the seminary has a legal duty to offer him the opportunity to receive it.

In addition to the general moral duty to seek counsel if it is necessary to act prudently, sometimes the use of spiritual direction may be a moral duty. There are certain circumstances in which the faithful Christian is in a situation where this type of help is especially valuable and easily accessible. For example, in my opinion, this is typically the situation in which a seminarian finds himself. Moreover, it seems obvious that a faithful Christian can make a commitment to God to follow spiritual direction, thus creating a moral duty to follow through on this commitment.

One might ask whether a person could assume a juridical obligation to access spiritual direction. I think that the juridical duty (that is pertaining to justice) could refer only to external aspects of spiritual direction (having a periodic meeting with a certain person, discussing certain topics, receiving certain direction in a personalized way). However, I think that the true openness of privacy does not have the characteristic of alterity (otherness) proper to rights, that is, I do not think it can be a good belonging to another person (and therefore owed to him), so the openness according to truth of any spiritual direction

could not, in my opinion, be a juridical duty. In other words, the much-recommended total honesty in spiritual direction (which is nothing more than logical consistency with the nature of this formative tool) may very well constitute a moral duty, but not a juridical one. On the other hand, it would be physically impossible to know another's conscience without him freely revealing it, however the manifestation of one's interiority may constitute a moral duty in certain circumstances (for example, think of the obligation to confess sins in the sacrament of penance). Therefore, access to this formative tool through the revelation of one's conscience will always be one's free choice.

With respect to the moral and legal scope of government action, it should be noted that since the community needs to have a minimum of organization to achieve its own good, being governed constitutes a right of the community members. In fact, lately, canonical doctrine has been insisting on the existence of the right of the faithful to a righteous and just leadership.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is the duty of the authority (or authorities) to govern and to make every effort to properly exercise the art of governing.

The right of the faithful to governance does not detract from their legal duty to obey legitimate decisions made by the relevant authority figure. Obeying is certainly a moral duty, but it is also a legal duty insofar as the community has the right to respect the established order to achieve the common good.

5. Perhaps the first author who spoke of the fundamental right that faithful have to good governance is Javier Hervada (see Hervada, *Diritto Costituzionale Canonico* ("Constitutional Canon Law") (Milan: Giuffrè, 1989), 137). Others (Miras, Canosa, Zuanazzi, Michowicz, Daniel, Errázuriz, Boni) have further developed this idea. For this topic, I refer to E. Baura, *Il "buon governo": diritti e obblighi dei fedeli e dei pastori* ("Good governance: Rights and Obligations of the Faithful and Pastors"), in Gruppo Italiano Docenti di Diritto Canonico (ed.) ("Italian Group of Professors of Canon Law (ed.)"), *Il governo nel servizio della comunione ecclesiale, "Quaderni della Mendola"* 25 ("Governance in the Service of Church Communion, 'Mendola Notebooks'") (Milan: Glossa, 2017) pgs. 3-30.

### 3. The Danger of Abuse and Assets at Stake

The practice of spiritual direction is therefore expedient and sometimes necessary, just as the activity of governing is also necessary. Given man's fallen nature, however, no matter how much those who guide souls or govern them benefit from charismatic gifts or even the sacred power of the Church, the danger of detouring from the proper use of these practices (the "ab-use") is always present.

In the Church, abuse of government power will not ordinarily manifest itself in violent actions, but rather under the guise of pastoral charity and spiritual needs. Actually, often the refusal to follow certain formalities or procedures, branding them as rigid legalism, are nothing more than a pretext for exercising governance incorrectly understood as personal dominion over people or the community. It would constitute an abuse of power to exercise it in pursuit of private interests rather than in pursuit of the common good, as would be the making of disproportionate decisions or decisions based on the preference of persons or on criteria of convenience of authority. Abuse of power is also any exercise of authority beyond one's subjective or objective competence; in this regard, the coercive command of what, at most, can only be advised, certainly constitutes an abuse that renders the command in question illegitimate. Against the abuse of power, the Church has set up a somewhat functioning system of appeals against government decisions, so as to protect the rights of the faithful in some way. (One can appeal against the decision of an ecclesiastical authority before the hierarchical superior all the way up to the appropriate dicastery of the Roman Curia, and one can even file a petition with the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura against the procedural or substantive legitimacy of an action taken by a curial institution.)

What is more difficult is protection when dealing with potential abuse in the context of spiritual direction. In order to demarcate the limits of the legitimate exercise of spiritual direction, it is necessary to keep in mind, once again, that the purpose of this means of formation is to find the necessary enlightenment and appropriate counsel to make moral decisions, as well as to receive comfort and encouragement to follow the path of holiness. Insofar as spiritual direction aims to orient the conscience following its externalization, the principle of freedom must be enforced, since the conscience belongs to the person concerned alone. In the words of *Gaudium et spes*, "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths."<sup>6</sup> The right to freedom includes the right to follow spiritual direction as well as not to follow it, the freedom to partially or totally reveal one's worries, the right to choose the person or institution to whom one turns to for this formative help, and finally the freedom to follow (or not) any advice one receives. Moreover, it is not superfluous to mention that the rights of freedom impose on others, including civil and ecclesial institutions, strict duties of respect and thus abstention.

Revealing one's conscience must be a free choice precisely because it is a private domain that cannot belong to a third party. Ultimately, there are two very precious assets of the person receiving spiritual accompaniment at stake, the injury of which would cause enormous psychological, moral, and legal damage. These two assets are freedom, including respect for conscience, and privacy.<sup>7</sup>

6. Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, 16.

7. I later draw from—as in other passages of this paper—on my paper *Accompagnamento e formazione: diritti e obblighi dei fedeli* ("Accompaniment and Formation: Rights and Obligations of the Faithful") in *Gruppo Italiano Docenti di Diritto Canonico* (ed.) ("Italian Group of Teachers of Canon Law (ed.)"), *Accompagnare, discernere, integrare: profili e prospettive giuridico-ecclesiali*, "Quaderni della Mendola" 27 ("Accompanying, Discerning, Integrating: Legal-ecclesial Profiles and Perspectives, 'Mendola Notebooks'") (Milan, 2019), 41–62.

### 3.1. Respect for Freedom

Having reached this point, it is necessary to address the problem of the danger of psychological manipulation that may arise in the practice of spiritual direction. First of all, it should be noted that the relationship that a disciple establishes with a teacher is based on a recognition of authority that leads him to trust the teacher's expertise, to the point of freely placing himself in a situation of subordination, at least in the context of teaching. It is only right that such a relationship should also be established for one's spiritual life, except that, since the teachings are personalized, even in the matter of spiritual life, the risk of mental manipulation is certainly greater.

This is as thorny an issue as ever because, in practice, it is very difficult to distinguish the boundaries between more or less persuasive exhortation and abuse of moral authority that can even lead to the expropriation of one's ability to make decisions. Some civil systems have established mental manipulation as a crime, but the typification of the crime of brainwashing has been viewed with suspicion because it can be charged with ideological imposition by the state, which, under the guise of protecting the freedom of citizens, can hinder educational action in that state. The example of Italian law, which considers exploitation a criminal offense in article 603 of the Penal Code—defined as the submission of a person to one's own power “in such a way as to reduce him to a total state of subjection”—is very instructive. The Constitutional Court deemed this law unconstitutional because it conflicted with “the principle of taxability of the case in question contained in the absolute reservation of the law in criminal matters, enshrined in Article 25 of the Constitution.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, ascertaining

8. Constitutional Court of the Italian Republic, Judgment no. 96, April 9, 1981, no. 16, in *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana* (“Official Gazette of the Italian Republic”), no. 158, June 10, 1981. The principle of taxability means that the criminal norm must identify the elements of the offense it contains so that one can deduce with precision what is lawful and what is prohibited. And the absolute reservation means the prohibition of punishing a particular conduct in the absence of a pre-existing law that defines it as a crime.

the state of subjugation is objectively difficult and susceptible, in turn, to ideological manipulation. The example of Italy leads one to guard against possible ideological attacks aimed at preventing people from evangelizing. That the risk of abuse of freedom and conscience in the practice of spiritual accompaniment exists is, unfortunately, a reality abundantly demonstrated by the facts. However, the Church must also defend itself against the ideological offensive that would like to prevent, in practice, its pastoral mission of proclaiming the Gospel and leading people to the truth, including through means of spiritual counseling.

Moreover, under normal psychological circumstances it is difficult to come to dominate another's mind and will to the point of destroying or greatly diminishing his freedom. The attack on freedom can occur more easily when a psychologically unstable person is involved, when the spiritual director is highly revered, or when there is a considerable difference in age, culture, or life experience between the director and the person being accompanied. We should also not overlook the psychological peculiarities of an abusive director, which can lead him to want to dominate the people he accompanies and to make them completely dependent on him. This can be achieved not only through threats, but also by overloading people with commitments or by exposing them to their community, violating his due confidentiality. The latter can happen more easily in small communities. Finally, the great risk to freedom is that of converting advice into a definitive order.

This could occur when the spiritual director makes a final judgment in practical matters, presenting his solution as the only one possible, where others could be equally legitimate. A clear example of this phenomenon would arise when advising a person to turn away from a morally dangerous situation. That opportunities to sin should be avoided is an exemplary moral principle, but the prudential judgment about the imminence of a given situation and the severity of removal from it might be questionable. In principle, the spiritual director should



merely point out the general principle and help the person concerned to make a responsible decision—informed by a good conscience—without prejudice to the duty to warn a person of the obvious grave moral danger of a certain circumstance—or even to point out the moral obligation to turn away from a situation that is unnecessary and has previously been revealed as an immediate occasion of grave sin.

In addition, there is the danger of an excessively pressing exhortation that could result in an attack on liberty by stalking. To analyze this hypothesis, it may be helpful to turn again to Italian law. Article 612-bis of the Italian Penal Code typifies the crime of “whoever (man or woman) repeatedly threatens or harasses someone in such a way as to cause a serious and constant state of distress or fear or to provoke within the victim(s) a well-founded fear for his/her own safety or for the safety of relatives or partners, or to force the victim(s) to change his/her living habits.” Without claiming to carry out a technical examination of this type of crime, it is worth noting that the threat refers to a potential, evil act, freely caused (directly or indirectly) by the one doing the threatening. This is a very different case from the warning of harm directly deriving from an evil act done by the person being warned, like the dutiful, evangelical warning of the eternal punishment of those who act in a certain way. It is possible for such a warning to become harassment, but it will only be considered criminal when it occurs against the will of the person receiving the warnings. If the relationship of spiritual accompaniment is based on the free choice of the person being guided and his trust in the spiritual director, insistence on moral exhortation should be viewed in the same way as a mother urging her son to stop taking drugs.

### 3.2. Respect of Conscience

I believe that, in order to distinguish a normal and praiseworthy—even vehement exhortation from mental manipulation, objective parameters should be used to ascertain whether the person is a victim. Although, there is always the risk of manipulation aimed at obtaining good—but not free—results. Given the difficulty of ascertaining the state of freedom, the feedback of one’s results may give us some clues. For example, there would be no doubt about there being undue manipulation in the case of leading a person to behave in a degrading way. This is also the case when spiritual guidance extends to fields that are not its own, as would be the claim to impose certain choices in the temporal sphere or for the personal benefit of the spiritual director.

Beyond the need to avoid criminal conduct in this matter, the Church has always felt the need to carry out the task of spiritual direction in absolute deference to the freedom of conscience. Respect for the individual is the first requirement of interpersonal relationships. The word “respect” comes from *re-spectus* (*re-spicere*). To respect a person means to look pointedly at him, understanding and keeping his dignity in mind. The Italian language has retained the expression “to have regard for someone” for a reason. A spiritual director must, therefore, stand before the faithful he accompanies, knowing that he is dealing with another’s conscience, which is the most radical, intimate core of the spiritual soul that was directly created by God and redeemed by Christ—the place where man meets alone with God. The spiritual director’s task is to enlighten a person’s conscience, to help a person make decisions freely; the spiritual director must renounce the temptation to demand an immediate result. It is not a matter of the person “doing” something, but of him “wanting to do so freely and autonomously.” Respect for conscience does not mean passivity. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that in contemporary culture it is easy for conscience not to present itself “as the window, which shows man a wide view of that universal

truth,” but is often conceived rather as “the shell of subjectivity, in which man can escape from reality and hide from it.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the Church’s main task is to serve the conscience.

Service to conscience is done by teaching the truth. The faithful who seek spiritual guidance have the right to receive this guidance according to the truth the Church preaches, even when it is inconvenient. We must not confuse rights—meaning objective goods that are just and belong to persons—with mere desires. A desire, no matter how intense, is not necessarily a right. Service to conscience is not accomplished by anesthetizing it nor by confusing it. Helping conscience falls directly under the purpose of *salus animarum*, which does not refer to the health of souls, understood as peace of mind, but to the eternal salvation of souls. The faithful have a right to receive from their pastors, not psychological therapies aimed at finding serenity, but appropriate aids, including the transmission of truth, to achieve eternal salvation, even when this is inconvenient for the one receiving the message.

To respect and serve the conscience means, therefore, to enlighten it with revealed truth, refraining from passing judgments on one’s interiority and from claiming to impose conduct contrary to what one’s conscience dictates. It is part of the art of spiritual direction to gradually lead souls toward the truth, which in no way justifies the teaching of something that is wrong but consists simply of the gradual transmission of truth (what is gradual is the teaching and learning, not the truth). Ultimately, the spiritual director must always be aware that he is a servant of the conscience and must run away from the pretension to dominate it as from the desire to acquire at all costs the faithful’s

9. J. Ratzinger, *La Chiesa: una comunità sempre in cammino* (“The Church: A Community Always on the Move”) (Cinisello Balsamo, Italy: Paoline, 1991) pg. 117. For more on this topic, cf. A. Rodríguez-Luño, *Coscienza, verità e libertà nella civiltà tecnologica* (“Consciousness, Truth and Freedom in the Technological Civilization”), [http://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2000-01/24-2/Coscienza\\_rtf.html](http://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2000-01/24-2/Coscienza_rtf.html) (date accessed: 03/04/23)

appreciation and acceptance. He must also avoid acting in a way that is influenced by his aspiration to obtain certain results at all costs, however commendable.

### 3.3. The Right to Privacy

When it comes to spiritual accompaniment, the situation in which a person decides to open up, there is an obvious need to respect his right to privacy. Privacy is something good that pertains to the human person, based on his dignity, which must be respected by others. Someone baptized, as a person, retains an innate right to privacy within the Church, as even the Code of Canon Law recognizes.<sup>10</sup>

The right to privacy refers mainly to psychological privacy and conscience, so that no one can be forced to reveal this part of himself, as it is an inherent part of his personal dignity. What a person can do, however, is freely exercise the right to express his thoughts and desires, thus revealing his private world, as it allows him to also seek advice, of course. It is common knowledge that it is healthy for one’s psyche to externalize one’s inner self, although acknowledging one’s shortcomings and revealing one’s inner self proves to be very damaging. This can be observed in the biblical account of the first negative consequence of original sin. On the ascetical level, in addition to the obligation to confess one’s sins in the sacrament of penance, communicating one’s worries and seeking the appropriate counsel can sometimes constitute a moral duty, among other things, to shape one’s conscience.

10. Today, there is an abundant bibliography on the subject. See, among others, Fr. Koyassambia-Kozondo, *Le bien juridique naturel de l'intimité personnelle dans l'Eglise* (“The Natural Juridical Property of Personal Privacy in the Church”) (Rome: EDUSC, 2020); E. Baura, *Il diritto all'intimità nella Chiesa: bene giuridico e disponibilità del diritto*, “Ephemerides Iuris Canonici” 61 (“The Right to Privacy in the Church: Legal Good and Availability of Law”) (2021), 719–749; B. Serra, *Intimum, privatum, secretum. Sul concetto di riservatezza nel diritto canonico* (“Intimum, privatum, secretum. On the Concept of Confidentiality in Canon Law”) (Modena, Italy: Mucchi, 2022).

The exercise of freedom to externalize private concerns, sometimes in fulfillment of a moral duty, does not entail the right of another to demand it; that one can and even should morally give up a good does not entail the right of a third party to appropriate that good.

Once one's private inner self is revealed, precisely because it is private, communication naturally falls under secrecy (the "natural secret"). It is the right of the one who made the disclosure to allow its disclosure to another person, especially when it is in his own interest. For example, this is the case when the person being accompanied wants the person to whom he opened up to consult others in order to give him better advice on the subject at hand.

#### 4. Measures to Avoid Abuse

Given the danger of abuse in spiritual direction, it is only right that a competent ecclesiastical authority should take measures to protect the faithful from such circumstances. Before going on to analyze some of these measures, however, it is worth contextualizing the argument to avoid misleading conceptions of the valuable means of formation that is spiritual accompaniment.

It would be naïve to discuss spiritual accompaniment exclusively from the perspective of the prevention of possible abuse, which would disregard its value and usefulness. The existence of abuse obviously must lead to their prevention and remediation, but without falling into such a strictness that actually prevents the normal practice of this formative practice. The yearning for safety cannot result in the naïve claim of absolute security that guarantees that abuse will not occur. One must shy away from the "risk of security,"<sup>11</sup> if you will allow the use of such an oxymoron, which ends up leading to inaction and the denial of the free exercise of rights: *abusus non tollit usum* ("abuse does

11. "And you all know, security is mortals' chiefest enemy" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act. III, Scene V, 32).

not cancel use"). On the other hand, naïveté becomes greater in the case of manipulation within various educational and recreational activities aimed at teaching aberrations to kids, even young kids.

Moreover, no community—least of all a Christian community—relies on the legislative system alone—however necessary it may be—but rather on trust. The claim to guarantee everything by means of laws is the chimera of legal positivism, leading to unnecessary legislative elephantiasis (*plurimae leges pessima respublica*),<sup>12</sup> which makes free action difficult without ever succeeding in avoiding the condemned evils.

Just as one must shy away from the concern for absolute security, so, too, should an authority avoid seeking hyper-efficiency and trying to know everything (even people's private interiority), so that he can avoid making mistakes. Instead, I believe that governing involves the risk of making mistakes and, certainly, respecting the freedom and rights of the governed.

Having premised what I have just mentioned, it should be noted that, when dealing with a risk, it is normal to provide guidelines that help us to avoid it. It is up to the ecclesiastical hierarchy to determine what means can, in some way, guarantee a safe environment where the aid of spiritual accompaniment can be utilized. Approval of certain guidelines should be a guarantee for the faithful, which comes after a personal acquaintance with the protagonists and after a judgment on the activities of a particular entity or group.

One of the normative measures that the Church has in place for consecrated life, that can also apply to other areas, is the prevention of the authority figure from serving as a spiritual director, or rather, the prohibition of the authority requiring the subject to have spiritual direction with one who holds a governing role. Concretely, CIC 630 § 1 provides that "while safeguarding the discipline of the institute, Superiors are to acknowledge the freedom due to the members

12. See Tacitus, *The Annals*, Book III, 27.

concerning the sacrament of penance and the direction conscience.” § 5 of the same canon concretizes this principle by encouraging religious to “approach their Superiors with trust and be able to open their minds freely and spontaneously to them,” but by stating imperatively that “Superiors are forbidden in any way to induce the members to make a manifestation of conscience to themselves.”

It seems obvious that this legislation of the Holy See, dating back to the second half of the nineteenth century, is intended first and foremost to protect the freedom of the faithful (specifically, religious), but at the same time it is relevant that openness of conscience is encouraged with those who have governmental duties. The rationale for the law that prohibits authority from demanding openness of the conscience of its subjects is clear: It is to avoid the abuse of power that would occur if an authority, using his capacity to govern, wanted to make what can only be advice a legal obligation that the authority figure enforces in order to reveal issues within one’s conscience with their full freedom. These are the motives that lead to the avoidance of what is usually called, in rough terminology, the confusion between the external and internal fora.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, another reason for this prohibition, of no small importance, is clearly to protect the reputation of community members, since certain measures of government could be taken on the basis of knowledge of the privacy of the person concerned, risking jeopardizing certain information that should remain confidential. Although the prohibition concerns the claim of requiring spiritual direction with those who hold governing positions over the person concerned, the reasons for this law lead one to think that it would be risky to even suggest it.

13. Indeed, “forum” means the sphere where jurisdiction is exercised. The so-called “internal forum” would be the sphere, in reality external, but most private, where acts of jurisdiction take place, such as the dispensation from a vow, matrimonial impediments, or the remission of a punishment, which are normally carried out in a public way, in the external forum. In this matter of discussion, however, the internal forum simply refers to a private, reserved sphere, even if jurisdiction is not exercised in it (as would be the case with spiritual accompaniment).

Given these reasons, it is understandable that we shy away from having the spiritual director also be a person who has duties of governance in the community. In any case, we should clarify that what should be completely avoided is not the concentration of two different roles in the same person, but the confusion of the function of governing the community with that of spiritually accompanying a specific faithful, since such a mixture would harm his freedom and probably his privacy. The distinction between the two roles is only a tool to protect these two goods—a tool, however, that can sometimes be disregarded. Indeed, for centuries in the monastic tradition the abbot acted as an authority and spiritual father (*abba*);<sup>14</sup> sometimes it may be in the interest of the faithful to seek personal spiritual guidance from the authority figure.

It should not be forgotten that the purpose of ecclesiastical government is not the mere organization of external activities, but the good of the community, which includes first and foremost the *salus uniuscuiusque animae*. In other words, the practice of governance in the Church must benefit the spiritual good of the individual believer. Thus, we can conclude that the best governance would embrace the concept of believers freely revealing their inner selves, which allows them to facilitate their spiritual life through governmental measures as well. Moreover, as a formative commitment and a vocational faithfulness, a believer may often be morally required to open his conscience to the relevant authorities in order for them to guide him appropriately and to ensure that the governmental measures that affect him are beneficial to him spiritually. In any case, it may be an interest of the believer to interject or even seek

14. See M. Belda, *Ars artium. Storia, teoria e pratica della direzione spirituale* (“Ars Artium: History, Theory, and Practice of Spiritual Direction”) (Rome: EDUSC, 2020), 21–39. One of the fifteenth-century frescoes depicting the life of St. Benedict (found in the upper part of the basilica of Subiaco) in which the abbot is shown welcoming the repentant monk; the abbot has one hand on the monk’s shoulder, a fatherly gesture; he holds a staff in his other hand, an obvious sign of jurisdiction.

spiritual accompaniment from those who have a leadership role in the community, an interest that should certainly be respected. This is why ecclesiastical law praises the faithful who spontaneously open their conscience before ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>15</sup> In any case, it is important that it remains clear whether the believer turns to the authority in order to have the measures of governance tailored to his personal needs or whether he does so exclusively to receive spiritual direction; in the latter case, it would be illegitimate to use, in the exercise of governance, the information received in these conversations without the prior permission of the person concerned.

Ultimately, the norm prohibiting authority from forcing someone to open his conscience should not hinder the normal exercise of spiritual guidance: *abusus non tollit usum*. It would also be an abuse, trying to avoid all these other forms of abuse, to place so many limits on the very act of evangelization and spiritual guidance.

After all, generic aprioristic norms are not enough to prevent abuse. What really shows respect for all that is good in spiritual formation within a community is respect for the nature of every role. As for the purpose of governance, it should be reiterated that it is meant to bring

order to the life of the community and help it to progress toward its own good, rather than being completely domineering. As for spiritual direction, we should remember that it consists of helping a person understand that it is best for him to freely seek what is good. It is not just a matter of educating people in freedom or respecting freedom, but of creating freedom itself. Therefore, it would be absurd and harmful to introduce into an environment of formation a kind of fear of freedom. On the contrary, it is about forming free people who freely choose the good. Moreover, the attack on freedom does not rely on vehemence or insistence in exhortation (no one thinks that a mother who heartily urges her child not to take drugs is committing an abuse of conscience), but on the deception that makes the choice vicious. Therefore, the litmus test for judging the legitimacy of formative action is its adherence to revealed truth. Christian formation consists of enlightening the conscience with the truth of the Gospel. Any teaching of a doctrine other than revealed truth, however pleasing to the person being formed, would, therefore, be an attack on the right to formation and to the freedom of the faithful, while the due transmission of truth, however inconvenient, is not only a right but also bolsters the freedom of the faithful—*veritas liberabit vos* (“The truth will make you free;” see John 8:32).

15. The duty of the account of conscience in the Society of Jesus is a very significant example in this regard, dating back to the foundation of the Jesuits. It requires its members to report to the Superior to discuss their state of conscience, so that he can take appropriate governing measures for each one. With the promulgation of the 1917 Code, the prohibition against inducing subjects to open their consciences with superiors, which had previously existed for lay institutes only, was extended to all religious institutes, so that the practice of reporting consciences as envisaged in the constituent norms of the Society of Jesus was no longer permitted (in this point, too, the code turns out to be a Procrustean bed). Pius XI reinstated it with a special papal privilege, rewritten June 29, 1923. Among other things, he believed that the practice itself of accounting one's conscience to the Superior, however risky, was not illegitimate. On this subject, cf. J.L. Sánchez-Girón Renedo, *La cuenta de conciencia al Superior en el Derecho de la Compañía de Jesús* (“The Account of Conscience to the Superior in Jesuit Law”) (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2007). Pope Francis has reminded Jesuits of this duty several times (see, for example, Francis, Meeting with Lithuanian Jesuits, Sept. 23, 2018, <http://www.raggionline.com/saggi/esercizi/papa-francesco-e-gli-esercizi-spirituali.htm> (date accessed: 03/04/2023) and Francis, “Address to the Community of the International College of the Gesù,” Dec. 3, 2018, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/december/documents/papa-francesco\\_20181203\\_collegio-gesu.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/december/documents/papa-francesco_20181203_collegio-gesu.html) (date accessed: 03/04/23).