

Talking point- Spiritual direction

This direction is meant for you if you feel God is calling you in your life.

This much is true- God is calling you to be a saint.

What does that mean?

In essence it means that you have a purpose in life. Your life has meaning – a God given meaning.

Before the world was made, before you were made, God conceived of a plan. His plan was to externalise Himself and commune with his creatures and delight in their company. (see Venerable Mary of Agreda in - the Mystical City of God).

In other words, God wanted to create the heavens and the earth as He wanted to give of Himself and live among his creatures even to the extent that the book of Proverbs can, 'his delight was to be with the children of men'. (Proverbs 8:31). Yes, God's whole plan is to live and be with the children of men and his creatures (angels). See how much we are worth to God! He wants you and I to be his friends and not simply friends but have His image- to be like Him.

But God does not want to force this end on us. God is love and love cannot be forced. Love is a choice. So there had to be the possibility in life of rejecting God's plan. So, even though God created you and I, without our consent, he will not force us to live with Him in this way if we do not freely choose it.

So, God, the creator of all beauty, truth, goodness and happiness and wants to share with you everlasting, incorruptible, contented life and the creator of your soul desires your consent.

So, this is God's plan and the choice that is laid before us – heaven or the alternative which is living without God and since God is love means living without Love.

So, you really have been created for a reason and that reason is the purpose of your life- to find out more about your creator and Father who loves you so much that he wants to spend eternity with you and not just with you but with all men who desire to live with Him.

So, life is about getting to know God, making a choice and returning His Love in the way that He wants it returning; in the way that is compatible with living with Him. Sounds like marriage to me- we have to learn to live together! But in this marriage one person is perfect so the learning is all on our part. We have to learn to be like Him.

This leads me to **the topic of spiritual direction.**

Since our ultimate end is living in perfection with God, we need a way to get there.

In case you doubt me that perfection is necessary, St Alphonse Maria de Ligouri (19th Century mystic and religious leader) said, 'there are no mediocre saints in heaven'.

This of course makes sense or we would have the same mess in heaven as we have on this earth with people quarrelling and fighting all the time. Indeed, the church teaches that if we are not ready for heaven we are kept in a purgatorial state until we are ready. There must be no rejection of His will in any way to have access to heaven.

So, yes, even you, have been called to be a saint if you desire to enter heaven and fulfil God's plan!

The end of your life is not to amass goods until you die which is materialism – you cannot take them with you.

The end of your life is not to eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die which is dissipation or hedonism. It is not distraction from suffering.

Rather it is to imitate the Christ as He would say, 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt 5: 48).

Furthermore, he shows us that all suffering we undergo in this life and in this regard is worth the end reward which we do not deserve but God desires to give us.

Jesus is the ultimate way, the truth and the life and all who seek to come to the Father must go through him. (John 14:6)

Spiritual direction assists us to clarify the aim of our life and set aids in place that will help us reach our goal. We have to be clear that every decision of ours that goes against God's plan takes us away from God and towards a final decision of rejection of His plan. This is a religious and a biological reality. Biologically every decision we make lays down neural pathways which once set as habits become very difficult to shift.

At the end of the day, we gain or lose heaven through our own decisions.

Since the fall of man, being perfect has been difficult for all of us and we have to work at making progress.

So, what are the aids that are going to keep us on track?

To explain to you by illustration I will use the writings of the **Venerable Mary of Agreda in The Mystical City of God** concerning the other wonderful example of perfection we have been given – the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary as she too points the way to heaven. The phrase, 'to Jesus through Mary', comes to mind. (St Jose Maria 1957 in Christ is Passing by).

In the Mystical City of God Mary of Agreda describes how when the Virgin Mary was taken to the Temple for dedication to God by her mother Anne, she 'offered herself to the Lord- bound herself to the obedience of her instructress and requested that her priest and

instructress prescribe for her an order of life to direct her in the occupations she was to assume.

Mary, in other words requests spiritual direction at the Temple. (See note 1). She gave herself over to obedience to that instruction after first offering herself entirely to God making a 'serviam' – kissing the floor and stating, 'I will serve the Lord my God'.

She is told she has been called to serve- to give God thanks for this privilege, to praise God for his gratuitousness, to welcome His plans, to seek to profit by striving hard to serve Him in truth and with an upright heart and give glory to God.

She is told to acquire all the virtues in order that she be strengthened against the troubles and the dangers of this world.

She is given a job to do- to assist at prayers and in song in honour of God- to specifically pray for the needs of the Temple and of His people and for the coming of the Messiah.

She is given a time to go to bed and a time to rise and pray.

She is given time to work.

She is given meal times and told to eat moderately.

She is given time to learn and time to be instructed in jobs.

She is told to read holy scripture.

And to be humble, affable and obedient.

Here are the direct quotes form these writings. P 369 Mystical City of God by Mary Of Agreda

Point 467 'She requested the priest and the teacher to prescribe for her an order of life and to direct her in the occupations of which she was to assume.'

Point 678 'The priest spoke to her and said: 'My daughter as a very young child the Lord has drawn Thee to his house and Holy Temple:

be thankful for His favour and seek to profit by it by striving hard to serve Him in truth and with an upright heart. Acquire all the virtues that thou mayest return from this Holy place prepared and fortified against the troubles and dangers of this world. Obey thy Mistress and commence early to bear the sweet yoke of virtue, in order that thou mayest find it more easy to bear during the rest of thy life...'

Point 470 'The priest also gave her a rule for her occupations and said, 'My daughter thou wilt assist at the exercises of divine praise and song in honour of the Lord with all reverence and devotion, and always pray to the Most High, for the necessities of his holy temple and of his people, and for the coming of the Messias. At 8 o'clock thou wilt retire for sleep (she's young at this point) and at the beginning of dawn thou wilt arise in order to praise the Lord until the third hour (this hour corresponds to our 9 o'clock in the morning). From the third hour until evening, thou wilt occupy thyself in some manual works, in order that thou mayest be instructed in all things. At meals, of which thou wilt partake after thy exercise, observe befitting moderation. Then thou wilt go to hear the instructions of thy teacher; the rest of the day thou wilt engage thyself in the reading of holy Scriptures, and in all things be humble, affable, and obedient to the commands of thy instructress.'

Moreover, Mary we are told took on extra tasks that were not expected of firstborn children especially not from the royal tribe of Judah.

Point 472' In the performance of works not commanded her our Queen and Lady distinguished herself from other maidens by asking her teacher to be allowed to serve them all and be engaged in the humble occupation of scrubbing and cleaning the rooms and of washing the dishes... With such eager humility she knew how to gain time and opportunity for doing such work... she understood all the ceremonies of the Temple; but she was anxious to learn them also by study and practice...'

Point 476' She divided her time and applied it with rare prudence so as to give each of her actions and occupations its proper share. She read much in the sacred writings of the ancients...She was so well versed in them and in all their profound mysteries and sacraments; she treated and conversed about them in her conferences...If this sovereign Mistress had written what she understood, we would have many other additions to the Sacred Scriptures and we would be able to draw out from them a perfect understanding of those writings and the deep meaning and mysteries of all those preserved in the Church'

Point 477,' Human nature is imperfect and remiss in practicing virtue, and easily weakens in its exercise; for it continually seeks rest and evades labour with all its might...when the soul listens to... the carnal part of its nature this latter will...reduce them to a dangerous and shameful slavery...by remiss in battle... they live... in... a paralysing and self-satisfied... false security. The demon then introduces other distractions and temptations and on account of their small appreciation of the rules and practices of religion, they begin to weaken in all of them, esteem them as light and unimportant matter and living on in their false security, come to lose the very concept of true virtue'.

Point 478, ' I desire that thou my daughter guard against this error. Remember that a voluntary remiss in regard to one imperfection prepares and opens the way for others: these facilitate the commission of venial sins, these again of mortal sins.

So here we have an illustration of the curriculum if you like of a **program of spiritual direction**. This is called by St Jose Maria Escriva a plan of life and by Mary of Agreda an order of life. I prefer the term an order of life as the aim of spiritual direction is to set your life in order according to the goal or the mission in life that you want to accomplish and that it is to get to heaven.

Now for what you really want to know. What is the program for me?

First of all, it's important that you set a framework for the day including all the activities that will lead you to heaven and give greater glory to God as mentioned above. This should be a regular timetable- one for a lay person- one that fits your occupations, family and vocations. Beginning by- getting up at a fixed time and going to bed at a fixed time- this is practical but spiritual too. How difficult it is to rise when the alarm clock goes!

On rising we see that it is important to bring to mind our purpose – to be thankful for God's plan and give thanks for it with an upright heart whilst kissing the floor and proclaiming our 'Serviam' to God. I will serve. I like your plan Lord!

St Jose Maria says in the Way point 413 ' The non-serviam of Satan has been too fruitful. Don't you feel the generous urge to express your daily desire for prayer and work with a 'serviam'- I will serve you, I will be faithful! Which will surpass in fruitfulness that cry of revolt'.

Notice that Mary rose at 6 am and spent the next three hours in formal Temple worship and prayer – assisting and singing. We too should try to make the effort to assist at formal worship – ie at Mass every day and include time for personal prayer- by this I mean spend time alone talking with Jesus about your needs and that of your family and pleasures and difficulties you may have.

Attending at Mass is to participate in praise, thanksgiving, petition and the sacrifice of Christ for the salvation of souls. Assisting is offering yourself with Christ to the Father.

Remember don't fall into the trap of thinking I'm not getting anything from this. It's not what you receive but what you give that makes Mass not boring. And during the eucharistic prayer you are at the foot of calvary. Mass is not entertainment but being with Mary and Jesus at this solemn moment. Dancing in the aisle and happy clappy music is not appropriate when someone is dying.

From 9am to evening, with fixed meal times Mary was to occupy herself with her work- learning and doing it. After which she was to read the scriptures.

We too in our plan of life have to allocate time during the day for all our activities in order to fit them in including time to read the scriptures or some spiritual book. Work enables us to help others, practice the virtues and give glory to God.

Mealtimes make a great opportunity to pray the Angelus and make a thanksgiving to God for the gifts that we have received.

Additionally, you should pray the rosary or at least a decade of it in the day.

Before bed you should make an examination of conscience with an act of contrition so any areas where we fall short we have reflected upon and drawn a resolution in order to grow in virtue and make real progress toward our end goal.

You need to attend actual times of spiritual direction and to go to confession frequently.

So, some of the elements in our spiritual plan remind us of our purpose and keep us focused on it– the morning offering, the ‘serviam’ and for example the addition of a final examination of conscience at the end of the day with the making of specific, practical and spiritual resolutions during this review of how the day went.

Some of the elements assist us to get to know and understand God and allow Him to speak with us– the reading of the New Testament and of some spiritual book with the contemplation of the rosary.

While some of the elements assist us to keep Him in mind throughout the day and reminding us of his actual presence with us in the moment- the Angelus and sporadic prayers we make on seeing religious images etc.

Some of the elements involve making time to converse with God on a personal level- personal prayer and the examination of conscience and act of contrition.

Some focus on understanding the virtues and putting them into practise in our life- through actual instruction in the virtues and how to apply it in the life of an ordinary lay person. That is making time for actual spiritual direction through a director, the daily examination of conscience at night and through going to confession and speaking to a priest. These are some of the most important elements in spiritual direction as it is the practical application of all we need to learn to serve God as He desires to be served.

Does all this seem hard to you?

The point is to begin. To begin by starting at least somewhere. Perhaps resolving to read the gospels for 20 minutes a day or perhaps going to Mass. When we fail, we begin again the next day and we slowly make progress.

In point 306 of *The Way*, St Jose Maria says, "Man's life on earth is warfare' so said Job many centuries ago. There are still some easy-going individuals who are not aware of the fact.'

In point 414 he says 'How pathetic- a man of God who has fallen away! But how much more pathetic, a man of God who is lukewarm and worldly!'

We have a choice of course but it is by far better to choose the virtuous path. We can't get into heaven without it!!!

Note 1

The Mystical City of God by the Venerable Mary of Agreda (1602-1665) is a book concerning the reported private revelations of the life of the Virgin Mary to Mary of Agreda. Catholics are not bound to

believe private revelations. However, Popes and Saints have read and recommended this book as of spiritual benefit and life lessons can be drawn from it although there is not to date historical evidence to support some of the events that Mary reported on. Never-the-less orders of life or as St Jose Maria Escriva would call it – a plan of life is an essential tool in Catholicism.