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Engaging with the Practice of Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Church Today

Abstract

Spiritual direction is a pastoral practice of utmost importance for Christian life, if not the most crucial among the various pastoral practices in the Orthodox Church. Unfortunately, it seems that in the life of the Orthodox Church today, mainly with regard to parish ministry, the practice of spiritual direction is either limited to sacramental confession or is completely neglected. In this paper it is argued that for an engagement with the practice of spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church today, a clear understand-



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ing of the practice is essential. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the practices of spiritual direction and sacramental confession in the current unified practice. Also, the fact that a spiritual director should be both ordained and qualified spiritually touches upon the issue of the combination of the institutional and charismatic dimensions. Arguing for a more effective practice of spiritual direction, the fundamental aspect of the relationship between spiritual director and directee is approached. In this context, a reflection based on Trinitarian theology is proposed. Orthodox trinitarian theology declares that the Holy Trinity is a communion of persons and that the being of God is inherently relational. Thus, intra-trinitarian relations can be a normative theological principle for the relationship between spiritual father and child, founded on love and freedom. Furthermore, the crucial role of spiritual father should be re-emphasized towards a proper engagement of spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church today.

Keywords

spiritual direction, Orthodox Church, sacramental confession, institution, charisma, trinitarian theology, spiritual fatherhood

1 Introduction

Spiritual direction¹ is considered as a pastoral practice of utmost importance for Christian life, if not the most crucial among

¹ For a systematic study on spiritual direction in the Eastern Orthodox tradition see, I. Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*,

the various pastoral practices in the Orthodox Church. This is mainly due to the nature of the encounter between the spiritual director and the directee, and its decisive role in the process of spiritual formation of the latter towards the aim of Orthodox spirituality, namely *theosis* or deification.

Unfortunately, it seems that in the life of the Orthodox Church today, mainly with regard to parish ministry, the practice of spiritual direction is either limited to sacramental confession or completely neglected.² So, for example, when we ask an Orthodox Christian today whether she or he is receiving spiritual direction or guidance, in the case they do they most probably mean that they attend sacramental confession. Apparently, employing one the two terms for describing the pastoral practice is not entirely false, as the two practices are intertwined. What is wrong, however, is when the notion of spiritual direction refers to a distorted perception of confession,³ based on a legalistic approach and lacking an appropriate spiritual relationship, a fundamental aspect of spiritual direction.

In this paper we argue for a proper engagement with the practice of spiritual direction today. First, a clear understanding of

(trans. A. P. Gythiel, Vol. 116, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1990).

² J. J. Allen, *The Inner Way: The Historical Tradition of Spiritual Direction*, *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 35/2-3 (1991), p. 265.

³ According to Fr. Alexander Schmemman, one can realize "to what degree nominal Christianity has pervaded our Church life. The basic Christian notions of sin and repentance, reconciliation with God and renewal of life, seem to have become irrelevant." A. Schmemmann, *Some Reflections on Confession*, *St Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly* 5/3 (1961), p. 38. See also A. Papanikolaou, *Honest to God: Confession and Desire*, in *Thinking through Faith: New Perspectives from Orthodox Christian Scholars*, A. Papanikolaou and E. H. Prodromou (eds.) (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008), p. 219.

spiritual direction is essential. Therefore, the development of the practice and correlated aspects such as its relation to sacramental confession and the institutional-charismatic dialectic are explored. Furthermore, the vital aspect of the personal relationship between spiritual father and child is approached, through a trinitarian perspective. In this context, the crucial role of the spiritual father is emphasized.

2 Understanding the Practice of Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Church

1.1 The Development of Spiritual Direction

The very beginnings of the practice of spiritual direction are traced back to the early Christian centuries. The vast majority of scholars would agree that spiritual direction appeared in the fourth century along with the flourishing of monasticism,⁴ and for that reason it is generally considered a “monastic concept.” However, as it has been argued, the roots of spiritual direction are to be found in the life of the Church well before the establishment of monasticism in the fourth century. Some see a connection with “prophetic ministry” which would place a form of spiritual direction in the second century.⁵ Following this line further back, no one would disagree that spiritual direction “is already foreshadowed in the New Testament” and especially in the figure of St. Paul (1 Cor. 4.15-16), who can be regarded as an early example of spiritual director, even though, as Kallistos Ware notes, this ministry should be understood in a different

⁴ K. Leech, *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), p. 37.

⁵ J. J. Allen, *The Inner Way: The Historical Tradition of Spiritual Direction*, p. 258.

context and mission than the spiritual elder's some centuries later in monasticism.⁶

It could be thus said that the practice of spiritual direction did not appear *ex nihilo* in the fourth century, but its foundations and basic characteristics existed in the life of the Church from the very beginning. Nevertheless, what came to be known as spiritual direction has indeed been fashioned according to the monastic practice and has been fully developed within that particular context. The fact that texts such as *Apophthegmata Patrum* (Sayings of the Desert Fathers) remain to this day a main source for the practice of spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church indicate the great contribution and, in effect, the normative influence of monasticism in the development of the practice.⁷ Therefore, as it has been noted, "[i]t is in this monastic context that the flowering of the methodology of Orthodox spiritual direction and the deepening of the Orthodox understanding of the nature of the process of spiritual growth and development took place."⁸

Some researchers distinguish between two paradigms of spiritual direction, based on the distinction between two paradigms of spiritual life that evidently existed and evolved in the Church

⁶ K. Ware, Foreword: The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climacus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian, in I. Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, (trans. A. P. Gythiel, Vol. 116, Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1990), p. viii. See also F. G. Rogers, Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Christian Tradition, *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 30/4 (2002), p. 278.

⁷ K. Ware, Foreword: The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climacus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian, p. x. See also Daniel Lemeni, The Dynamics of Spiritual Guidance in the Apophthegmata Patrum, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 60/3-4 (2015), p. 131.

⁸ F. G. Rogers, Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Christian Tradition, p. 278.

since the development of monasticism. As George Demacopoulos explains:

“We can contrast the intense life of professed ascetics, many of whom isolated themselves from society, with the progressively institutionalized, imperial, and less rigorous practice of married Christians who continued their various urban and rural lifestyles. To accommodate the increasingly differentiated pastoral needs of these communities, patterns of spiritual direction evolved along two distinct trajectories.”⁹

Along the same lines, Liviu Barbu in his doctoral thesis about spiritual direction in the Eastern Orthodox Church, interestingly argues that spiritual direction in monasticism developed alongside the practice of spiritual direction which existed at that time in the so-called “mainstream” Church, thus speaking about two distinct models that gradually merged in the life of the Church producing the practice that is known today. According to Barbu, the practice in the mainstream Church basically refers to the ministry which derived from the apostles and which was later carried out by the bishops as the “spiritual fathers” *par excellence*. This model of spiritual direction is understood within an ecclesiological framework, directly linked to the sacraments and the doctrinal teaching of the Church.¹⁰ The

⁹ G. E. Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church* (Notre Dame, Indiana, USA: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 3. See also J. A. Jillions, *Spiritual Guidance in Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, in *Spiritual Guidance Across Religions: A Sourcebook for Spiritual Directors and Other Professionals Providing Counsel to People of Differing Faith Traditions*, Rev J. R. Mabry (ed.) (Woodstock, Vermont: SkyLight Paths, 2014), p. 254.

¹⁰ L. Barbu, *Pastoral Care as Spiritual Direction: An Eastern Orthodox Pastoral Theology and its Implications for Contemporary Pastoral Practice* (PhD thesis, King's College London, 2008), p. 123.

development of monasticism from the fourth century onwards, however, introduced a model of spiritual direction, practised by non-ordained charismatic monastics as well, and created a parallel, yet complementary as Barbu argues, practice of spiritual direction within the life of the Church.¹¹

These two distinct models of pastoral tradition, the so-called “clerical” and “ascetic” models of pastoral tradition,¹² influenced each other and eventually a combination of the two took place. More precisely, it could be said that it was more about an “asceticizing” of church life, hence the implications of monastic practice on spiritual direction, a change which was also facilitated by the rise of professed ascetics to positions of Church leadership.¹³ Nevertheless, the practice that emerged included elements of both models and, to a large extent, came to be the practice that has survived in the life of the Orthodox Church to this day.

“The way spiritual direction is practised today in the Orthodox Church mirrors this synthesis between mainstream and monastic elements. Traditionally, the office of the spiritual father in the Orthodox Church combines both elements, ordination to priesthood and ascetic experience. The bishop and the priest have retained their ministries as spiritual fathers; the monastic input can be seen in the legacy going back to the desert fathers (asceticism, confessions of thoughts and obedience to the spiritual father).”¹⁴

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 191.

¹² G. E. Demacopoulos, *Five Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church*, p. 3.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁴ L. Barbu, *Pastoral Care as Spiritual Direction*, p. 14.

1.2 Spiritual Direction and Sacramental Confession

The practice of spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church is indeed very closely related to sacramental confession.¹⁵ In fact, in the writings of many Orthodox theologians the notions of repentance, confession, spiritual fatherhood or spiritual direction, are most of the times used interchangeably. This is by no means the consequence of a general misunderstanding that exists in the Orthodox tradition, but rather denotes the result of a long-term co-existence of spiritual direction and sacramental confession in pastoral practice.

Even though sacramental confession could be considered as part of the “mainstream” practice of the Church, drawing on Barbu’s argument, it has been clearly influenced by the interaction with the monastic practice of spiritual direction. As John McNeill points out, it is the monastic practice of spiritual direction that led to the development of private confession in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.¹⁶ Following the distinction of three periods in the development of “penitential practice” in the Orthodox Church, Job Getcha recognizes that particularly in the third period, which is after the 18th century, confession came to be identified with spiritual direction, particularly evident in the change of the practice of confession compared to preceding periods, primarily in terms of the frequent and private manner of confessions.¹⁷

¹⁵ By sacramental confession we mainly refer to the practice of confession and absolution of sins in the context of repentance, according to the Orthodox rite and tradition, founded on Christ’s words: “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained” (Jn. 20.23).

¹⁶ J. T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (London: SCM Press, 1952), p. 307.

¹⁷ J. Getcha, Confession and Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Church, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 51/2-3 (2007), p. 208.

What has been handed down today in the Orthodox Church, mainly regarding parish ministry, by and large constitutes one unified practice. Both spiritual direction and sacramental confession usually take place in the same setting, ministered by an ordained priest who has received the blessing to confess. Thus, today the parish priest is normally the confessor and the spiritual director of the parish. However, the current formation of the practice has been criticized for giving primary emphasis to sacramental confession at the expense of spiritual direction, which seems to be largely overshadowed or even completely ignored. Especially when the whole process is narrowed down in terms of “absolution” in a juridical manner.¹⁸ We could therefore argue for the need to distinguish between the two practices, and ascribe to each one its actual meaning, scope, and purpose. Acknowledging the differences between the two within the unified practice will benefit both parts of the practice and, hence, will contribute for achieving a more effective spiritual direction in pastoral practice.

One of the main differences is that confession is exclusively ministered by ordained priests, whereas spiritual direction can be ministered by non-ordained persons as well, usually monks or nuns.¹⁹ This is linked to the discussion about the “institutional” and “charismatic” levels in the life of the church, which will also be mentioned below.

Another difference is the scope and objective of the two. As it has been stated, confession is about revealing sinful actions that have already occurred in the past in order to receive absolution.

¹⁸ J. Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2000), p. 28.

¹⁹ K. Ware, Foreword: *The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climacus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian*, pp. xxi-xxii.

On the other hand, spiritual direction is about the manifestation of one's "inner state," which mainly consists in the disclosure of thoughts (*logismoî*), in order to receive proper guidance aiming to achieve progress in spiritual life. The first, according to Kallistos Ware, can be described as retrospective while the latter is regarded as prophylactic, or preventative, since it aims to fight against the causes of sin.²⁰

The issue whether the current setting is indeed proper for spiritual direction has been posed.²¹ We would agree that the sacrament of confession remains an appropriate occasion for spiritual direction, based on the argument that the establishment of "private confession" in the Orthodox Church maintains, at least to some extent, the aspect of personal relationship between the priest confessor and the penitent, allowing some space for spiritual guidance.²² Nevertheless, spiritual direction should not be strictly confined in sacramental confession, and might take place on other occasions as well, when counselling and guidance are needed. From this point of view, spiritual direction is a broader and deeper practice compared to sacramental confession. Although they are distinguished, at the same time they are closely linked and interact together towards the spiritual de-

²⁰ K. Ware, *The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity*, *Cross Currents* 24/2 (1974), p. 302. See also J. J. Allen, *The Inner Way: The Historical Tradition of Spiritual Direction*, p. 268; Getcha, *Confession and Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Church*, p. 215.

²¹ J. J. Allen, *The Inner Way: The Historical Tradition of Spiritual Direction*, p. 265.

²² K. Ware, *The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity*, p. 297. See also J. Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, p. 29; J. A. Jillions, *Spiritual Guidance in Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, p. 258; F. G. Rogers, *Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Christian Tradition*, p. 277.

velopment of each person.²³ Put differently, it has been said that the disclosure of thoughts and the work done in spiritual direction is the precondition for attaining the “fruit,” which is the “absolution” and the “re-entrance” into the church.²⁴ Nonetheless, any description of the interaction between the two should not imply any chronological order between the two practices.

Spiritual direction and confession can also be seen as two inter-related aspects of the one healing process, an idea which resonates with the concept of “soul care” (*cura animarum* in Latin) which embraces both notions of care and cure, thus includes both aspects of nurturing and healing.²⁵ The notion of *metanoia* (true repentance) is central in this healing process. It should be noted that in the Orthodox tradition the notion of the “sacrament of repentance” (*μυστήριο μετανοίας*)²⁶ is often used to describe the whole process which comprises repentance, sacramental confession, absolution and spiritual guidance, a prac-

²³ F. G. Rogers, *Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Christian Tradition*, pp. 276-277.

²⁴ J. J. Allen, *The Inner Way: The Historical Tradition of Spiritual Direction*, pp. 265, 268.

²⁵ G. W. Moon, D. G. Benner, *Spiritual Direction and Christian Soul Care, in Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls: A Guide to Christian Approaches and Practices*, G. W. Moon and D. G. Benner (eds.) (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Eagle Publishing, 2004), p. 23.

²⁶ See S. G. Makris, *Μετανοίας Μυστήριο*, in *Θρησκευτική Και Ηθική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια*, Vol. 8 (Athens: A. Martinos, 1966), pp. 1057-1058; P. Vassiliadis, *Μετάνοια*, in *Μεγάλη Ορθόδοξη Χριστιανική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια*, Vol. 11 (Athens, Greece: Stratigikes Ekdoseis, 2014), pp. 345-347; Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Ποιμαντική της Μετανοίας*, (Apostoliki Diakonia, 1983); A. Gkikas, *Ο Πνευματικός και το Μυστήριο της Μετανοίας*, (Thessaloniki, Greece: Migdonia Publishers, 2nd ed., 2005).

tice that has taken various forms in the life of the Church.²⁷ Based on Orthodox ecclesiology, it should never be understood as a private matter but rather should be seen in a communal perspective.

The point where the two interact and, to some extent, practically coincide, is when personalized guidance is offered in the context of private confession, which maintains the significance of personal relationship of the Orthodox practice compared to the Western tradition.²⁸ However, this is not always true in the modern practice of spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church, which, in a sense, tends to become more “westernized” in terms of undervaluing the significance of personal relationship.

The aspect of personal relationship can also be enhanced through the therapeutic perspective, particularly stressed in the Orthodox tradition.²⁹ In contrast to the “juridical model,” in which sin is understood as the breaking of the law and penance as punishment, mainly related to Western Christianity, and which admittedly had influenced the Orthodox Church at some point,³⁰ the Orthodox tradition maintains the “therapeutic

²⁷ A. Gkikas, *Ο Πνευματικός και το Μυστήριο της Μετανοίας*, pp. 14-16.

²⁸ D. Corcoran, *Spiritual Guidance*, in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff and J. Leclercq (eds.) (London: SCM Press, 1996), p. 445.

²⁹ St. Basil the Great says that sins must be revealed to those who are able to cure them, in the same way we reveal bodily illness to the doctor. St. Basil the Great, *Shorter Rules*, in *PG 31*, 1236. The medical language is also patently expressed in the 102nd Canon of the Sixth Ecumenical Council (691), which gives instructions of “treatment” to the spiritual father as the “spiritual physician” who holds the “healing” power and provides the “remedies.” See G. A. Ralli and M. Potli, *Σύνταγμα των Θείων και Ιερών Κανόνων*, (Vol. 2, Athens, Greece: Grigoris Publications, 1852, (1992 Reprint), pp. 549-550.

³⁰ See J. Getcha, *Confession and Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Church*, p. 210.

model” which considers sin as an illness and the spiritual director as the “doctor.”³¹ Associated with the therapeutic perspective is the principle of *oikonomia* (economy), that is the flexibility in the application of the canons and *epitimia* (penance) according to the needs of each person in the Orthodox practice. In medical terms, the spiritual father should give the proper medication and right analogy, as each person is unique and what works for one person might be harmful for another. In this context, the significance of the virtue of discernment is critical, a quality which is underlined and highly valued³² and relates to the charismatic dimension of the ministry of spiritual fatherhood.³³

Ultimately, for a balanced and proper combination of spiritual direction and confession in the current practice, what plays the key role is the person of the spiritual director. Emphasizing sacramental confession at the expense of spiritual direction in modern practice is undoubtedly linked to the weaknesses of the minister, as it is true that “only a few confessor priests would claim to speak with the former’s [a starets] insight and authori-

³¹ See K. Ware, Foreword: The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climacus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian, p. xii; J. J. Allen, *The Inner Way: The Historical Tradition of Spiritual Direction*, p. 269; J. Getcha, *Confession and Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Church*, pp. 215-216; A. Gkikas, *Ο Πνευματικός και το Μυστήριο της Μετανοίας*, pp. 95-99.

³² See K. Ware, *The Orthodox Experience of Repentance, Sobornost* 2/1 (1980), p. 24; Getcha, *Confession and Spiritual Direction in the Orthodox Church*, p. 216; A. Gkikas, *Ο Πνευματικός και το Μυστήριο της Μετανοίας*, pp. 79-82; Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, pp. 77 ff.

³³ N. Sakharov, *Αγαπώ Άρα Υπάρχω: Η Θεολογική Παρακαταθήκη του Γέροντα Σωφρονίου (I Love Therefore I Am: The Theological Legacy of Archimandrite Sophrony)*, (trans. Christos Makropoulos, Athens, Greece: En Plo Editions, 2007), p. 274.

ty.”³⁴ This issue is inherently linked to the co-existence of institutional and charismatic levels in the practice of spiritual direction.

1.3 Considering the Institutional and Charismatic dialectic

The dialectic between institutional and charismatic, or priestly and prophetic, is emphatically posed when approaching the practice of spiritual direction. The aforementioned intimate relation of sacramental confession and spiritual direction makes the whole issue even more complicated. The particular ministry of spiritual director, based on the traditional figure of a “*starets*” (or *geron*) in the Orthodox understanding, although it remains itself charismatic it is linked to the specific function and office in the church as institution, that of “priest-confessor.”³⁵ Thus, in the person of spiritual director one can recognize the combination of these two levels.³⁶

As it has been already mentioned, according to the Orthodox tradition the minister of the sacrament of confession must be an ordained bishop or priest.³⁷ On the other hand, the spiritual director might not be ordained to the priesthood but might be a simple monk, not in holy orders, or a nun, a lay person, either a woman or a man.³⁸ On the whole, the main criterion for some-

³⁴ K. Ware, *The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity*, p. 297.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 297.

³⁶ J. Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, p. 49.

³⁷ Since sacramental priesthood in the Orthodox Church is only ascribed to men, any discussion regarding gender issues is beyond the scope of this study.

³⁸ Although women cannot get sacramental priesthood, they are by no means considered inferior to men with regard to spiritual direction. Personal holiness becomes the main criterion and, therefore, we may speak of “spiritual motherhood” in cases that spiritual direction is offered by women. In the tradition together with “*abbas*” there are ex-

one to take on this ministry is mainly personal holiness and the experience of the Holy Spirit. This has been a matter of dispute between the East and the West, as the latter stressed the importance of the spiritual director to be in priestly orders, whereas the former gave primary focus on one's spiritual gifts. Hence, spiritual directors outside ordained clergy carried on as an option for many centuries in the Orthodox Church.³⁹ The expression "*pater pneumatikos*" (spiritual father) ascribed to the spiritual director in the Orthodox Church derives from this very understanding of the spiritual qualities of that person.⁴⁰ This is also stressed in the selection of the priest-confessors, as the right to confess is always granted by the bishop, a practice still followed in the Orthodox Church today. Ordination to the priesthood does not imply any automatic, as it were, ability or authority for a priest to offer spiritual direction, which should be given by the bishop to certain priests who are suitable and spiritually qualified for this ministry.⁴¹

With reference to institutional and charismatic levels, any understanding of an opposition between the two did not exist in the past but has been posed by modern scholarship,⁴² such as the conflict between "charisma" and "traditional authority,"⁴³ or

amples of "ammas". Ware, *The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity*, p. 297. See also Ware, Foreword: *The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climacus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian*, p. x.

³⁹ J. J. Allen, *The Inner Way: The Historical Tradition of Spiritual Direction*, p. 260.

⁴⁰ J. T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls*, p. 307. See also J. J. Allen, *The Inner Way: The Historical Tradition of Spiritual Direction*, p. 260.

⁴¹ K. Ware, *The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity*, p. 297; Christoforos Stavropoulos, *Ποιμαντική της Μετανοίας*, p. 159.

⁴² I. Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, p. 40.

⁴³ J. Scott and G. Marshall, Charisma, in *A Dictionary of Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

the “prophet” against the “priest,”⁴⁴ found in the works of Max Weber. Affirming such a conflict between the “charismatic” and the “institutional” can lead to an antagonism in the sense that the “saint” is always opposed to the institutional hierarchy, which is clearly not the case in the Orthodox Church, particularly in relation to the practice of spiritual direction, as a bishop or a priest may also be a spiritual father and a saint.⁴⁵

Interestingly, the idea of such tension between “institution” and “charisma” concerning spiritual direction and confession is found in the works of St. Symeon the New Theologian, specifically in the *Letter on Confession*.⁴⁶ According to the text, the authority to “bind and loose” is not a matter of ordination to the priesthood but remains the exclusive right only for those who have attained purity and personal holiness. Consequently, Symeon says that bishops or priests who are lacking this experience have deprived themselves of the power to confess, which is passed on to charismatic non-ordained monks.⁴⁷

The opinion presented in this text constitutes a noticeable exception from what is generally accepted in the Orthodox tradition,⁴⁸ which from a doctrinal-ecclesiological point of view can be considered rather dangerous.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, as Kallistos

⁴⁴ R. Gill, *Theology and Sociology: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 36-37.

⁴⁵ K. Ware, Foreword: The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climacus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian, p. vii.

⁴⁶ H. J. M. Turner, *The Epistles of St Symeon the New Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴⁷ K. Ware, Foreword: The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climacus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian, p. xxi.

⁴⁸ L. Barbu, Pastoral Care as Spiritual Direction, p. 21, note 54; J. J. Allen, *The Inner Way: The Historical Tradition of Spiritual Direction*, p. 261, note 12.

⁴⁹ J. Van Rossum, Priesthood and Confession in St. Symeon the New Theologian, *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 20/4 (1976), p. 224.

Ware explains, it should be seen in a pastoral and not in a doctrinal perspective, and that Symeon's main effort was an appeal to his contemporary clergy.⁵⁰ Likewise, Van Rossum comments that "we have to understand his 'anti-hierarchical' texts as *prophetic warnings* against too easy conception of the high office of the priesthood."⁵¹ Symeon had no intention to undervalue ordination to the priesthood, in fact his respect is expressed in the same text and any suspicion is dissolved by the fact that he himself was a priest.⁵²

In relation to the conflict between institution and charisma, John Zizioulas explains that even though we can recognize the existence of a conflict between hierarchy and monasticism at some periods of the history of the Church, as representatives of institution and charisma respectively, mystical experience was never an exclusive characteristic of the latter. Any reference to mystical experience in the past did not refer to an extraordinary event but it was part and parcel of the life of the Church as a whole, including the institutional aspect.⁵³ Therefore, there is no clear demarcation between institutional and charismatic in church life in general, and especially concerning the ministry of "spiritual father." Nevertheless, the "institutional-clerical paradigm" of spiritual direction that has prevailed in the Orthodox Church today, inherently related to Orthodox ecclesiology and sacraments, should never lead to a devaluation of the "charismatic" dimension of the qualities of that particular person,

⁵⁰ K. Ware, Foreword: The Spiritual Father in Saint John Climacus and Saint Symeon the New Theologian, pp. xx, xxii.

⁵¹ J. Van Rossum, Priesthood and Confession in St. Symeon the New Theologian, p. 224.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 224.

⁵³ J. D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, P. McPartlan (ed.) (London: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 287-288.

which must always be taken into serious account when choosing and appointing a priest to this specific and vital ministry. As Barbu puts it,

“the ministry of spiritual fatherhood ideally combines sacramental priesthood (which bestows the apostolic power to ‘bind and loose’ in the name and through the power of God) together with various charisms (discernment above all – gifts endowed by God, yet embellished by one’s ascetic experience). It is true that this ideal does not always match reality, but the model sets a high standard for what is expected in pastoral ministry.”⁵⁴

2 Towards a more Effective Practice of Spiritual Direction

2.1 A Trinitarian Perspective of the Relationship between Spiritual Father and Child

“What was such an elder? An elder was one who took your soul, your will, into his soul and his will. When you choose an elder, you renounce your own will and yield it to him in complete submission, complete selfabnegation. This novitiate, this terrible school of abnegation, is undertaken voluntarily, in the hope of self-conquest, of self-mastery, in order, after a life of obedience, to attain perfect freedom, that is, from self; to escape the lot of those who have lived their whole life without finding their true selves in themselves.”⁵⁵

In these words, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, most probably reflecting on his own personal experience, offers a great description of

⁵⁴ L. Barbu, *Spiritual Formation as an Art*, *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 9/1 (2012), p. 29.

⁵⁵ F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Dover Publications, 2012), p. 53.

spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church and touches upon the issue of the relationship between the spiritual director and the directee, or better said spiritual father and child, which is indeed crucial for the effectiveness of the practice.

Unfortunately, as it has been observed, in modern society the notion of “spiritual fatherhood” has been largely forgotten, mainly due to a false understanding of fatherhood, which is mainly realized in terms of oppression.⁵⁶ Undoubtedly, there is great responsibility on the side of the Church as well, more precisely the clergy, as a distorted concept of spiritual fatherhood is often unsuitably witnessed in the life of the Church. As Christos Yannaras points out, the “institution of spiritual fatherhood and discerning guidance bears no relation to the moral psychological ‘paternalism’ towards the conscience of others”, so often found today.⁵⁷ Misuse of authority from the side of the spiritual director, unfortunately a sorrowful reality in the life of the Church and undoubtedly a deeply problematic situation, often develops either due to the lack of appropriate Orthodox theological principles or based on a misinterpretation and idealization of monastic tradition.⁵⁸

It could be thus argued that a theological framework that would underpin the practice of spiritual direction is essential, especially focused on the aspect of the relationship between spiritu-

⁵⁶ G. I. Mantzarides, *Ορθόδοξη Πνευματική Ζωή*, (Thessaloniki, Greece: Pournaras, 2nd ed., 1993), p. 54.

⁵⁷ C. Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, (trans. Elizabeth Briere, Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), p. 157.

⁵⁸ As John Chryssavgis comments: “While imposing their authority, they may attempt to justify their un-Christlike behavior on the premise of a ‘spirituality’ of the cross. A dysfunctional relationship is thus ‘rationalized’ as they become ‘crucifiers.’ They may argue that the ‘self-will’ of a spiritual child must be broken so that he or she may progress spiritually.” J. Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, p. 124.

al director and directee, in order to eliminate any deviations with regard to the practice of spiritual direction and safeguard, as it were, its effectiveness. In this perspective, modern Orthodox theologians have urged for a rediscovery of the Orthodox Trinitarian perspective of fatherhood,⁵⁹ in relation to spiritual direction as well.⁶⁰ According to George Mantzarides, spiritual fatherhood and sonship should be based on the model of the relationship between the Father and the incarnate Son.⁶¹ For John Zizioulas, the relational character of the Trinity founded on the person of God the Father offers an appropriate analogy for spiritual fatherhood,⁶² based not on natural laws but on *love* and *freedom* which constitute God's very being.⁶³

"[T]he unlimited self-offering of the love of the Father to the Son and the unlimited self-abandonment of the Son to the will of the Father" can delineate the ideal relationship between the spiritual director and directee in the framework of spiritual direction.⁶⁴ In this perspective, there is no place for an "authoritative" or "oppressive" understanding. This does not mean, however, that there is no order or hierarchy in this type of rela-

⁵⁹ O. Clément, Purification by Atheism, in *Orthodoxy and the Death of God: Essays in Contemporary Theology*, A. M. Allchin (ed.) (Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1971), p. 34.

⁶⁰ J. Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, p. 104.

⁶¹ G. I. Mantzarides, *Ορθόδοξη Πνευματική Ζωή*, p. 55.

⁶² J. D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 122.

⁶³ J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), p. 41. As Christos Yannaras points out, "[w]hen the Christian revelation declares that 'God is love' (1 John 4:16), it is not referring to one among many properties of God's 'behavior,' but to what God *is* as the fulness of trinitarian and personal communion." Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, p. 18. See also L. Barbu, Spiritual Fatherhood as Symbol of Divine Fatherhood, *Revista Portuguesa De Filosofia* 69/2 (2013), p. 261.

⁶⁴ G. I. Mantzarides, *Ορθόδοξη Πνευματική Ζωή*, p. 55.

tionship. As Zizioulas explains, “the Church becomes *hierarchical* in the sense in which the Holy Trinity itself is hierarchical: by reason of the *specificity of relationship*,” based on the specific attributes of each person in the Trinity.⁶⁵ The principle of the monarchy of the Father as the “cause” of the Trinity does not create any tensions but, on the contrary, constitutes the cornerstone for a relational ontology in the Trinity.⁶⁶ It can be thus argued that the spiritual father legitimately holds some sort of primacy or control over the relationship established within the framework of spiritual direction, but again this can only be realized within the context of a personal relationship based on freedom and love, according to the Trinitarian model. Orthodox Trinitarian theology affirms the communion and at the same time the uniqueness of the persons in the Trinity.⁶⁷ Based on the fundamental anthropological principle, that human beings are created according to the “*image of God*,” the Trinitarian “mode of existence” can be paralleled to that of humanity,⁶⁸ as each human being shares the same common nature with other human beings, with common characteristics, but at

⁶⁵ J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 223.

⁶⁶ A. Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 90.

⁶⁷ J. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 9: “The Father cannot be conceived for a single moment without the Son and the Spirit, and the same applies to the other two persons in their relation with the Father and with each other. At the same time, each of these persons is so unique that their hypostatic or personal properties are totally incommunicable from one person to another.” See also Daniel Munteanu, God the Father - Spring of Everlasting Love and Life: Trinitarian Impulses for a Culture of Peace and Healing Communication, *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 1/1 (2010), pp. 156-158.

⁶⁸ N. Sakharov, *Αγαπή Άρα Υπάρχω: Η Θεολογική Παρακαταθήκη του Γέροντα Σωφρονίου*, p. 290.

the same time each human being is unique.⁶⁹ The “mode of existence” of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit affirms that “being in communion” ultimately identifies with the concept of “person,” which validates that personhood exists only in the framework of communion with other persons.⁷⁰

Orthodox theology has made a profound contribution to contemporary debate about *personhood* by offering a unique perspective of the human person based on the communion with others.⁷¹ As Zizioulas explains, “[t]he person is an identity that emerges through relationship (*schesis*, in the terminology of the Greek Fathers); it is an “I” that can exist only as long as it relates to a “thou” which affirms its existence and its otherness. If we isolate the “I” from the “thou” we lose not only its otherness but also its very being; it simply cannot be without the other.”⁷² In other words, to be a person ultimately means that this can only happen in communion with other persons. “To be” and “to be in relation” have come to mean exactly the same thing and signify the concept of ontological personhood, which identifies with theosis and salvation,⁷³ and consequently constitutes a primary aim of spiritual direction.

A very important point made by Zizioulas is that “it is the ministry that more than anything else renders the Church a *relational* reality, i.e. a mystery of love, reflecting here and now the very

⁶⁹ Chr. Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, p. 21.

⁷⁰ J. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 9; Chr. Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, p. 22.

⁷¹ Paul Collins is right to point out the great contribution of John Zizioulas in bringing the Orthodox tradition into contemporary debate regarding the concepts of person and personhood. Paul M. Collins, *Trinitarian Theology, West and East: Karl Barth, the Cappadocian Fathers, and John Zizioulas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 143.

⁷² J. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 9.

⁷³ J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 49-50.

life of the trinitarian God.”⁷⁴ We could claim that this can be experienced in the context of spiritual direction *par excellence*, due to the intimate personal relationship established in this context. The trinitarian perspective stresses the vital importance of the quality of the relationship between the spiritual father and child, and, in effect, restores the Orthodox traditional understanding for this kind of relationship.⁷⁵

An associated issue is the fundamental principle of obedience, which should always be implemented in this trinitarian perspective of a personal relationship, based on love and freedom, otherwise it loses its meaning and purpose.⁷⁶ The aspect of obedience to the spiritual father is not merely a monastic concept as most people may understand it today, but it should be maintained in both lay and monastic contexts of spiritual direction, albeit in different forms. Its major significance has already been pointed out in the words of Dostoyevsky, in his description above. Obedience always goes hand in hand with freedom, although it seems to be a contradiction in terms. When a person breaks her or his own will for the sake of the other person, then we may speak of a *perichoretic* and *kenotic* interpersonal relationship, according to the Trinitarian model,⁷⁷ and thus of the achievement of true freedom.⁷⁸ In this fashion, the communion between spiritual father and child expands, as it were, and it

⁷⁴ Ibidem, p. 220.

⁷⁵ As Barsanuphius says: “I care for you more than you do yourself.” Barsanuphius and John, *Letters* (trans. John Chryssavgis, Vol. 1, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), p. 55 (Letter 39).

⁷⁶ J. Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, p. 52.

⁷⁷ N. Sakharov, *Αγαπώ Άρα Υπάρχω: Η Θεολογική Παρακαταθήκη του Γέροντα Σωφρονίου*, pp. 289-290.

⁷⁸ J. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 303.

becomes truly “trinitarian,” including God as the third person in this personal relationship.⁷⁹

2.2 Re-emphasizing the Role of the Spiritual Father

Through the lens of trinitarian theology, the whole understanding of the relationship between the spiritual father and child is transformed and the notion of “fatherhood” acquire its proper meaning, especially with regard to the contribution of the former to the spiritual development of the latter. Hence, trinitarian theology refers to the effectiveness of the practice, particularly from the side and responsible role of the spiritual father. The role of spiritual director in this relationship is indeed critical and as well as practical. This is where the “primacy” of spiritual father actually comes into play, conceived as responsibility of transmitting a spiritual experience that he is supposed to have already acquired in the process of personal spiritual formation. In the words of Yannaras, “[t]he Christian comes to know the life of the Church embodied in the person of his [or her] spiritual father, and becomes attuned to his asceticism, to his prayer.”⁸⁰

What the spiritual director gives to the directee is not a set of advices, regulations or techniques but a personal relationship.⁸¹ This is chiefly an experiential process, or better said, as Yannaras puts it, a “living event” in which the “Christian is ‘led by the hand’ into knowledge, prayer and asceticism – into the life and truth of the Church,” a transmission of experience and

⁷⁹ N. Sakharov, *Αγαπώ Άρα Υπάρχω: Η Θεολογική Παρακαταθήκη του Γέροντα Σωφρονίου*, p. 274.

⁸⁰ Chr. Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, p. 156.

⁸¹ K. Ware, *The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity*, p. 309; Chr. Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 156-157.

knowledge always applied in love and received in humility.⁸² Nevertheless, the spiritual director needs to understand that in this process both are growing and changing and that both are being guided by God,⁸³ that both participate in this “mutual seeking.”⁸⁴ Therefore, as it has been eloquently said, they are both “subject to the same conditions and commandments, both accountable before living God. The two are travelling together, though they may not be on equal footing.”⁸⁵

The process of acquiring and transmitting spiritual experience resonates with the concept of *habitus* in *Practical Theology*, which emphasizes the significance of the qualities of the spiritual director. This concept is concerned with the degree of perfection that the practitioner has achieved, which in turn affects the excellence of the practice.⁸⁶ Also, the concept of *habitus* emphasizes the importance of spiritual life, virtues and maturity of the minister.⁸⁷ In this point, the issue of selecting, training, and appointing a spiritual director inevitably emerges. Certainly, training is not merely acquiring relevant knowledge, but should also be concerned with the spiritual formation of the director himself, an experiential process of attaining the proper qualities and virtues which are presupposed for the ministry of

⁸² *Ibidem*, p. 157.

⁸³ K. Ware, *The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity*, p. 309.

⁸⁴ K. Leech, *Soul Friend: Spiritual Direction in the Modern World*, p. 30.

⁸⁵ J. Chryssavgis, *Soul Mending: The Art of Spiritual Direction*, p. 79.

⁸⁶ D. B. Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 4-5.

⁸⁷ P. Ballard, J. Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*, (London: SPCK, 2nd ed., 2006), pp. 74-75.

spiritual fatherhood.⁸⁸ As Ballard and Pritchard point out, “ministerial training is essentially about developing the Christian character. This will involve a realistic self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses, of gifts and limitations to be offered in pastoral service. It will mean developing habits of prayer and devotion which enable the centre of one’s being to hold firm in God.”⁸⁹ This is also practically linked to the spiritual director’s own experience of having an established personal relationship with a more experienced spiritual father.⁹⁰ As Hausherr comments, “it is impossible even to study and practise it without paying attention to the lessons and examples of a teacher who has mastered this art of arts. It is important for us to see what the great masters of easter spirituality have to say about this. With impressive unanimity, they call for a perfect preparation before allowing anyone to deal with direction.”⁹¹

On the whole, we could argue that the quality and effectiveness of the practice of spiritual direction is, to a great extent, determined by the quality of the spiritual director. This point, in our opinion, should be the basis for any endeavour towards a proper engagement and, ultimately, a renewal of the practice of spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church today.

⁸⁸ See A. Gkikas, *Ο Πνευματικός και το Μυστήριο της Μετανοίας*, pp. 61-82. See also I. Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, pp. 51 ff.

⁸⁹ P. Ballard, J. Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*, p. 75.

⁹⁰ A. Gkikas, *Ο Πνευματικός Και Το Μυστήριο Της Μετανοίας*, pp. 71-72.

⁹¹ I. Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East*, p. 53.

Conclusions

When approaching spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church today, a clear understanding of the practice is essential. It is necessary to distinguish between the practices of spiritual direction and sacramental confession, in the current unified practice. The fusion of the two practices in modern practice is also related to the fact that spiritual direction is mainly ministered by an ordained priest-confessor and it is offered, at least in parish ministry, in the same setting with the sacrament of confession. The fact that the minister of spiritual direction normally is, or at least should be, both ordained and qualified spiritually, also points towards the combination of the institutional and charismatic dimensions in the practice of spiritual direction.

Towards a more effective practice of spiritual direction today, we particularly focused on the issue of the personal relationship between spiritual director and directee. In this context, a theological reflection based on trinitarian theology is proposed, as the proper theological framework to underpin this relationship and, hence, the actual practice. Orthodox trinitarian theology declares that the Holy Trinity is a communion of persons and that the being of God is inherently relational. Thus, intra-trinitarian relations, founded on love and freedom, can be normative for the establishment of the relationship between spiritual father and child. Furthermore, trinitarian perspective enhances the concept of “spiritual fatherhood” and emphatically stresses the crucial role of spiritual father, both theologically and practically, for a proper engagement and, ultimately, a renewal of the practice of spiritual direction in the Orthodox Church today.