



What is accompaniment? What are the particulars of this encounter between seeker and mentor?

Accompaniment for discernment

BY NATURE, THE APOSTOLATE of accompaniment is a rich, fertile ground for the discernment of decisions. Through the accompanying relationship, mentors provide a space of hospitality and charity for those accompanied to be their authentic selves, grow in love and imitation of Christ, identify their individual gifts and talents, recognize the desires of their heart, and determine concrete steps for following the voice of Christ. In their relationship with the mentor, the ones accompanied contemplate both small and large decisions that affect their life and vocation. Like Eli helps interpret the experience of Samuel being called by the voice of the Lord in the temple (1 Samuel 3:1-10), so too does the mentor assist the one they accompany in recognizing the voice of the Lord and actively responding to it. Emboldened by the wisdom of the mentor in the path of discernment, the one accompanied is able to respond to the call of Christ: “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10).

Accompaniment during a process of discernment not only seeks growth in faith, but also serves the objective of discerning a particular choice. The choices that accompaniment can fruitfully address include decisions as large as discerning entering the seminary or religious life, deciding whether to get married, or discerning a vocation to the single life. The large, major choices that can be discerned through accompani-

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ment need not be explicitly religious, but can also involve major decisions, such as choosing a college or career path, taking a new job, or considering a move to a new city. In all of these major questions, the mentor serves as a guide and friend, offering wisdom, direction, insight, and affirmation in the other's search for the voice of the Lord.

In addition to the major or vocational questions that require discernment, the apostolate of accompaniment can also serve in a more general development of the gift of discernment in the life of those accompanied. Accompaniment can provide formation that attunes the spiritual senses of the one accompanied, helping him or her hear the voice of the Lord in the everyday realities of life. In addition to major life decisions, accompaniment fosters active contemplation of the will of God through ordinary means.

Discernment is necessary not only at extraordinary times, when we need to resolve grave problems and make crucial decisions. It is a means of spiritual combat for helping us to follow the Lord more faithfully. We need it at all times, to help us recognize God's timetable, lest we fail to heed the promptings of grace and disregard God's invitation to grow. Often discernment is exercised in small and apparently irrelevant things, since greatness of spirit is manifested in simple everyday realities. It involves striving untrammelled for all that is great, better, and more beautiful, while at the same time being concerned for the little things, for each day's responsibilities and commitments (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 169).

To this end, the mentor assists the one accompanied in the discernment of the everyday, in emotions, experiences, passions, interests, relationships, actions, and desires. This "little" discernment lays the foundation for the path of holiness, on which the one accompanied can more clearly hear the voice of Christ and follow him as a disciple in every aspect of life.

Accompaniment for both "large" and "small" discernment can be implemented in any context. Seminar-ies, houses of formation, and lay formation programs might particularly benefit from accompaniment for discernment in which a more experienced person introduces the one accompanied to the lifestyle of the vocation. Parishes, Catholic universities, campus ministries, or any situation in which youth are supported by a stable network, are contexts in which this style of discernment might be useful.

Functions of a mentor

The Final Document of the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment states:

Spiritual accompaniment is intended to help people integrate step by step the various dimensions of their lives so as to follow the Lord Jesus. In this process three elements can be identified: listening of life, encounter with Jesus and mysterious dialogue between God's freedom and that of the individual.... In personal spiritual accompaniment one learns to recognize, interpret and choose from the perspective of faith, listening to the Spirit's promptings within the life of every day.

From these statements, the principal functions of a mentor within the apostolate of accompaniment take shape. The mentor's overall task is assisting the one they accompany in the integration of his or her life into one vision which maintains focus on Jesus Christ. This integration is cultivated through five components of a mentor's apostolate: fostering a space of listening, providing spiritual guidance that leads towards an encounter with Christ, interpreting experience, Spirit-filled evangelizing, and fearless healing.

Fostering a space of patient listening

The foremost task of the mentor is to provide the one he or she accompanies with a presence of patient listening. The practice of listening is "an encounter in freedom, which requires humility, patience, readiness to understand, and a commitment to formulate the answers in a new way" (Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, 6). To foster a space of patient listening within the relationship of accompaniment, mentors relate to the ones they accompany with patience, love, respect, non-judgment, and fidelity. Listening is transformative and reflects the way in which God interacts with and ministers to people:

Listening transforms the hearts of those who do it, especially when it takes place with an interior disposition of harmony and docility to the Spirit. So it is not just a gathering of information, nor is it a strategy for achieving a goal, but it is the manner in which God himself relates to his people. God sees the wretchedness of his people and he hears their cry, he is deeply moved and he comes down to deliver

THE ART OF ACCOMPANIMENT

“The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this “art of accompaniment” which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other.”

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*

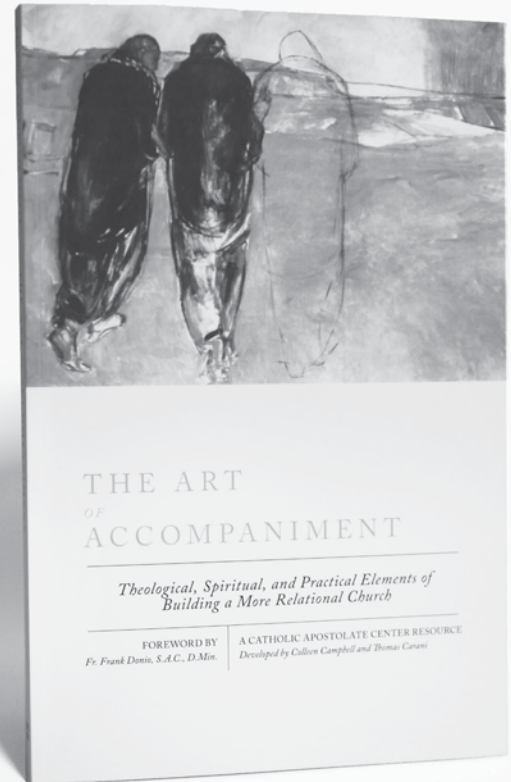
This new resource examines methods to engage future parish leaders through spiritual accompaniment based on the Church’s rich pastoral tradition of accompanying its members.

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them.... The Church, through listening, enters into the movement of God who, in his Son, comes close to every human being (Final Document of the Synod on Youth, Faith, and Vocation Discernment, 6).

The practice of patient listening allows mentors to walk with the one they accompany through the person’s experiences, receptively pondering the mysteries of life, seeking to hear the voice of the Spirit. In listening patiently to the one they accompany, the mentors give the gift of their presence, allowing people to be heard in a deep way:

Listening makes possible an exchange of gifts in a context of empathy. It allows young people to make their own contribution to the community, helping it to grasp new sensitivities and to consider new questions. At the same time it sets the conditions for a proclamation of the Gospel that can truly touch the heart, incisively and fruitfully (Final Document of the Synod on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment, 8).

Like Christ’s example on the Road to Emmaus, listening in the apostolate of accompaniment makes possi-

ble the conditions for the recognition of Christ as Savior.

Practically, mentors foster a space for patient listening within the relationship of accompaniment by establishing familiarity with the ones they accompany, asking questions about the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of their life, meeting them where they are by understanding their frame of reference, carrying out their own call with respect and sensitivity, and honoring the relationship of accompaniment through appropriate boundaries and levels of confidentiality (*The Road to Emmaus and the Art of Accompaniment* presented by Father Frank Donio, S.A.C., 31 May 2018).

Spiritual guidance toward encounter

The apostolate of accompaniment refers to a shared journey between mentor and the one accompanied; this journey has a definitive destination and purposeful orientation. Because accompaniment is not aimless wandering, it requires that a mentor be equipped to provide spiritual guidance that fosters an encounter with Jesus Christ. Accompaniment helps those accompanied articulate and act on the holy desire for Christ:

In many ways, the young people of today are saying to us: ‘We wish to see Jesus’ (John 12:21), thus manifesting the healthy restlessness that characterizes the heart of every human being: ‘the restlessness of spiritual seeking, the restlessness of the encounter with God, the restlessness of love’ (Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment, 50).

Therefore, the apostolate of the mentor always serves to promote an encounter with Christ for the one they are accompanying. Through spiritual guidance in the ordinary and extraordinary components of life, the mentor is tasked with assisting the one they accompany in identifying situations where Christ invites them into deeper relationship with him. Mentors help those accompanied attune their spiritual vision to see Christ in the circumstances of their career, interactions with their family, partnership with their significant other, needs of the community, and their own development towards Christian maturity.

Mentors practically make a space for encountering Christ within the relationship of accompaniment through praying with the one accompanied, introducing the person to formative spiritual practices, reflecting on human experience with the person through the light of the Gospel, and assisting the individual in discerning decisions.

Interpreter of experience

Like data for a scientist or marble for a sculptor, the material for spiritual accompaniment is human experience—the living account of what it means and feels like to be a human person in a particular context in a specific period of historical time. In the accompanying relationship, one main role of the mentor is assisting in interpreting this human experience in light of the Gospel in order to discover the movements of the Spirit at work. As “the locus for the manifestation and realization of salvation,” (General Directory for Catechesis, #152) the human experience of the one accompanied sheds light on the call of the Spirit at work in his or her life. For the person of faith, human experience is where the Gospel is actualized and embodied, making present the Paschal Mystery in the life of a human being. In seeing the Paschal Mystery present in personal human experience, faith-filled people come to know the action of God and God’s plan for them in the ordinary and extraordinary events of their life. Therefore, human experience is a method by which people can mature in their faith, dis-

cern their vocation, grow in awareness of God’s action, and love in their life and throughout human history, and ask questions regarding their vocation in God’s plan for salvation. This is the work of the mentor in interpreting the human experience: assisting the one accompanied “to accept the invitation of the Holy Spirit to conversion, to commitment, to hope, and to discover more and more in his life God’s plan for him” (General Directory for Catechesis, #152).

Mentors and the ones they accompany labor together toward this practice of interpretation in the relationship of accompaniment, a space that is well-suited for this component of accompaniment because of its intentional and committed nature. Through the mutual and prayerful reflection upon events, situations, and relationships in the life of the one accompanied, the mentor and the one accompanied let the wisdom of the Gospel and Christian tradition speak to the questions and sentiments that arise from being human—creating a space for dialogue regarding “the correlation and interaction between profound human experiences and the revealed message” (General Directory for Catechesis, #152).

Through the assistance of the perspective of the mentor, the one accompanied evaluates, tests, and discerns the components of his or her experience, listening for the guidance of the Spirit. With the words and images brought forth by the Gospel and Christian tradition, the one accompanied is thus able to advance spiritually and respond prudently to the invitations and promptings of the Holy Spirit—recognizing and naming these movements in his or her personal life.

For a mentor to be properly disposed to interpret experience, he or she must be knowledgeable regarding Scripture, tradition, discernment, cultural sensitivity, and basic human psychology. To acquire the skills necessary for this practice, mentors must exercise active listening, learn basic skills in spiritual direction, and be supported by a cohort of others who are engaged in the apostolate of spiritual accompaniment.

Spirit-filled evangelizer

Because of his or her own encounter with Christ and zeal for mission, the mentor is filled with the Holy Spirit and well-disposed to accompany and send the accompanied out on mission. As they share the journey of the Christian life with the one accompanied, mentors evangelize the accompanied by fostering an encounter with Christ in daily life, drawing connections between the Gospel message and everyday experiences, and en-

couraging the accompanied toward ongoing conversion to Christ through the relationship of accompaniment. Spirit-filled evangelization of the one accompanied occurs also because of the mentor's example and witness. In accompaniment, a mentor must also testify to his or her own love for and experience of Jesus Christ, both explicitly by sharing personal experiences of faith, but also implicitly through friendship with the one they accompany. In facilitating accompaniment, the mentor strives to invite the one accompanied more closely into the community of the church in order to empower him or her to be a missionary disciple: "This missionary vision cannot be accomplished without shared effort by the whole church community" (*Living as Missionary Disciples*, 2).

In evangelizing the ones they accompany, mentors assist in strengthening their bond to the church; to strengthen this bond, the mentor encourages them to participate in the sacramental life, use their gifts to build up the church in unique ways, share the intentions and responsibilities of the mission of the church, and take an active role in their identity as an evangelizer.

Though accompaniment has varied applications and several objectives, Spirit-filled evangelization is its core component. If the mentor properly accompanies by first evangelizing them, those accompanied will be formed to take an active role in the mission of evangelization. As *Living as Missionary Disciples* details, the one accompanied who experiences life-giving formation and transformation in Christ through accompaniment is formed to be an evangelizer:

After reflecting, praying, and experiencing a deep conversion and renewed confidence in the gospel message, a follower of Christ goes outward to evangelize others. The evangelized becomes the evangelizer. This involves outreach to those inactive in their faith, as well as embracing the mission *ad gentes* (to the nations). A community of renewed believers continues to go outward, ultimately leading to the evangelization of society and culture. Evangelizing the culture furthermore involves bringing the gift of *communio* (communion) to secularism, relativism, materialism, and individualism (*Living As Missionary Disciples*, 8).

Fearless healer

Paramount to a fruitful apostolate of accompaniment is the mentor's love, acceptance, and welcome of the one he

or she accompanies. Regardless of challenging or uncertain circumstances in which the one accompanied finds him or herself, a mentor is fearless by being unafraid to encounter the person in these contexts despite messiness, confusion, or chaos of life. A mentor who offers this presence to the one they accompany heals through providing a space in which to meet along the Christian journey. In this sense, mentors are not responsible themselves for healing the one accompanied but are responsible for fostering healing conditions in the relationship. These conditions provide the one accompanied a solid foundation on which to begin active seeking of the Lord. A healing space is not only one that welcomes and respects circumstances of those accompanied, but is one where truth is freely welcomed. To provide a space of healing, the mentor is also unafraid to challenge the one accompanied with pastoral and fraternal correction. To be a fearless healer, the mentor must accept the responsibility to foster a relationship in which Christ can be easily found both in a welcoming and loving hospitality and in the awareness and movement toward the truth.

On the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), Jesus demonstrates creating a space of fearless healing. Jesus first provides a space in which the disciples can freely express their fears and questions. In walking alongside the disciples in their disillusionment, Jesus models a way of ministry that is human: embodied, relational, and derived from experience. This moment of compassion, charity, and listening allows the disciples to trust Jesus, know and believe in his investment in them, and open their hearts to his teaching. Because he chooses to accept the frame of reference in which the disciples find themselves instead of admonishing or correcting them immediately, Jesus forms the disciples for their mission by creating a space for healing in his relationship with them.

Concretely a mentor becomes a fearless healer in cultivating a willingness to walk with the one being accompanied in complex or difficult life situations, practicing a pastoral attitude concerning items of a sensitive or difficult nature, holding space for both non-judgment and fraternal correction when appropriate, becoming knowledgeable about outside resources that can assist the one accompanied in finding greater overall healing, and carrying out the accompanying relationship with both a spirit of prayer and action ("Spiritual Accompaniment of High School Students," presentation, Donio).

Young people have asked for accompaniment in their spiritual journeys. May all who walk the path of accompaniment encounter the fruits to be found along the way. ■