



## ***Spiritual Direction***

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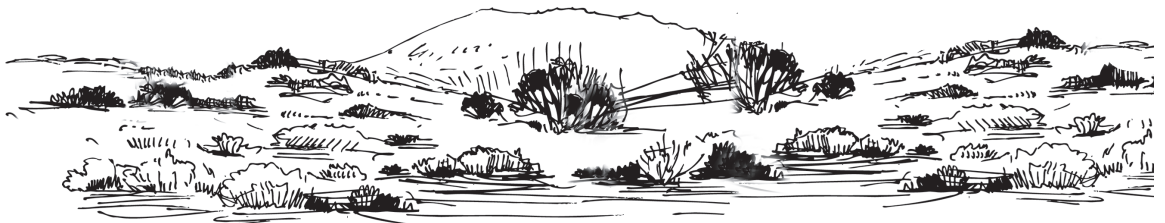
**T**he art of Christian spiritual direction traces its roots to the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, and Persia. Having left the noise of the cities to live in solitude, and seeking community with others who believed as they did, the Desert Elders recognized the need for the ongoing guidance of the Spirit. Each one's desire was to be attentive to God's movement in his or her life and to the inner motivations that lead a person closer to or further from God's truth. Their example continues to provide encouragement for women and men today to seek respite from the demands they encounter and restore a life of prayer.

Practitioners of modern-day spiritual direction, seekers and those who offer it, are looking for the same kind of freedom and peace as the Desert Elders. The quest for spiritual direction also is a search for the desert paradise that theologian Thomas Merton considered "a liberation," a kind of permanent "vacation." This "vacation" is the original sense of "emptying," in which we discard the useless and tedious baggage

of vain concerns and devote ourselves to the one thing Merton said was really *necessary*: "the quest for meaning and for love, the quest for our own identity."

The search for identity and the potentially helpful role of spiritual direction has come more and more into focus for me as I grow in my understanding of scrupulosity. I also have a better understanding of what is helpful and what is not so helpful in the management of the disorder. I am learning to distinguish between what enables and energizes the disorder and what essential practices repair and redirect the useless energy that scrupulosity generates. I understand that engaging in the traditional practice of seeking qualified and understanding spiritual direction is a beneficial option for those who desire to manage personal scrupulosity. Those seeking this option prefer seeking meaning, love, and identity rather than the useless, pervasive experiences of fear and anxiety.

The first and essential step for a person who desires to engage in helpful spiritual direction and who suffers from scrupulosity is filled with risk. It can seem lonely



and perilous for a person to engage his or her disorder in a manner designed to bring healing. It is as fearful as standing on a cliff and jumping into the unknown. It means coming face to face with the *fear* of sin, rejecting the anxiety it brings, and instead embracing the truth of what scrupulosity is: a disorder that severely limits the individual person's capacity for freedom of choice. When a person chooses to embrace this paradigm and reject the notion of all-present sin, he or she is effectively choosing love of God and love of self. Such love is defined as believing you were created by God as a loving person who is able to love and be loved.

A good spiritual director can be immensely helpful in providing the necessary personal support that enables the scrupulous person to focus on what is important rather than what is distracting. A good spiritual director will help you make the necessary choices to steer clear of any path that leads to more fear and anxiety and keep you firmly focused on the integrity of who you are as a person. A good spiritual director will help you sort through all of the voices that seem to demand your attention and focus only on the single voice of God.

Also, know that a spiritual director can only be your companion and supporter. The director cannot make the choices you need to make. The director can stand with you as you confront your fear and your terrible anxiety, but he or she cannot feel the pain for you. A director can be an emotional supporter and can encourage you, but he or she cannot take away the pain and the discomfort that the disorder brings.

However, just knowing you are loved and supported in your struggle by another human being lessens the burden. The presence of a spiritual director helps remove two significant obstacles to healing that many scrupulous people encounter: isolation and loneliness. A good spiritual director will stand with you in the light and encourage you to accept the warmth and good feelings that it brings.

Please remember that spiritual direction is not confession. It is not the sacrament of reconciliation. They are two different experiences; each is an encounter with the grace of God but not the same experience. Spiritual direction cannot substitute for confession, and confession cannot substitute for spiritual direction. They are somewhat complementary but also distinct. Just as people cannot be their own confessor, people cannot be their own spiritual director. Both confession and spiritual direction are relational, requiring the intervention of another person in the encounter. The "other" can properly be understood and appreciated as "the instrument of God's grace."

In order to place this understanding in the appropriate historical context, there was a time in Christian history when confession was understood as a sacrament, an experience of formation, and spiritual direction. The understanding of all three was merged into one experience, with some success. Today, however, we routinely separate each experience and understand that each is different. Since there was no practiced distinction in these experiences in our

history until recently, it can be confusing for a person who is reading something about it from a century or two ago. Please apply the contemporary practice and understanding, even though advice from ages past may seem to be contradictory.

When choosing a spiritual director, you are not necessarily looking for a person who shares your religious discipline or practice. While similarities might make you more comfortable, what is really necessary is the skill of the director to listen to what you are sharing and to effectively discern with you what comes from the Spirit of God and what does not. Your spiritual director needs to be aware of the distracting power of scrupulosity and refuse to permit the distraction to overwhelm the reality of who you are as a person and your quest for meaning, love, and your true identity. ✨



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# Penny Prayers

## True Stories of Change



### THE MIRACLE PENNY

An inspiring story of the faith of a western Pennsylvania family in the early 1940s

“**M**om and Dad were struggling to keep a roof over our heads and put food on the table for their two children,” reminisced Margaret Bowser of Cleveland. “Mom was taught how to make soup from just about anything, especially red kidney beans. Beans expanded and filled the stomachs of many for just pennies. Red kidney beans back then cost seven cents a pound.”

One day, Margaret’s parents had only six cents, not enough to buy a pound of beans to quiet the growling stomachs of their hungry family. The search for the much-needed penny began—in pockets, purses, junk drawers, and down the insides of an overstuffed sofa, but to no avail.

At the time, Margaret and her family were living in a large old house that had been home to many families. The floors were covered in much-worn linoleum, its edges chipped, torn, and not tacked down. Finally, under a loose sheet of linoleum, Margaret’s parents found a lone copper penny, with the familiar “In God We Trust” stamped on the front and wheat sheaves on the back.

“My mother trusted in God to provide her family with their daily bread (beans) and he did!” said Margaret, who had heard the story of the miracle penny over and over as she was growing up and how vital a penny can be in people’s lives. “I would never pass up a penny anywhere! The story is forever burned in my head and my heart—and what the symbols on the penny mean to our family.”

### PRICELESS VALUE

Why invoking the Penny Prayer makes a lot of sense

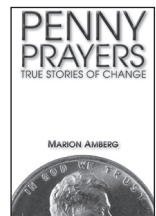
**T**he author writes: One day when I found a penny lying on a sidewalk, I brushed it off, then fingered the raised surfaces and studied the coin. No longer shiny, the penny was beginning to tarnish from the many hands that had touched it over the years.

I felt just like the coin: tarnished from the hand that life had dealt me. I had a leg injury that doctors said was irreversible. I was experiencing financial worries and needed to make crucial decisions about my future. *Should I do this or do that?* I turned the coin over and discovered a message worth more than all the riches of the world.

“In God We Trust,” proclaimed tiny capital letters above the bust of Abraham Lincoln. Prompted by an inner nudge, I prayed, “God, I trust in you.” Immediately a sense of calm and peace descended on me like a warm blanket. The next time I found a penny, I repeated the prayer.

A penny and a prayer. It sounds too simple, but the physical act of holding up a penny and declaring my trust in God lifts burdens from me. Find a penny and say the penny prayer—then watch for change in your life! ✨

Adapted from *Penny Prayers: True Stories of Change* by Marion Amberg, copyright 2014 (Liguori Publications, 823923). To order, visit [Liguori.org](http://Liguori.org) or call 800-325-9521.



**Q.** *I am quite confused by one of your recent newsletters. You asserted that “thoughts are thoughts and that is it. They have no power in and of themselves.” I find this not helpful and seek your clarification.*

**A.** Thoughts do not have power beyond the power that you assign to them. People can sit all day in a room and generate a nonstop series of positive and negative thoughts, and no changes will take place around them. The ones doing the thinking are the only people who will experience the thoughts. As I said, thoughts have no power in and of themselves.

**Q.** *The dispensations for attending Sunday Mass during the pandemic did not comfort me. How can anyone, even a bishop, dispense Catholics from one of the Ten Commandments?*

**A.** Attendance at Mass on Sunday is not one of the Ten Commandments. It is a precept of the Church, a canonical law, a spiritual practice and discipline that has been created by those who possess the authority to make regulations in the Catholic Church. Those who have the power to make regulations also have the power to dispense people from one. The commandment says to keep the sabbath “holy.” It says nothing about attending church on Sundays.

**Keep the Lord’s day “holy.”**



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