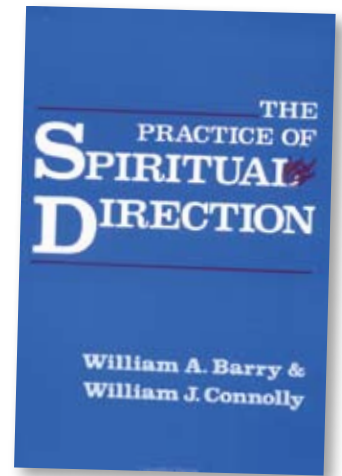


# ...the Practice of Spiritual Direction



*A Conversation with Fr. William Barry, SJ*  
by Grace Regan



To know Fr. Bill Barry, SJ, is a gift and a grace. One would never know that thirty years ago, Fr. Barry and his colleague and friend, Fr. Bill Connolly, SJ, had a great idea to write a book on spiritual direction. They couldn't find a publisher and had to juggle to finish the manuscript, both men having other jobs and areas of responsibility. Today, their book, "The Practice of Spiritual Direction," serves as a handbook in the field. It has been translated into six languages and is presently being revised with more inclusive language, new thoughts and data, and an updated bibliography.

So, what has changed in thirty years? I sat down with Fr. Barry in August before he left for the long retreat at Eastern Point Retreat House in Gloucester with the Tertiaries and he shared his thoughts on the challenges, changes and opportunities for spiritual direction in the new millennium. Fr. Barry said that he is looking at the practice of spiritual direction with a new lens. The main change in his thought is the desire to speak less of religious experience and more of the religious dimension of all human experience. God is present at all times and in all seasons. Barry passionately believes that God wants to relate to us, not solve our problems. So, what is spiritual direction? Fr. Barry asks people he directs, "What happens when you engage in a relationship with God?" For him, spiritual direction is not about problem solving or giving advice, it is about helping a person engage in an authentic relationship with God; a relationship that is mutual and dialogical. He stresses that in giving the *Spiritual Exercises* the main question for the directee is, "What do you want from God?" There is a fundamental belief in God wanting a relationship with us. This God is a forgiving God and

a God who helps us face our resistance to the mystery of God. Fr. Barry pointed out "that engaging in the relationship with God isn't always neat or pretty; it's tough work wrestling with God."

I asked Fr. Barry to think about what has changed over thirty years and he immediately responded with a chuckle, "Me! I talk a lot less and have come to trust more fully in God. My feeling is God will act. The experience of doing spiritual direction is a challenge; it faces me with my own resistance to the mystery of God. In life and in the relationship with God things can become dark and often both director and directee face the mystery of suffering. However, if we trust that God is operative, God can be found in all things and that's our mission as Jesuits, to find and see God in all things."

*Fr. Barry is the director of the Jesuit Tertiaries Program and a director of retreats at Campion Center.*