

 THE CONCISE GUIDE SERIES

a concise guide to
**Supervising
a Ministry
Student**

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The Spirituality of the Supervisor

The focus of this book has been the professional ministerial relationship that exists between the supervisor and field education student. As reiterated several times, this is a relationship that is—as with all ministerial relationships—other centered. Supervision is a ministry to the student and to the community. We are not able to expect that our own personal needs or even our institution's work needs will always be met in taking on a field education student. Ministry is a gift given without strings attached. At the same time, we cannot deny that, in the mysterious graciousness of God, whenever we minister, we do receive in return. Not always what we expected, but a gift nonetheless—often a greater gift than what we were able ourselves to offer. In theological language, we might say that ministry is praxis: it is self-transforming activity.

Much is written about spirituality. Some of the literature makes it sound as if the life of the spirit were somehow quite separate from daily life, with its traffic and meetings and clogged plumbing. It focuses on that part of the day, week, or year that we can dedicate to silence, to being

"away from it all," to stepping out of the chaos and morass of our routine existence. And yet, while time for silence and retreat is *very* valuable and necessary, at the heart of the Catholic sacramental tradition lies the conviction that God loves the world. God chooses to make Godself known to us through created matter. God is known in the matter of bread and wine, water and oil, but also the matter of our lives, our families, our work, and our congregations. While there are many conceivable ways of defining spirituality, one possibility is simply to say that spirituality is the particular way in which God works out our salvation in this world—in essence, the particular way in which God brings us into the fullness of life and light for which we are intended. So, if we speak of a Christian spirituality, we mean that Jesus Christ plays an integral role in our salvation. If we speak of a marital spirituality, we mean that it is through the experience of being married that God intends to make us into the people that we are meant to be. If we speak of a ministerial spirituality, we pause to reflect on how, through the practice of ministry, God is transforming the minister. And if we speak then of the spirituality of the supervisor, the key question we will want to ask is, "How is the ministry of supervision somehow part of the way that God is transforming me into the person God dreams me to be?"

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, to receive a vocation or a call from God is an invitation to movement. In Genesis, the first words that God speaks to Abraham are "Come out" (Gn 12:1). In John, the Good Shepherd "calls his own by name and leads them out" (Jn 10:3). Calls impel us "out" of ourselves to something more, something beyond. As Margaret, a character in Gail Godwin's novel *Evensong*, points out, "Something is your vocation if it keeps making more of you."

While supervision is likely not going to be your primary vocation in life, it is a call from the Church, and from God.

It can be a powerfully transformative experience. And it may very well be that you will discover your own spiritual journey is deeply intertwined with your willingness to serve in this ministry. God plans to do things through this experience, not just for the student, but for you, too.

The experience of each supervisor is unique and particular, and yet, when experienced supervisors talk about "the more" that supervision has made of them, they often mention eight key virtues or dispositions that the practice of the ministry seems to inherently cultivate if we allow it!¹

Supervision calls us to wholeness. When we are charged with challenging and forming others to be healthy and whole ministers, we will be immediately confronted with all those ways in which *we* are not as healthy and whole as we should be. When we ask tough questions to others, we begin also to ask tough questions of ourselves. For example, "How can I talk with a student about developing better balance in her life when I work seventy hours a week?" "How can I suggest a student go talk with a counselor about possible depression when I've always avoided counselors myself?" "How can I give lectures on good conflict management when I absolutely refuse to deal constructively with another coworker?" As we hold up the mirror for students, students often unwittingly hold the mirror up to us. We realize where greater personal integrity is needed between what we advocate and what we actually do. Supervision makes us attentive to aspects of our own life that we might otherwise overlook.

Parents often give up certain vices, such as smoking or cursing or watching excessively violent television shows, once their children begin to imitate those behaviors. Behaviors that seem somewhat innocuous to adults or are only perceived to affect oneself suddenly appear glaringly inappropriate when someone new, someone they care about, begins to try them on for size. Similarly, in supervision, for

the sake of the next generation, one feels a renewed urgency to “clean up” bad ministerial habits. Things that we might not do for ourselves, we do for those who are looking to us as models.

Supervision calls us to humility. Supervision can make us aware of how much we have learned and grown over time in ministry. Tasks that a new student might find difficult, we suddenly realize, have become very easy for us. We become aware of how many gifts we have for ministry and how much knowledge we’ve acquired. But, just as often, the experience of supervising makes us aware of our own shortcomings and limitations. Many times, we will sit in front of students who are good, holy, and talented people and think, “Who I am to be giving them advice? I don’t know the answer any more than they do” or “Who am I to be making judgments about whether this person should go on in ministry? I don’t know enough about this stuff. I am not God!” Many supervisors find that the process of evaluation and offering constructive feedback is especially humbling: “How can I name a splinter in the student’s eye when I may have a plank in my own?”

As noted in chapter 3, a student’s sense of identity as a minister is often marked by an “all-or-nothing” mentality. He thinks either he is good or he is bad. Either he is competent or he is incompetent. In truth, many of us in the field of supervision consider ourselves through the same black and white lens. Either I must be a perfect supervisor or I have nothing to offer. Either I must have excellent judgment or I shouldn’t judge at all. The truth is that none of us is as wonderful a mentor as we would like to be, and none of us has perfectly clear judgment and full knowledge of a student’s abilities and character. We often become more aware of our own imperfections than of theirs. And then we gradually learn to live with ourselves honestly and openly,

acknowledging what “mixed bags” we are. The poet May Sarton writes:

Now I become myself.
It’s taken time, many years and places.
I have been dissolved and shaken,
worn other people’s faces. . . .
As slowly as the ripening fruit,
fertile, detached, and always spent,
falls but does not exhaust the root.²

Supervision, if we allow it, helps us become ourselves and become okay with those selves.

Supervision calls us to courage. A commonly repeated joke tells of a mother coming in to wake up her son for school. The son pulls the sheets over his head and whines, “I don’t want to go. I don’t like school. All the kids make fun of me and are mean to me.” “You will go to school,” the mother retorts. “The sun is up, the bus is coming, and you have to go: you are the principal.” This is how it is sometimes, isn’t it? We wake up to find ourselves leaders and mentors of others without quite knowing how it happened. It can be rather overwhelming. The work asks us to tackle issues that we don’t quite know how to handle—issues that take us far beyond our comfort zones. Many times a supervisor will suddenly realize, “I’m going to have to grow up to the job.”

At this point, the virtue of humility in the supervisor must find its complement in the virtue of courage or fortitude. No, we don’t know everything we wish we knew. No, we are not perfect. No, we don’t feel worthy to make recommendations that could affect others’ lives. But, with due humility, we also have to act. We have to ask difficult questions. We have to make decisions. We have to offer challenging feedback. Sometimes we even have to write negative evaluations and

let the student know face to face. We struggle to cultivate a "response-ability" to match our responsibility.

Often, as a field education director, I find myself in situations with students and supervisors that I would very much prefer to avoid. I know that I do not have the wisdom or experience that I should have to be dealing with the issues present, but nevertheless, there they are, and there I am. I do know enough from experience to know that no matter how badly I might botch things up through direct confrontation, it will be better than how badly I will botch things up by not directly confronting. This is often not much of a consolation. At these times, I must rely not on my own inner resources, but on the grace of the role itself. I recall that someone has asked me to serve in this capacity and appointed me to carry out the task. There may be someone better out there, but that person is not here right now, and the work needs to be done now. I have to trust that the gap between what the role requires and me will be filled by the Holy Spirit.

In his Second Letter to Timothy, there is a wonderful line in which Paul encourages Timothy to "stir into flame" the gift of God that Paul knows is within his disciple, reminding him that "the Spirit God has given us is no cowardly spirit, but rather one that makes us strong, loving, and wise" (2 Tm 1:6-7). That same Spirit is the one that bolsters field education supervisors all the time, making the work possible and effective. Supervisors come to know that the Spirit really is with them and within them, just waiting to be "stirred into flame."

Supervision calls us to trust. One of the key qualities that supervision cultivates is trust. At the beginning of a supervisory relationship, it can sometimes be hard to send the student off on her own, and we find ourselves wondering: "Wouldn't it be good for her to observe a little longer?" "What if he does something that offends the congregation?"

"What if she fails and I have to pick up the pieces?" It can be hard to turn over portions of our ministry to others and allow them to do it differently, to accept the possibility that things might go awry. As the placement proceeds, it can also be difficult to trust the process of field education itself: "Yes, theological reflection is good and all, but can't I just tell him the answer without having to go through a whole reflection?" "Can't I just fix the situation for her?" "Do I really have to wait for him to find his own answers and let him try something I am sure will flop?" But perhaps the greatest trust is called for at the end of the placement. Often supervisors feel that they have not done quite enough. "Does the student really know all that she needs to know to move into this field?" "Is he ready for ordination?" "Is she ready to be hired?" "Have I said all that I should have said?" "Is the future of the Church safe in his hands?"

One of the most challenging parts about being a supervisor is that supervisors don't often have a lot to show for their efforts at the end of their work. Unlike for an architect or a fundraiser, there is no physical building or financial report that bears witness to the supervisor's labor. The supervisor's efforts are directed toward a person of free will, who can accept what is offered or reject it or, often, can hear only part of what is being said. Sometimes the impact of a supervisor's message doesn't hit until years later. Words that didn't make sense at the time suddenly have meaning, but the supervisor is long gone. There is a certain poverty in serving in this ministry, and ultimately the final act of trust that the supervisor must make is that supervision really does make a difference. Author Laurie Beth Jones summarizes this aspect of the supervisor's spiritual journey well when she notes:

Jesus did not say, "I've left construction of the temple in capable hands, and it should be finished by May." Nor did he say, "I've doubled the

number of your recruits here, and you will note the offerings are up in three locations." Instead his summary read: "Dear Chairman of the Board, as proof of my good work here, I present to you Peter, James, John, Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Martha . . . completed in love."³

Supervision calls us to curiosity and patience. When identifying virtues culled in supervision, almost every supervisor names patience. In supervision, there is a long waiting as the student slowly readies to reveal himself. This is a process that cannot be forced or rushed. Educator Parker Palmer testifies:

Like a wild animal, the soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient. . . . Yet, despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. . . . If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out.⁴

If this is true of the search to encounter our own cores, imagine how much more so it is true when we attempt to touch the core of another. Trust in the supervisory relationship is built over time. Students do not generally jump into supervision eager to receive critique of their ministry and ask hard questions about their lives. Only gradually do they become aware of why these practices are necessary and what amazing fruits these practices can bear. Sometimes it is important to push a student, but just as many times, it is important to wait.

Patience is also required when a student is learning new skills and new behaviors. Experienced supervisors note that they have forgotten how much they'd learned over time until they see someone else take her first steps in the ministry. Occasionally new supervisors are shocked when

their student doesn't seem to be aware of information they regard as common sense: "Well, of course, you wouldn't talk about a patient openly at the nurses' station." "Well, of course, you don't fill the wine carafe to the top; otherwise the communion ministers will be left to consume too much at the end." "Well, of course, there needs to be coffee present at the council meeting; without caffeine there will be a rebellion." Supervising over a long period of time, however, cultivates an added awareness of small stumbling blocks and a tolerance of mistakes.

The partner of patience is curiosity. Curiosity is a virtue that has been mentioned several times in this book and is one of the defining characteristics of excellent supervisors. At some point in time, many supervisors experience a shift from frustration and irritation with a student to genuine wonder. "Why did you *do that!*?" shifts to "Why did you do that?" "What were you *thinking!*?" becomes "What were *you* thinking?" Rhetorical questions are rephrased to become real queries. The greatest learning in field education happens when supervisors and students become truly curious, when they are able to stand back a bit from situations and say with the interest of a scientist or an artist, "Wow. What is going on here?"

Supervision calls us to reflection as a way of life. The practice of theologically reflecting on a regular basis has a profound impact on the lives of supervisors, sometimes even more than it does on students' lives! Experienced ministers who supervise over a number of years find that they enter into an ongoing reflective mode of being. Whereas once theological reflection was a time set apart to look at incidents in the student's experience, gradually theological reflection becomes a way of life—a permanent curiosity and wonder that constantly makes connections between personal experience, faith, and culture. Here is a typical observation:

I have become more in tune with theological reflection in my own life. It helps me make connections in my daily life and activities. I have become more open to the grace of the Holy Spirit being operative in me and others.

To use again the analogy of the night sky, when longtime supervisors look around them, they no longer see events like isolated stars on a dark backdrop. Rather, they see constellations—relationships among the stars that others might miss. They see patterns and bigger pictures in which all things are connected. When theological reflection truly becomes a *habitus*, it wires the brain to enable a new way of seeing.

Supervision calls us to embrace "death." To say that field education supervision invites us to embrace death can sound a bit melodramatic. Opportunities for physical martyrdom in the line of duty are very rare. And yet, as writer Vigen Guroian notes, "Our lives are filled with countless little intimations of death"⁵—in the waxing and waning of relationships, in the things that we must give up, the hopes we must let go. In ministerial leadership, one longtime supervisor confirms, "You die a thousand deaths for the good of the whole."

Among these deaths that supervisors are called to are some that we have already discussed. For example, supervisors experience a death of the ego when they come to a new awareness of their own shortcomings and limitations. And, they are called to "die to control" with the realization that the student and the field education process have a life of their own that supervisors can participate in, but never completely manage.

Perhaps the most subtle of these deaths is the death of productivity. Supervisors rarely have a lot of extra time

in their schedules. If not supervising, there are always a hundred other things they could be doing. This means that supervisors generally must let go of something else that they wanted to do in order to fit in supervising a field education student. Maybe it is a book they wanted to read, a committee they would liked to have been part of, or a project they wanted to take on. Sometimes students need more attention and energy than anticipated. Sometimes their timing is not particularly good. They need to talk when the supervisor has a big deadline. Much of the ministry of supervision is in acceptance of the interruptions.

Each of these deaths—and innumerable others—could be skirted and ignored or greeted and welcomed. In every Christian vocation, there is an aspect of the Paschal Mystery. It is precisely through embracing this mystery and walking through it that our spiritual journeys actually become salvific. In a talk about staying alive and thriving as a leader of a ministerial institution, seminary president Charles Bouchard commented:

Staying alive does not, ironically, mean avoiding death. It means facing death and risk, embracing them gracefully and in faith, and trusting that they will shape us into good servants who will lead our institutions [*and, we could add, students*] to all they can be.⁶

Supervision calls us to hope. Death never has the last word, however. Even supervisors who have faced great challenges, when asked to describe their students, inevitably use language like "fresh and energetic," "enthusiastic," and "full of zeal." One supervisor writes, "Working with students can refresh my spirit on days when I'm feeling jaded or cynical or have difficulty seeing the hand of God through the political aspects of Church work." Another acknowledges, "As I

encounter the sincerity they bring with their desire to serve, I am touched by their holiness, goodness, and truth—albeit often different from my own. This helps me become more than what I was prior to this encounter.” In the end, the most common comment of supervisors is something along the lines of, “The students give me hope.” Hope that the message of Jesus Christ will go on. Hope that Christ’s care will be extended in new ways. Hope that there truly are others who will carry on the ministry. Hope that others find their joy in the same thing that has made our lives so rich and meaningful. Some of the best, brightest, and most generous people in the world are hearing a call to service. Field education puts us in contact with them. There is plenty of reason for hope.

Field education, as a call from God and the Church, has the potential to “make more” out of us. It makes us more whole, more humble, and more courageous. It makes us more trusting, curious, and patient. It makes us more reflective. It marks on us the pattern of Christ, moving through death to hope in new life. The gift of the ministry is that it makes of us all of these things, not only when we are sitting in the role of the supervisor, but also in our daily lives. What we learn and practice in supervision begins to permeate our relationships with our peers, our families, and our communities. “Supervision has definitely led me to be a better person,” writes one supervisor. “I am always grateful.”

There are many scriptural images that supervisors use to capture the kind of relationship with God and others that supervision has called them into. These images illumine aspects of themes discussed in this chapter and range from the familiar, like Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, to the more obscure, like Tobias and the angel Raphael. They capture the dynamic of honesty and confrontation that exists in supervision, like Nathan before David, as well as the joy of sharing, like the story of the Visitation. Scripture is a gold

mine full of rich models of mentoring. An exercise based on some of these scriptural images appears in appendix D as a way of reflecting further on the themes explored in this chapter and offering companions on the supervisory journey. When we struggle with embracing death, stirring the fire of courage, or finding hope, these are stories that we can return to again and again to light the path. Their characters are fellows in the company of saints who will draw aside and walk with us.

Perhaps the most challenging image depicting the spirituality of the supervisor is found in the story of the Prodigal Son from Luke 15:11–32. In his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Henri Nouwen offers an extended meditation on Rembrandt’s painting of that parable. The painting portrays the father’s welcome of his wayward son while the elder, faithful son and three onlookers obscured in darkness stand by. Nouwen describes his long fascination with the picture and the relationship that he developed with each of its characters, seeing how each represented himself at various times in his life. He notes that initially he saw himself in the figure of the younger son, the one who squanders the family wealth and needs to seek forgiveness. With time, he came to know himself as the elder son—faithful and stable, but also resentful and jealous. The hardest character to identify with was the one at the center of the picture. He records the challenge of a friend who pointed out to him, “Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father.”⁷

Nouwen relays the shock and resistance he felt to first hearing these words and how long it took for him to grow comfortable with this new identity. “The year and a half since [my friend’s] challenge has been a time to begin claiming my spiritual fatherhood,” he writes. “It has been a slow and arduous struggle, and sometimes I still feel the desire to remain the son and never to grow old.”⁸ Later he writes:

Though I am both the younger son and the elder son, I am not to remain them, but to become the Father. No father or mother ever became father or mother without having been son or daughter, but every son and daughter has to consciously choose to step beyond [his or her] childhood and become father and mother for others. It is a hard and lonely step to take . . . but a step that is essential for the fulfillment of the spiritual journey.⁹

There are many ways in which engaging the metaphor of fatherhood in a book about supervision could go awry. In chapter 4, we discussed in detail why supervision should be construed as a professional and not a familial relationship; our students are not best viewed as prodigals, and the image will strike some as gender exclusive. Furthermore, in our culture, the language of "fatherhood" often immediately evokes images of *Father Knows Best*. That is not what we are talking about here.

The image of fatherhood that Nouwen is evoking is quite different. He is using the metaphor to touch on something very close to the heart of the supervisor's vocation: the call to generativity, the call to take up one's proper authority and become the leader.

For much of our lives, we speak of the Church in third person. "The Church teaches . . ." "The Church should be . . ." "The Church says . . ." And then there comes a moment when we realize that we actually *are* the Church, and if the Church should be doing anything, it should be us doing it. Nouwen notes that perhaps the most radical words Jesus spoke were, "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate."¹⁰ We are invited not just to turn to God *for* compassion, but also to *become* that compassion of God for others. In exercising the ministry of supervision, we will need to become comfortable, just as our students will, with modeling something of

God for others. "Christ has no body now but yours," echoes Teresa of Avila in her famous prayer.

"Becoming the father" does not mean exercising power that is in any way oppressive, abusive, or self-serving. That is not the kind of power that God has ever exercised. It does mean being willing to take on the power to reconcile, to love, to confront, to make decisions that serve the common good, to heal, to hope, to lay down one's life.

Summary

This book has been about the invitation to serve as a supervisor. In the end, that invitation is the invitation to "become the father"—to become the kind of minister the world needs in the process of mentoring the ministers that the world needs. If you believe in the future of the Church and its ministry, the work that you are about to undertake is absolutely essential. It is essential for the student. It is essential for the People of God. It may even be essential for you. Be ready for a spiritual adventure.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Do you consider the invitation to supervise a ministry student as part of your overall vocational journey?
2. How do you see God transforming you through your current ministerial role? In what ways do you suspect God might be inviting you to change and grow in taking on the role of a supervisor?
3. What most excited you when reading this chapter? What did you find frightening or uncomfortable?
4. What metaphor or image from scripture or tradition best captures the spiritual dynamic of supervision for you?

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

1. In preparing for this chapter, I interviewed several persons who have been involved in the Aquinas Institute field education program. I want to acknowledge with gratitude the following: Mary Joan Meyer, F.S.M.; Greg Rohde, Jackie Toben, S.S.N.D.; Steve Gira, C.R.; Julie Allen Berger; Celeste Mueller; Diane Kennedy, O.P.; Charles Bouchard, O.P.; Russell Peterson; and Bob Sweeney.
2. May Sarton, "Now I Become Myself," in *Collected Poems, 1930–1973* (New York: Norton, 1974), 156.
3. Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus, CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 286.
4. Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 58.
5. Vigen Guroian, *Life's Living Toward Dying: A Theological and Medical-Ethical Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 22.
6. Charles Bouchard, O.P., "Death and the President," an address to the ATS-sponsored New Presidents' Seminar in New Orleans, January 2005.
7. Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 22.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 122.
10. *Ibid.*, 123.