

Role and Authority of the Spiritual Father in the Eastern Christian Monastic Tradition

Geo Pallikunnel

Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru

Abstract

Spiritual direction and spiritual fathers/mothers are essential parts of monastic tradition from the beginning of monasticism in the East. All authority in the Church are from God for the service of the faithful, to lead them back to God in the process of divinization (*theosis*). While spiritual father represents the charismatic and prophetic authority the bishop (and partially the monastic superior) represents the formal (and sacramental) authority in the Church. The role of the spiritual father is to help the spiritual children on the way of their spiritual journey. Most importantly, as per this article, he is helping his spiritual children in discernment (of the spirits) on the way of Christian perfection. At the same time, he is doing this with humility and love with wisdom and knowledge. Most importantly spiritual father's life is the message to the disciple. He is not mere teacher but represents Christ himself to the spiritual children.

Keywords: Eastern Christian Monastic Tradition, Spiritual Father, Spiritual Authority, Spiritual Direction, Spiritual Discernment

Introduction

Spiritual direction and spiritual fathers (and mothers)¹ are as old as the monastic² way of life in the Christian tradition. This does not mean

¹ Though in the following pages we use exclusive language for convenience most of the things we discuss about spiritual fathers (*abbas*) shall be applicable also to spiritual mothers (*ammās*), and spiritual sons to spiritual daughters.

² The word 'monastic' is used here in the wider sense of the consecrated life in the Christian tradition. For example the early desert fathers in the narrow sense cannot be considered 'monastic.'

that this spiritual ministry and experts guiding the persons in their spiritual life-journey were not there before the monastic foundations. This concept of spiritual guidance was there even in other pre-Christian religious traditions. For example in the Hindu religious tradition the concept of *guru*³ has many common grounds with the Christian spiritual father and direction, though there are substantial differences in the understanding of attaining salvation.

We can see many elements of spiritual begetting and guidance in the New Testament and in early Church fathers. Jesus can be considered the spiritual director par excellence by directing his disciples to the Father in the way of perfection in the Spirit. Paul is another example who says that “until Christ formed in you I am in child-birth pangs” (Gal 4:19).

According to Thomas Merton, a modern contemplative and spiritual master, spiritual direction “is a continuous process of formation and guidance, in which a Christian is led and encouraged in his special vocation, so that by faithful correspondence to the graces of the Holy Spirit he may attain to the particular end of his vocation and to union with God ... Spiritual direction was, then, one of the essential means to monastic perfection” (Merton, 1960, p.13-14). In this article we mostly discuss spiritual father and spiritual direction in the background of early Eastern Christian monastic tradition and spirituality, though most part of them applicable to any Christian.

Spiritual Authority in the Church

Spiritual authority is the authority that makes or facilitates or supports the union of a person with the Divine (Baier, 2010). In the Christian tradition we call the ultimate Divine reality as the Trinitarian Divinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Communion with this Trinitarian Divinity is the final goal of humankind and the cosmos/creation. It is happening in and through the economy of Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Church. One who facilitates this in the Church is the spiritual authority.

All authority in the Church is coming from God. As Paul says, “there is no authority except from God and those authorities that exists have been instituted by God” (Rom 13:1). The authority in the Church is the

³ One of the meanings of this Sanskrit word is the “one who dispels darkness of ignorance.” *Guru Gita* [Long Version], 44: गुकारश्चान्धकारो हि रुकारस्तेज उच्यते । अज्ञानग्रासकं ब्रह्म गुरुरेव न संशयः ॥

authority of God the Father that is transmitted to the Church through the Son. And every paternity is from God the Father as Paul says in the Letter to the Ephesians (3:14-15): “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every fatherhood in heaven and on earth takes its name.” So the Church understands the authority in the Church is from God and it is not for domination but for service in charity to lead the flock to the true authority, the Father. Christ himself is the best model for this authority.

Bishop. In the Church the bishop (*episcopoi*) is considered as the embodiment of divine authority and fatherhood, transmitted through Christ and then the apostles. This is very clear to the Christians of early centuries. That is why the *Didascalia Apostolorum* clearly says: “He [bishop] it is who ministers the word to you and is your mediator, your teacher, and *after God, is your father who has regenerated you through the water*” (Stewart-Syker, 2009, p.150-52) According to Thomas Merton “the bishop, the living and visible representative of the apostles who had founded the local Church, spoke for Christ and apostles, and, helped by his presbyters, took care of all the spiritual needs of his flock. The individual member of the community was “formed” and “guided” by his participation in the life of the community, and such instruction as was needed was given first of all by the bishop and presbyters, and then, through informal admonitions, by one’s parents, spouse, friends, and fellow Christians.” (Merton, 1960:11-12) He is the formal spiritual father because his fatherhood and authority are related to the very spiritual birth of a person in the Church through Baptism. This spiritual birth in the Church is sealed by the bishop—in the Roman tradition by giving the Sacrament of Confirmation by himself and in the Eastern Christian tradition through sealing the person in the Sacrament of Chrismation (in the form of the cross) using the very oil (*Myron/Chrism*) consecrated by the bishop.

Monastic Superior (Abbot/Prior). Monastic superior (*hegumen/resha d-dayra*) was the immediate spiritual father in the cenobitic life style in the beginning. Though monasticism started away from the world⁴ it is not a revolt against the society as such. It was started in the Egyptian deserts as a revolt against the wealth and power hierarchies of the society.

⁴ This we are saying about Egyptian monasticism. The Proto-monasticism in the Syriac tradition, also started almost at the same time or even before that of the Egyptian monasticism, existed with the ecclesial communities and not away from it.

The Desert Fathers declined to be ruled by men, but had no desire to rule over others themselves. Nor did they fly from human fellowship- the very fact that they uttered these “words” of advice to one another is proof that they were eminently social. The society they sought was one where all men were truly equal, where the only authority under God was the charismatic authority of wisdom, experience and love. Of course, they acknowledged the benevolent, hierarchical authority of their bishops: but the bishops were far away and said little about what went on in the desert until the great Origenist conflict at the end of the fourth century (Merton, 1900, p.5).

So, equality was the benchmark of this movement. Still it keeps this character somewhat aloof from the worldly power systems. In the context of cenobitic monasticism the role of monastic authority is important. So (monastic) superiors in these communities are charismatic leaders or those elected from the equals to minister the community. Their authority is rather spiritual and charismatic, at the same time slowly in the course of time became somewhat formal.

Spiritual Father. In the early days of monasticism, especially among the cenobites, generally the superior and the spiritual father were same. At the same time we can see independent spiritual fathers from the beginning itself. Among the anchorites this was very common. Antony, though he was not a formal *hegumen*, was spiritual guide and father for many, both in the desert and those from outside (*Vita Antonii*, ch. 15). The Semitic word “abba” is the common term used in the ancient times, other words like *gerōn* in Greek, *staretz* (Mcdowell, 2011, p.218-20) in Slavic languages also used to denote the elder.

In the NT the term “abba” is used for God the Father and, as we have seen, in Christian understanding all fatherhood comes from this source (cf. Eph 3:15). As the ‘monastic profession’ was considered as a second baptism the spiritual father (abbot/novice master) can be considered as a second father in the spiritual milieu (Hausherr, 1990, p.23-24). ‘Abba’ is the word used in the early ascetic literature and monastic tradition for spiritual father both in the eremitic and cenobitic traditions. The words ‘abbot’ and ‘abbey’ comes from the same root. In its original meaning the word *abba* is the one who “had the necessary qualities to bring forth disciples to the spiritual life, to rear them and guide them to perfection” (Hausherr, 1990, p.29). For a novice in the early monasticism “the spiritual father replaced the bishop and presbyter as representative of Christ. And yet there was a difference because there

was nothing hierarchical about his function. It was purely and simple charismatic. It was sanctioned by the father's own personal holiness. The greatest 'abbots' in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts were generally not priests" (Merton, 1960, p.12-13).

Spiritual Fatherhood in the Eastern Christian Tradition

Spiritual fatherhood and spiritual direction are very part of eastern Christian monastic tradition from the beginning up to now. Its history, concept and practice will help us to have a clear picture of this spiritual ministry in the Church.

History and Models. This spiritual tradition has the same history of the monastic tradition in the East. Great personalities in the history of monasticism, both anchoritic and cenobitic traditions, from Antony of Egypt onwards, were spiritual fathers. *Vita Antonii* and the *Apophthegmata Patrum* amply prove this claim. Pachomius and his successors in the Pachomian Koinonia are great mentors of souls. On Pachomius it is said, in *The First Sahidic Life of Pachomius*, that "he very carefully fashioned the brothers' souls" (Veilleux, 1980, p.440). In the early times the monastic superior himself was the spiritual guide. "The earliest sources for cenobitic monasticism also emphasize the efforts of the community's director to offer counseling to every individual in the community. Thus, Pachomius is said to have toured the cells of individual monks, 'examining the brothers, and correcting the thoughts of each one'" (Dilley, 2017, p.5). He even trained his beloved disciple Theodore in this art. Though Basil's rules do not directly mention about a separate spiritual father he also speaks about the "care of souls" (Long Rule 33; Silvas, 2005). Climacus speaks about the protective prayer of the spiritual father as a saving helmet for their disciples (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent* 4.2.). In the Syriac tradition many of the writings of famous spiritual writers including Aphrahat (especially his 6th demonstration), Ephrem, Joseph Hazzaya, Isaac of Nineveh etc. and writings such as *The Book of Steps (Liber Graduum)* were spiritual conferences given to the seekers of spiritual wisdom and direction.

The *Philokalia* is a goldmine of teachings on spiritual direction by different spiritual authors. For example St. Neilos the Ascetic, lived in the 5th century and is the earliest writer refer explicitly on Jesus Prayer, elaborately discuss on the spiritual direction in his Ascetic Discourse (Palmer, Sherrard and Ware, 1979, p.215-228). Symeon the New

Theologian (c. 917-987), a later spiritual writer exhorts the spiritual seeker to see Christ himself in his spiritual father:

Whoever possesses unclouded faith in his spiritual father will, on seeing him, think that he is seeing Christ Himself; when with him or following him, he will firmly believe that he is with and following Christ. Such a person will never want to associate with anyone else, nor will he value anything in the world more than his thought of him and his love for him (Palmer, Sherrard and Ware, 1995, p.28).

Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) was a holy *staretz* who guided many in Russia at his time. Paisios (in Mount Athos), an elder died in 1994, was considered a great spiritual father in the Greek Orthodox tradition in recent times. (Farasiotis, 2008; Markides, 2001) Many of the Russian literature, especially of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy (Kolstø, 2008) were much influenced by this tradition of spiritual eldership. For example Father Zosima, the Elder/*staretz* in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers of Karamazov* is an embodiment of the concept of a modern spiritual father in the Eastern Christian tradition. According to it "a starets is one who subsumes your soul, your will, into his soul and into his will. When a starets accepts you, you renounce your own will and surrender to him in total obedience, total self-abnegation" (Dostoevsky, 1994) – a true description of spiritual father-son relationship in the East.

Concept. Christian life is a life in Christ transformed from "worldly" and "somatic" centred life by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the Eastern Christian tradition this transformation in Christ look towards deification (*theosis*). This Christic transformation (Pallikunnel, 2021) or way can be considered as a spiritual movement/progress from lower (bodily) level to the higher spiritual levels. Discernment of spirits is very important in this path of spiritual progress. Those who pursue this path knows that "one cannot reach spiritual perfection by oneself, but needs guidance from an experienced person, who has walked that path and knows its pitfalls and difficulties" (Hämmerli, 2014, p.152-53). Asceticism and spiritual exercises are part of this movement. Learned and experienced masters can guide the "novices" in this way of spiritual progress. So, as Nouwen says, "the goal of spiritual direction is spiritual formation—the ever-increasing capacity to live a spiritual life from the heart. A spiritual life cannot be formed without discipline, practice, and accountability" (Nouwen, 2006).

This process has two sides: Divine and human. Early spiritual fathers are very much aware of this. They considered themselves as weak instruments in the hands of God to direct their fellow men in the path of divine life. At the same time they clearly understood that “it was neither the abba’s counsel nor the ascetic’s efforts alone or in concert that was responsible for his triumph. Rather, it was “God working in him,” that is, the intercession and manifestation of the divine presence that effected transformation” (McNary-Zak, 2005, p.110). The spiritual father becomes a channel of God’s grace in this process.

Practice. The spiritual father is often considered as a charismatic figure and each spiritual child is unique and so the practice of spiritual direction has no specific form. It may vary according to the spiritual father and the spiritual child. Generally in the monastic tradition “the mention of spiritual fatherhood is often linked to the memory of one’s reception into the religious or spiritual life” (Hausherr, 1990, 25).

From the beginning of monasticism we can see this spiritual tradition. Desert fathers are best example of this practice:

In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, for example, men anxious to make progress in asceticism, or to become disciples in a more formal sense, ask acknowledged masters of the spiritual life questions of the greatest simplicity, reflecting their confidence that virtually anything their $\alpha\beta\beta\alpha\varsigma$, or ‘father,’ might say would be to their advantage. *Εἰπε μοι λόγον* was their traditional request: ‘Speak to me; some word, some phrase.’ They refused to restrict the father’s reply, either by the shortcomings of their own self-knowledge, or by the limits of any particular difficulty. They asked questions that were also of considerable scope—‘How may I be saved?’—trusting that the dialogue to follow would answer their deepest need (Rousseau, 2010, p.19).

They are not asking instructions merely on general matters of spiritual life but also about particular courses of action because they believe that these elders who were men of insight and wisdom can help them with suitable solutions for their personal problems (Rousseau, 2010). This is not merely teaching practical things. “It was the person’s experience as a whole which became the very content of dialogue with the director. As one was led toward a deeper communion with God, there was always a focus on what was operational within oneself—the perceptions of heart and mind—and between oneself and God and his or her fellows—behavioural concerns” (Allen, 1994, p.5). At the same

time “the relationship is seen as a form of training through obedience on which a disciple’s attainment of the virtues and qualities which are the aim of the monastic life was directly dependent and which directly affects his standing before God as well” (Gould, 1993, p.27). These can be applied not only to eremitical but cenobitical monasticism. “The care of souls in cenobitic monasticism was an elaborate process of instruction, discipline, and ritual with the goal of salvation, which placed leaders and disciples in a reciprocal relationship of obligations” (Dilley, 2017, p.3).

Spiritual Direction, Sacramental Confession and Counselling.

Some, even those who are learned and in authority, understand them as same. Though these three overlap at times they are different and their purposes are also different. In the monastic tradition human being is not at the centre and scale of measure of everything, but God. At the same time human being has a definitive plan in the divine economy of salvation. This often contradicts the modern anthropocentric world-vision that gave birth to the Freudian and Marxian understanding of human being and this world.

In the Confession the emphasis is on the sacramental healing and forgiveness of God. In many ways it overlap with the spiritual direction. So we can see some confusion even in some of the writings of spiritual authors of Eastern Christian tradition. But according to Hausherr “what the ‘spiritual children’ asked of their fathers in God was not the removal of a past sin through an act of authority, but the means to avoid it better in the future” (Hausherr, 1990, p.102). So we shall distinguish between “the accusation of sins with a view to absolution, and the ‘revelation of thoughts’ with a view to direction to be received” (Hausherr, 1990, p.99). And we shall also remember that in the Eastern Christian tradition most of the spiritual fathers are not persons in the holy orders as in the Western Christian tradition.

In the psychological counselling the emphasis is on the emotional healing and mental health and by that the wellbeing of the person. Generally here human being is the centre (anthropocentric), God and religion has not much role in it. On the other hand in spiritual direction (and also in the Sacramental Confession) the centre point is God and his salvific mystery. At the same time some psychological and spiritual problems are connected as the same way as some psycho-somatic illnesses then a psychotherapy based on Christian anthropology can be useful for the healing (Getcha, 2007, p.218).

Spiritual Father and the Spiritual Discernment

The Greek word *diakrisis* (διακρίσις) means discernment or discretion or discrimination. This word appeared very rarely in the NT. Distinctly in the sense of discernment of good or evil comes only once in the Scripture (Heb 5:14). But the “discernment of spirits” (διακρίσεις πνευμάτων), which is very much related to the spiritual discernment in the spiritual direction, is considered as a gift/charism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:10). This gift of God surpasses all other virtues in the field of spiritual direction.

According to an anonymous saying of a desert father “discretion is greater than all the virtues” (Wortly, 2013, p.77). “An elder was asked: “What is the monk’s task?” “Discretion,” he replied” (Wortly, 2013, p.75). If the most important task of a monk is discernment then helping others in discernment is the most important help one can give to the other on the way to perfection. So the most important function of the spiritual father in the spiritual direction is to help his spiritual child in discernment in the spiritual path. Every person has his own limits and potentials. Discerning this and directing that person in the spiritual path is very important. This may be different for person to person. Good for one person is not apt for another person. Here is an example from the desert fathers:

The same abba [Poemen] asked Abba Joseph another question saying, ‘What should I do when the passions attack me? Should I resist them, or let them enter?’ The old man said to him, ‘Let them enter and fight against them.’ So he returned to Scetis where he remained. Now someone from Thebes came to Scetis and said to the brethren, ‘I asked Abba Joseph if I ought to resist the passions when they approach, or let them enter and he replied I ought not to allow them the smallest entry but cut them off immediately’ (Ward, 1975, p.102).

The first person is strong enough to fight the passions so that he may become stronger but the second person will not gain anything from this so he may not allow it to enter into him. Each person is unique and his way to perfection also. Directing a person in the spiritual life with discernment is the most important help the spiritual father can give to his spiritual child.

Then another question related to discernment is whether we shall always go for the advice of the spiritual father? “[O]n the one hand we can ‘easily attain’ discretion, on the other hand, we must always have

recourse to the counsel of the fathers to guide us rather than exercise a grace granted to the individual” (Wortly, 2019, p.74). Yes, guidance of a spiritual father is safer than depending on one’s own wisdom. This is also a mark of humility, to submit to another person and be guided by him, from the part of the spiritual children.

The entire second chapter of Cassian’s *Conferences* is on discernment. For him all other virtues are directed by discernment. Thomas Merton comments on Cassian’s *Conferences* in his *A Course in Desert Spirituality*:

Without discretion their other virtues came to nothing and bore no fruit. Discretion, avoiding contrary extremes, teaches the royal road to God, and this discretion is what the Gospel calls: “the light of the body which is the eye, and if the eye be single the whole body is lightsome” (Mat 6:23). Discretion is neither carried away by enthusiasm, “lifted up” in time of fervour, nor depressed and discouraged in time of trial (Merton, 2019).

It is said about Evagrius that “in the course of fifteen years [in the desert] having purified his mind to the utmost he was counted worthy of the gift of knowledge and wisdom and the discerning of spirits” (Clarke, 1918, p.136).

This discernment is very much related to spirituality and holiness also. One is spiritual and holy through the participation in the Spirit of Holiness, and in the early Church, according to Irenaeus, “the surest sign of spirituality is martyrdom” (*Against Heresies* 5.9.2). As we understand from history the monastic life emerged in the Church as a continuation of martyrdom and even at times called “white martyrdom.” And “this is holiness, and the mark of this spirituality and holiness is *diakrisis*” (Hausherr, 1990). Asceticism is very part of the way of holiness in the monastic tradition. But asceticism without discernment is futile. Antony the Great says: “Some have afflicted their bodies by asceticism, but they lack discernment, and so they are far from God” (Ward, 1975).

Other Important Qualities of a Spiritual Father

What makes a person a spiritual father? Age and grey hair? No. As Cassian says, “the riches of the elders are not to be measured by their grey hairs but by the hard work of their youth and the deserts of their past labours ... Therefore we should not follow in the footprints of all the elders whose heads are covered with grey hair and whose long life

is the only thing that recommends them, nor should we accept their traditions and counsel” (*Conferences* 2.13.1-2). Then what shall be the norm? He continues: “Instead we should follow those who we recognize have shaped their lives in a praiseworthy and upright manner as young men, and who have been instructed not in their own presumptions but in the traditions of their forebears” (*Conferences* 2.13.1-2).

Apart from discernment of spirits what all the qualities needed for a spiritual father? He shall be free of vices that hinder the spiritual life of him and his spiritual children. Evagrius warns of many vices including pride and vain glory in the spiritual masters in doing healing, expel demons and so on (*Praktikos*, 13-14; *Evagrius Ponticus*, 1981, p.19-20) Antony also warns his disciples about this and asks them to live pious life and to pray that “we may receive the gift of discerning spirits” (*Vita Antonii*, no.38). Some important qualities that needed for a spiritual father are discussed below.

Charity. An elder took up this ministry because of charity. In dealing with the weakness of the disciples he need extraordinary patience, gentleness, forbearance, delicacy and compassion. “Charity and non-judgment were, without question, the outstanding qualities of the desert fathers/mothers” (Corcoran, 1988, p.447). Compassion for others and understand their plight is the way of charity. Without charity all other virtues, as Paul says, are mere “noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1). “Holiness consists in being God’s neighbour through charity and all spiritual direction consists in bringing another close to God through charity” (Hausherr, 1990, p.57).

Spiritual fathers are often more strict to their beloved disciples (cf. Heb 12:8). At the same time they are very sensitive to not give more burden (spiritual or physical) than their disciples can carry. He himself carries part of the burden of one’s spiritual child. Constantly praying for the spiritual children is a way of carrying the burden “since of all ascetic works prayer is the one that ultimately demands the greatest effort, and because such prayer for the disciple obtains either relief from pain or greater strength to bear it” (Hausherr, 1990, p.141). Together with prayer listening with kindness and patience, and desiring the good of their children always, as like a natural father, are part of this charity. Slowly a matured and deep Christian friendship arise among them and some modern authors call it as ‘soul friendship.’

Humility. Spiritual father who stands at the place of Christ to the disciple shall acquire the mind of Christ who emptied himself and

obeyed his father unto death (Phil 2:5-11). The sense of humility and kenosis in the spiritual father comes from his deep self-awareness and knowledge that he is inadequate to take-up such a ministry, and his participation in the very life of Christ. This surely helped him to see others as they are with a luminous eye. Disclosing of the heart needs humility not only from the part of the directee but also from the director who listen it. Because,

True discretion is not obtained except by true humility. The first proof of this humility will be if not only everything that is to be done but also everything that is thought of is offered to the inspection of the elders, so that, not trusting in one's own judgment, one may submit in every respect to their understanding and may know how to judge what is good and bad according to what they have handed down (Ramsey, 1997).

Spiritual father who asks obedience, which presupposes humility, shall obedient like Christ to his father. Spiritual father who did not undergo spiritual direction in their spiritual life shall not go for directing others.

Knowledge and Wisdom. The early monastics and Fathers of the Church consider spiritual direction or guiding the soul as the greatest of all philosophies or knowledge. Those who practice it without enough instruction and knowledge do more harm to the directees than good. (Hausherr, 1990, p.52-54) This is not mere bookish/acquired knowledge but wisdom from the experience in the ways of God working in a person's soul and as the gift of the Holy Spirit. So, "it is necessary that those who are to be promoted to the care of souls have an understanding of things human and divine, and know how to discern the movements of psychic and somatic powers; and they must also possess the other qualities consequent on these" (Hausherr, 1990, p.80). Proper discernment presupposes this knowledge and wisdom. As Abba Poemen says "Vigilance, self-knowledge and discernment; these are the guides of the soul" (Ward, 1975, p.172).

Leading through Example than Words. Use less words and lead the spiritual children through example is the quality of a good spiritual father. This presupposes a life of integrity and holiness from the part of a spiritual father. "You cannot cure the souls of others or 'help people' without having changed yourself. You cannot put in order the spiritual economy of others so long as there is chaos in your own soul. You cannot bring peace to others if you do not have it yourself" (Elchaninov, 2001, p.218). As Cassian says "a saintly life is more educative than a

sermon” (Conferences 11.2; Chadwick, 1958). So there are no self-appointed spiritual directors in the East but only reluctant ones though they are ardently seek by many. So “a true spiritual father is the one who proposes a model to his disciple, because what he has to convey is not encoded into a written text, but in his way of being” (Lemeni, 2013, p.75).

Basil in one of his ascetical discourse says about the monastic superior/*hegumen* is also applicable here for spiritual fathers: “[I]t is therefore of the highest importance that the one chosen as guide in this state of life be such that his life may serve as a model of every virtue to those who look to him, and, as the Apostle says, that he be ‘sober, prudent, of good behaviour, a teacher’” (1 Tim 3:2) (Wagner, 1962, p.210-11). So we can say the essential function of any spiritual father is guiding the inner life of the disciple by his own life and example.

Spiritual Father (*pater pneumatikos*) and Spiritual Master/Guide (*didaskalos*). Leading through example further differentiate the life and role of a spiritual father and a mere teacher. A spiritual father is not a mere teacher in the modern sense. As Lemeni says “an Abba is never defined as a teacher (*didaskalos*) who teaches in theory a set of knowledge to his disciples” (Lemeni, 2013, p.74). A spiritual father is not teaching a doctrine or science but help the spiritual children to experience the divine life. “The spiritual father being essentially a vehicle of grace, he does not transmit a truth, but rather he embodies it in his own way of life” (Lemeni, 2013, p.76). Hausherr explains that “a person can be a professor, and very good one, but that does not make him a spiritual father; it does not even prove that he can become one, at least in the judgement of the easterners ... The essential, the indispensable condition for becoming someone’s spiritual father is to first be spiritual oneself” (Hausherr, 1990, p.29). So there are so many spiritual masters/teachers but few spiritual fathers.

Charismatic and Prophetic Authority of the Spiritual Father

The authority of the spiritual father is of more prophetic and charismatic than a formal one. Some authors relate the prophetic ministry that arose in the second century to the ministry of spiritual direction and by that relating it to the “prophetic ministry” of Apostle Paul in the early Church, though this practice, as we understood now, emerged in the 4th century only (Allen, 1991; Kontzevich, 1989). In the OT prophets are the voice of God to the people. To the spiritual children spiritual

fathers' words become the voice of God. "Abba, one word" is the normal utterance of a disciple to his spiritual father. This we can see in the desert fathers. Yes, the disciple or the spiritual child asking what is the will of God for him. So discerning the will and plan of God for his spiritual child has utmost importance.

As monastic life is not part of Church's hierarchical institution spiritual fathers also not part of that. As Kallistos Ware says "spiritual guides are ordained, not by human hands, but by the hand of God. They are an expression of the Church as "event" or "happening," rather than of the Church as institution" (Ware, 2000, p.129). From the beginning of the monastic life in the Church in the early centuries it is like that. St. Antony of Egypt is considered as a model for this.

Their authenticity comes from this authority. Abandoning oneself into the hands of God in obedience – there blooms this authenticity, for both the spiritual father and to the disciple.

What preserves the authenticity of spiritual direction in the desert is the unrelenting sense of accountability and responsibility. No one set himself or herself up as an authority. Abandonment to another in obedience was the only avenue toward grace; but it was expected of everyone, elders and novices alike! (Chryssavgus, 2003, p. 65).

Otherwise it will lead only to domination. Only by becoming flame they can kindle flame in others. It is said that early spiritual fathers were not men who went after miracles, vision, ecstasies etc. Rather they live very ordinarily, though in dire needs and in the name of God and as a charitable work they did some miracles. "The essential reason for their authority lies in the fact that they treated all things with judgment and discretion of Spirit rather than obstinacy of mind" (Hausherr, 1990, p.40; Ramsey, 1997). This makes them authentic, by that also prophetically authoritative.

Conclusion

Spiritual fatherhood is an essential part of monastic tradition from the beginning of monasticism in the East. All authorities in the Church are from God for the service of his people. While spiritual father represents the charismatic and prophetic authority the bishop represents surely the formal and sacramental authority in the Church. The role of the spiritual father is to help the spiritual children on the way of their spiritual journey. Most importantly he is helping his spiritual children

in discernment (of the spirits) in the way of Christian perfection. At the same time, he is doing this with humility and love with wisdom and knowledge. Most importantly spiritual father's life is the message to the disciple. He is not a mere teacher but represents Christ himself to the spiritual child.

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