

Nurturing Mental Health with Spiritual Direction

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Introduction

A jubilee offers not only a moment for celebration, but also a critical opportunity for spiritual renewal, introspection, and recommitment to one's foundational mission. In the context of the 150th Jubilee of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), the theme "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*" underscores the Society's enduring commitment to intercultural and holistic evangelization. The theme broadens the horizon of mission to include not only the proclamation of the Word but also the pastoral and psychological accompaniment of those in need.

Contemporary realities—marked by increasing levels of mental, emotional, and spiritual distress—call for an integrated approach to formation and ministry. In this light, spiritual direction emerges as a vital practice that fosters self-awareness, inner healing, and resilience. Drawing from pastoral experience in spiritual direction and counseling at St. Joseph's Catholic Institute of Theology in Yangon, Myanmar, the author explores the intersection of spirituality and mental health, emphasizing the relevance of spiritual accompaniment as a form of mission grounded in compassion, presence, and faithful service to the whole person.

Spiritual direction is not limited to one-on-one or face-to-face encounters. It also extends to those under our care in our workplaces and among people from diverse cultures, traditions, and life experiences. As Divine Word Missionaries, we are blessed with a unique opportunity to offer guidance and bring hope to those facing life's many challenges, as we serve in diverse,

multicultural settings—transcending cultural boundaries in the spirit of our mission. Spirituality and spiritual direction contribute positively to the overall well-being of the person. In today’s world, where mental health is a growing concern, spiritual accompaniment can offer meaning, inner peace, and resilience. By listening with compassion and journeying with others in faith, we support not just their spiritual growth, but their holistic well-being—mind, body, and soul.

We are called to be a light for those who dwell in the darkness of fear, anxiety, and life’s many trials. This Jubilee Year renews our calling and challenges us once again to live as true *“Witnesses to the Light—From Everywhere for Everyone.”*

Pilgrimage of the Soul

Spirituality Today

Deep within many of us lies a yearning for spirituality. Researchers have observed that interest in spirituality has surged across various fields in recent years, including education, business, science, and medicine. Terms like “spirituality,” “spiritual life,” and “spiritual direction” have become increasingly prevalent in contemporary discourse. For example, thousands of people journey to countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka and India in search of meaning or spiritual enlightenment, often guided by spiritual teachers or gurus. These individuals are in search of direction, meaning, and purpose in life. Despite all their material possessions, they find their lives still feel empty, as though something crucial is missing. Many arrive with personal challenges but leave feeling peaceful and fulfilled. As one tourist remarked, “I went to India for the first time last year. I’d always been drawn to ancient Indian philosophy... It was, I guess you could say, ‘spiritual tourism’: travel for the purpose of spiritual growth.”¹

In recent years, Christian Ashrams have emerged across various regions of India. A Christian Ashram is a type of monastery modeled on Hindu hermitages. Years ago, those of us assigned to foreign missions had the opportunity to experience a Christian ashram, where we met many foreigners who had come to deepen their personal growth, self-awareness, and inner peace under the guidance of trained priests. These priests, often referred to as

¹ Jules Evans, “The Construction of Spiritual India,” *Philosophy for Life*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.philosophyforlife.org>

“Christian gurus,” led us through spiritual exercises, talks, and meditation. Many of these visitors would leave their families behind to experience a deeper spiritual connection with God. This trend continues to thrive to this day.

What is Spirituality, Anyway?

Spirituality has been defined in many different ways. For St. Arnold Janssen, it centered on the Holy Trinity—the Divine Word and the Holy Spirit in particular. His writings and legacy reflect a deep commitment to nurturing one’s relationship with God through following Jesus, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and engaging in prayer and reflection.

De Valle stated that SVD spirituality is missionary in nature, as it seeks to bring the life of God to others. The SVD emphasizes both diversity and universality, recognizing that God loves all people and has created us different and diverse so that we may have the courage to live together in harmony.²

Pope Francis offers a similarly profound perspective. He observes, “Today, many still seek religious security rather than the living and true God, focusing on rituals and precepts instead of embracing God’s love with their whole being.”³

But what does it mean to embrace God’s love with our whole being? The Pope explains further: “Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by laboring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain.”⁴

In essence, we are invited to imitate Jesus’ love and care for others through small, everyday actions—wherever we are and whatever we do. This, he suggests, is true spirituality, spiritual life, or simply being spiritual. Pope Benedict XVI summarizes this beautifully, stating, “The call to perfection or holiness is essentially what the Christian spiritual life is all about.”⁵

² Carlos De Valle, SVD, “Spirituality and Charism of the Divine Word,” *Correo Misionero*, no. 3 (Summer 2016).

³ FLL Editorial Team, “Francis: People Still Seek Religious Security Rather than the Living and True God,” last modified October 28, 2021, <https://fll.cc/en/inspire/pope-francis-people-still-seek-religious-security-rather-than-the-living-and-true-god/>.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today’s World, Gaudete et Exsultate*, March 19, 2018, no. 14; *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 2018, no. 110.

⁵ Mark S. Latkovic, “Catholic Men, the Spiritual Life, and Our Growth in Holiness-Perfection: Living Faith as Conversion, Knowledge, and Joy According to the Thought of Joseph

The Importance of Spiritual Direction

In our Christian life, we all—whether laypersons, religious, or clergy—need guidance. No one can achieve perfection in this life. We are imperfect people living in an imperfect world. We often lose our way and, at times, feel lost. Our intimacy with God may not always meet the mark. Spiritual direction offers a time-tested and effective way to bridge this gap. This practice has been part of Christian tradition since the time of the desert fathers and mothers in Egypt.

The 150th Jubilee of the Society of the Divine Word, with its theme “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*,” provides a timely invitation to reimagine our missionary commitment not just in terms of geographic outreach, but also in how we accompany the inner journeys of those we serve.⁶ In line with the Society’s charism, which emphasizes intercultural dialogue and holistic evangelization, spiritual direction becomes a quiet yet powerful form of mission—especially when extended to those carrying hidden burdens of mental and emotional distress.

As countless individuals seek guidance to live more meaningfully and build closer relationships with God and others, we, as followers of Christ, also need a spiritual director to help us navigate this path. Henri Nouwen, with his characteristic simplicity, defined spiritual direction as “direction given to people in their relationship with God.”⁷

Numerous articles have been written on the role and importance of spiritual direction in the life of a Christian who is committed to deepening his faith and relationship with God. The purpose of this article, however, is not to repeat what has already been written, but to focus on some of the significant benefits that spiritual direction can offer for maintaining a healthy mental state through a strong spiritual life, guided by a spiritual director.

Spiritual Direction and Mental Health

Today, mental health professionals widely recognize the positive impact that spiritual direction can have on mental well-being. Recent research

Cardinal Ratzinger/Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, November 16, 2015, <https://www.hprweb.com/2015/11/catholic-men-the-spiritual-life-and-our-growth-in-holiness-perfection/>.

⁶ Cf. Society of the Divine Word, *SVD General Chapter 2000*, Document no. 74; Alexander Rodlach, ed., *SVD Health Professionals Participating in God’s Mission to Heal* (Rome: e-Publications Generalate, 2023).

⁷ Henri Nouwen, “An Ecumenical Hub for the Study and Practice of Christian Spirituality,” *Center Quest*, last modified 2022, <https://cqcenterquest.org/faq/what-is-spiritual-direction-2/>.

indicates that “to many patients, religion and spirituality serve as vital resources in coping with life’s stresses, including those related to illness.

Many psychiatrists now acknowledge the significance of religion and spirituality in their patients’ lives. The importance of spirituality in mental health is now widely accepted.”⁸

In his November 2021 prayer intention, Pope Francis recognized the effects of modern life’s pace on mental well-being, saying, “Sadness, apathy, and spiritual tiredness end up dominating people’s lives, which are overloaded due to the rhythm of life today.”⁹ He emphasized the importance of proper accompaniment for those suffering. The term “*accompaniment*” here refers to spiritual direction or guidance. Supporting this call, Fr. Frédéric Fornos, S.J., International Director of the Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network, said:

Our societies, with their relentless pace and ever-advancing technologies, contribute to depression and the stress-related burnout syndrome... Francis urges us to pray and be present for those experiencing extreme mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion. Psychological support is needed, but, as Jesus reminds us, his words offer comfort and care: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”¹⁰

We are made up of body, mind, and soul—three interdependent elements. The health of one affects the others, and thus spiritual health plays a key role in maintaining mental health. Under the guidance of a skilled spiritual director, individuals can experience a wealth of benefits for their mental well-being. A meaningful relationship with God can foster positive emotions. As Peter White observes, “There are situations where medication is necessary. However, in other cases, medication may mask a long-standing unhealthy lifestyle. Sometimes, we simply need to slow down. Spiritual direction provides a space to articulate our thoughts and emotions to another person. This is something we are hard-wired to need. In this way, it can act as ‘burnout insurance.’”¹¹

⁸ Abraham Verghese, “Spirituality and Mental Health,” *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 50, no. 4 (October 2008): 233–37, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26889252_Spirituality_and_mental_health.

⁹ “Prayer with the Pope for the Challenges Facing Humanity,” The Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network, 2021, <http://popesprayerusa.net>.

¹⁰ “People Who Suffer from Depression,” The Pope Video, 2021, <https://thepope-video.org/november-people-who-suffer-from-depression/>.

¹¹ Peter White, “10 Benefits of Spiritual Direction,” *The Sabbath Life*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.thesabbathlife.com/spiritual-direction/benefits-spiritual-direction>.

The Role of Spiritual Director in Mental Health

People typically seek spiritual direction when they are serious about deepening their relationship with God and others, and discerning God's will for their lives. Sister Catherine Liver, who has served as a spiritual director for 25 years, reflects, "It seems that many more people—perhaps due to the chaotic times we live in—are seeking a deeper sense of meaning in life and in their relationship with God."¹²

Clearly, individuals turn to spiritual directors when experiencing emotional or spiritual turmoil. They hope to gain insight into what God might be communicating through their challenging circumstances. A spiritual director helps them navigate stress and make wise choices regarding their relationships with themselves, others, and God. Through this process, individuals can experience a renewed sense of meaning, purpose, peace, and contentment. Genalin Niere-Metcalf, a psychologist and spiritual director, shares her personal experience to highlight the connection between spiritual direction and mental well-being:

Your growth in spiritual direction can enhance your ability to address psychological issues. There is something profoundly transformative when a person encounters God and experiences His unconditional love. This encounter strengthens the soul, enabling it to confront hidden shame and the painful aspects of the heart. . . I have seen directees face their grief and loss more deeply, instead of avoiding the pain, as they grow in their experience of God's love and care. Those struggling with depression or anxiety often begin to understand how shame has contributed to their psychological challenges, as God's love removes that shame and sets them free.¹³

A spiritual director can be seen as a catalyst—a mediator between the Holy Spirit and the directee. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the spiritual director helps the individual discover their potential and self-worth, contributing to the wholeness of body, mind, and soul. The vital role of the spiritual director in helping the directee achieve this holistic well-being can be summarized by the following benefits:

- Identifying and trusting one's own experience of God
- Integrating spirituality into daily life
- Discerning and making difficult choices

¹² Dan Burke, "Disciple of a Fool," *Catholic Spiritual Direction*, May 19, 2015, <https://spiritualdirection.com/2015/05/19/disciple-of-a-fool>.

¹³ Genalin Niere-Metcalf, "On Being a Spiritual Director and Clinical Psychologist," *Samarara Care Counseling*, 2021, <https://samaracarecounseling.org/on-being-a-spiritual-director-and-clinical-psychologist/>.

- Sharing struggles, losses, or disappointments
- Finding encouragement and affirmation
- Growing in relationship with God, self, others, and creation¹⁴

A Brief Interview on the Impact of Spiritual Direction on Mental Health

To assess the impact of spiritual direction on mental health, I conducted an interview with five seminarians from the Catholic Major Seminary of Yangon. They were asked the question: What benefits have you received from your years of spiritual direction? The respondents included two seminarians from the second year, two from the pastoral year, and one from the third year. Except for the third-year seminarian, who stated that he only benefited spiritually, the other four seminarians recognized the holistic benefits to soul, mind, and body. Some key responses are as follows:

- *Noel Paul Raj Thet Paing Soe (Third Year)*: Noel noted that spiritual direction “enabled me to become aware of my strengths, weaknesses, and shortcomings, as well as the areas where I need to make greater efforts to improve.” He added that spiritual direction helped him cope with his emotional struggles.
- *Robert Jacob Thi Ha Kyaw (Third Year)*: Robert echoed similar thoughts, saying that spiritual counseling “*raised my self-awareness.*” He also shared that, through proper direction from his spiritual director, he was able to overcome his fears, regrets, and spiritual dryness.
- *Paulinus Ghung Khui Shing (Pastoral Year)*: Paulinus stated that spiritual direction benefited him spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally. “I gradually became more aware of myself and improved my emotional maturity, which enhanced my spirituality.” Through his encounters with the spiritual director, he experienced increased self-confidence and self-acceptance: “I am able to accept my imperfections and surrender everything into the Hands of God, especially the things beyond my control.”
- *Paul Naw Ja (Pastoral Year)*: In addition to experiencing a greater awareness of God in his life, Paul felt that his self-esteem was strengthened. “I feel the worthiness of my being,” he said, “and that feeling encourages me to strive for personal growth.” He also explained how one of his spiritual directors encouraged him not

¹⁴ Cf. Ronald Bagley et al., eds., *Becoming a Young Adult Responsive Church: A Guide for Implementing Sons and Daughters of the Light—A Pastoral Plan for Ministry with Young Adults* (Naugatuck, CT: CMD, 1997), <https://dwc.org/diocese/ministries/young-adult-ministry/spiritual-direction-questions-to-ponder/what-are-the-benefits-of-meeting-with-a-spiritual-director/>.

only to make an examination of conscience but also to cultivate an awareness of every action he undertakes. “I was encouraged to focus on self-acceptance rather than on my imperfections,” he said. He acknowledged, however, that while spiritual directors can guide and accompany him, the ultimate responsibility for transforming his life lies with him.

From the responses of these seminarians, it is clear that they recognized the profound importance of spiritual direction for holistic growth. In particular, they noted its positive influence on their mental health. Mental health, as the seminarians describe, encompasses the overall well-being necessary for functioning effectively in all aspects of life. Based on this interview, I have identified four key benefits of spiritual direction that underscore its impact on mental health.

Spiritual Direction and the Development of Self-Awareness

The role of spiritual direction in fostering self-awareness was highlighted by seminarians during the interviews I conducted. Self-awareness is one of the key factors for good mental health. According to the Oxford Dictionary, self-awareness is the conscious knowledge of one’s own character, feelings, and thoughts. It is about being honest with yourself—understanding who you are, including your abilities, emotions, and limitations. Self-awareness is essential for positive mental health and can be likened to the ancient Greek aphorism, “Know thyself.”

One of the significant challenges faced by today’s youth is an identity crisis. Many try to imitate others, striving to become someone they are not. They face immense pressure from peers, family, school, and other social influences to con-form to others’ expectations. This creates a tension between their authentic selves and the personas they try to project. Blaming others for personal misfortunes, harboring envy, or fostering biases can prevent genuine self-awareness.

Self-awareness is crucial for overcoming self-importance, hypocrisy, biases, and prejudices. It promotes respect for diverse opinions and ideas, fosters healthier relationships with others, and strengthens one’s relationship with God. As Jesus said, “Whatever you do for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you do for me” (Matthew 25:40).

There is a saying: “Self-awareness is the oxygen of the spiritual life.” Spiritual direction provides abundant opportunities for developing this awareness. A 2018 study involving students from Christian institutions explored the role of attachment to God and spiritual self-awareness in evangelical Christians’ understanding of suffering. The study found that individuals with avoidant

attachment to God exhibited lower levels of spiritual self-awareness.¹⁵ Avoidant attachment refers to a mindset in which a person views God as distant and impersonal, feeling as though God does not care. In essence, those with a strained relationship with God tend to have lower self-awareness.

Spiritual direction is specifically designed to help individuals examine their inner lives. The spiritual director, with guidance from the Holy Spirit, helps the directee delve deeply into their spiritual interior. This examination is crucial, as Boniface Hicks explains: “Our interior life impacts—and is impacted by—everything we think, feel, say, do, and choose not to do. It is the place where we are alone with ourselves and alone with God.”¹⁶ Going deeply into one’s interior life is not easy. It requires openness and courage to face one’s wounds, brokenness, limitations, and weaknesses. One must become vulnerable to truly encounter oneself. Only then can the directee begin to listen to the voice of God. In the silence of the interior life, one can hear Christ’s voice, guiding them toward His will and nurturing a deeper relationship with God.

Spiritual Direction and the Improvement of Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is another key component of superior mental health. In fact, individuals with strong self-awareness tend to have higher self-confidence. As mentioned earlier, self-awareness allows a person to be honest with themselves—acknowledging both their strengths and weaknesses. This honesty is a crucial prerequisite for building self-confidence. Self-confidence refers to one’s belief in their own abilities and worth. It is essential in every aspect of life, as it enables individuals to achieve great things. However, many people struggle with low self-confidence due to challenging life circumstances, such as strained relationships, financial stress, or chronic illness.

Can spiritual direction play a role in improving self-confidence? Research suggests it can. A 2016 study conducted among university students in Indonesia found that spiritual counseling helped students improve their self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-control.¹⁷ This highlights the positive impact of spiritual guidance on personal growth.

¹⁵ Naomi A. Bock, “The Role of Attachment to God and Spiritual Self-Awareness in Predicting Evangelical Christians’ Appraisals of Suffering,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 21, no. 4 (August 2018): 1–17.

¹⁶ Boniface Hicks, “Going Deeper with Spiritual Direction,” *St. Paul Center*, September 26, 2018, <https://stpaulcenter.com/going-deeper-with-spiritual-direction/>.

¹⁷ Iip Istirahayu, Syamsu Yusuf, and Dian Mayasari, “Increase the Ability of Self-Direction through Spiritual Counselling,” *Global Illuminators* 3 (2016): 18–21, www.globalilluminators.org.

Moreover, faith in a higher power can significantly boost self-confidence. When individuals trust that someone greater than themselves is looking after them—someone who cares and provides—they feel less alone and more secure. In my interviews, seminarians like Paulinus Shing and Paul emphasized this trust, with Paul stating, “Put everything in the Hand of God.” The spiritual director’s role is to help deepen this faith, fostering trust in God’s providence and care.

When facing life’s struggles, people who are confident in God’s presence are more likely to approach challenges with assurance, knowing that the Creator is watching over them. As Seminarian Paul put it, “During spiritual direction, I feel safe to express my uncovered state of spiritual life. I can honestly reflect on what God is doing in my life.” Reflections like these undoubtedly contribute to greater self-confidence.

Spiritual Direction and the Boosting of Self-Esteem

In the interviews, seminarians acknowledged self-esteem as one of the key benefits of spiritual direction. As Robert Jacob put it, “This helps me stay in the present moment instead of focusing on things I might regret from my past or fears of the future.” Self-esteem refers to how much we value and appreciate ourselves. Whether one has high or low self-esteem often depends on how honestly we answer questions such as: Do I appreciate myself? Do I value my talents and abilities? How do I respond to compliments? Do I know my worth, or do I view myself as worthless?

In simple terms, self-esteem is the value we place on ourselves. Low self-esteem can wreak havoc on one’s life, destroying dreams, hopes for the future, and negatively impacting social and spiritual well-being. Threats to self-esteem include negative self-talk, undervaluing accomplishments, comparing oneself unfavorably to others, and blaming oneself for external problems. Low self-esteem can also be exacerbated by how others perceive and judge us. Healthy self-esteem requires a clear understanding of oneself and one’s abilities. As Caprile wisely notes, “It’s important to remember that we all have our own paths to walk. While feedback from others can be helpful in the quest for self-love, it will never replace it.”¹⁸

Can spirituality or spiritual direction help boost self-esteem? A survey of 464 participants consisting of respondents aged 15 and older examined self-esteem alongside religiosity, religious attendance, prayer frequency, negative religious coping, image of God, and spirituality. The results indicated that

¹⁸ Capril, “Low Self-Esteem? These Spiritual Practices Will Help,” *Spiritual Guidance*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.astrology.com/article/low-self-esteem-spiritual-practices/>.

regular prayer, spirituality, a low level of religious struggles, and a positive image of God were all linked to higher self-esteem. Interestingly, religious participants were found to have a 60 per cent lower chance of experiencing high self-esteem compared to non-religious respondents,¹⁹ which may suggest that spirituality's role in self-esteem can vary based on one's faith and practices.

However, as research suggests, spiritual practices like prayer and a positive image of God indeed promote a high self-esteem. For example, prayer is central to spiritual direction. As Fr. Bennet Kelley, OP, observes: "Unless a person is willing to devote him/herself to a life of prayer, and daily speaking to God, he is not yet ready for ongoing spiritual direction."²⁰ Both the spiritual director and directee must engage prayerfully, listening for God's voice. Spiritual direction, therefore, encourages regular prayer, fosters spirituality, and nurtures a positive image of God—elements that can profoundly enhance self-esteem.

Moreover, self-knowledge cannot be fully developed in isolation. We often need others to help us see ourselves more clearly and guide us toward our full potential. As the saying goes, "We are not the best judges of ourselves." Our self-perception can be clouded by doubts and uncertainties. Through consistent dialogue with a spiritual director, the directee gains crucial insights into their true self. Spiritual direction provides opportunities for deep reflection and understanding of one's identity.

Opus Dei, in an article on healthy self-esteem, explains: "Besides personal reflection, self-knowledge comes from what others teach us about ourselves. This requires learning how to open up to those who can truly help us: what a wonderful means we have in personal spiritual direction! There we receive another person's advice and consider it in relation to a truly worthwhile ideal for our life."²¹ A spiritual director, using scriptures and other spiritual literature, helps the directee see their value and worth. Passages such as the following can be especially empowering for someone seeking to grow in self-esteem:

- We are created in the image of God; everyone is called to develop and grow in this likeness (cf. Genesis 1:27).
- We are loved by God, despite our sinfulness (cf. Romans 5:8).

¹⁹ Katarína Gábová, Katarína Maliňáková, and Tavel, "Associations of Self-Esteem with Different Aspects of Religiosity and Spirituality," *Československá Psychologie* 65, no. 1 (February 28, 2021): 73–85.

²⁰ David W. Acklin and Boniface Hicks, "Guidance in Prayer from a Spiritual Director," *St. Paul Center*, September 24, 2018, <https://stpaulcenter.com/guidance-in-prayer-from-a-spiritual-director/>.

²¹ "A Healthy Self-Esteem," *Opus Dei*, October 8, 2015.

These and similar scriptural passages form the foundation of a positive self-image. By continually encountering God, we grow in the awareness of our intrinsic value as His beloved children.

Spiritual Direction and the Discovery of Meaning and Purpose in Life

Research has consistently shown that individuals with a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life experience better mental health, greater overall well-being, and enhanced cognitive functioning compared to those who lack such a sense of purpose.²² How, then, can one find meaning and purpose in life without proper self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-esteem? As we have already seen, spiritual direction fosters these qualities, which in turn enable a person to discover their meaning and purpose in life.

Throughout history, people from all walks of life have sought to understand the meaning of their existence. Questions like “Why am I here?” “What am I supposed to do with my life?” and “Where am I going?” are universal. In my own priestly experience, I have encountered people who frequently switch religions in search of deeper meaning, hoping to find a belief system that offers them clarity and direction. In this context, it’s valuable to remember the question Jesus posed to His first disciples: “What are you looking for?” (John 1:38). They, too, were seeking meaning in their lives, and Jesus invited them to “Come and see”—to find their purpose through Him.

Every religion offers a path to discover life’s true meaning and purpose. Buddhism, for example, teaches that the true purpose of life is to alleviate suffering through compassion and helping others. Christianity, however, teaches that the meaning of life is to seek the Lord, to know Him, and to love Him with all our strength (CCC1).

This is precisely where spiritual direction plays a pivotal role. One of the most crucial questions a person can discuss with their spiritual director is: “What is God doing in my life right now? What does He want me to do, and where is He leading me?” Pope Francis wisely reminds us: “If you are looking for meaning in life but not finding it, you throw yourself away with ‘imitations of love,’ such as wealth, career, pleasure, or addiction. Let Jesus look at you, and you will discover you have always been loved.”²³ This truth was

²² Kristen Fuller, “How Creating a Sense of Purpose Can Impact Your Mental Health,” *Psychology Today*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/happiness-is-state-mind/202203/how-creating-sense-purpose-can-impact-your-mental-health>.

²³ Pope Francis, “There Is No Better Way to Pray than as Mary Did,” *Pildoras de Fe*, June 27, 2020, <https://www.pildorasdefe.net/noticias/pope-francis-mary-prayer>.

demonstrated long ago when Jesus walked the earth. In the Gospels, we read about a rich man who sought meaning in life. He came to Jesus, who instructed him: “Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor. Then come and follow me, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Matthew 19:21).

Integrating the Theme “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*” into Spiritual Direction and Mental Health—for Ourselves and Those We Serve

The theme, “*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*,” chosen for the SVD’s 150th Anniversary, invites us to reflect on how we care for both ourselves and those who come to us for guidance. In the context of spiritual direction and mental health, it calls us to offer inclusive, compassionate, and holistic support that honors the diversity and dignity of every person. Some recommendations:

a) Holistic Care: The theme highlights the SVD’s global mission. Integrating spiritual direction and mental health support fosters holistic care by addressing the spiritual, emotional, and psychological needs of individuals from diverse cultural and personal backgrounds.²⁴

b) Embracing Diversity: Recognizing the richness and complexity of human experiences allows us, as SVDs, to offer more compassionate and effective care. This reflects the theme’s call to serve “*From Everywhere for Everyone*,” embracing all people in their uniqueness.²⁵

c) Accompaniment and Support: Spiritual direction offers meaningful accompaniment for individuals on their spiritual journeys, including those facing mental health challenges. By offering such support, we affirm our commitment to the integral care of each person—spiritually, emotionally, and mentally—living out our mission to reach “Everyone.”²⁶

d) Mission and Evangelization: By responding to both the spiritual and emotional needs of individuals, we enhance the effectiveness of our ministry and evangelization. Reaching out to people of varied backgrounds and cultures, we affirm our dedication to a more holistic, inclusive, and compassionate approach to care and mission.²⁷

²⁴ Cf Alexander Rodlach, ed., *SVD Health Professionals Participating in God’s Mission to Heal* (Rome: e-Publications Generalate, 2023), 57–58.

²⁵ Society of the Divine Word, “Prologue,” in *Constitutions of the Society of the Divine Word*.

²⁶ Cf. Philip Gibbs, “Mission and Culture,” in *The SVD Connection*, 295.

²⁷ Cf. Society of the Divine Word, *SVD General Chapter 2000*, Document no. 74.

Conclusion

Numerous studies have highlighted the profound positive impact of spirituality on mental health, both generally and especially in times of crisis. Spiritual and mental well-being are deeply interconnected, each influencing and reinforcing the other. Developing healthy self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-esteem is crucial for discovering meaning and purpose in life—key components of mental wellness. A spiritually grounded person is often more likely to maintain a positive mental state.

However, spiritual growth rarely occurs in isolation. As Christianity teaches, we are fellow pilgrims on a shared spiritual journey. We need one another for support and encouragement to navigate life's challenges. This mutual support helps us resist the temptations of loneliness, avoid unnecessary complaints born from a lack of sacrifice, refrain from speaking ill of others, and prevents us from indiscriminately seeking consolation from anyone who will listen—often driven by our longing to be understood.²⁸

In the spirit of the Jubilee theme, "*Witnessing to the Light: From Everywhere for Everyone*," we recognize that this journey of mental and spiritual renewal is not confined by geography, culture, or background. It is a universal call inviting people from all walks of life to come together, support one another, and share the healing power of faith and fellowship. In embracing this inclusive vision, we foster a community where everyone—regardless of where they come from—can find hope, purpose, and renewed strength for the challenges ahead.

²⁸ Cf. Pope Francis, "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to Priests on the 160th Anniversary of the Death of The Holy Curé of Ars, St John Vianney," August 4, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190804_lettera-presbiteri.html.