One of the first things I recommend to a man considering the Jesuits is that he get into spiritual direction with a good Jesuit spiritual director.

*What is spiritual direction?*

Spiritual direction is an ongoing process of nurturing one’s spiritual life. Although it is not counseling or therapy, it may have the benefits of healing and spiritual and emotional growth. Perhaps the best way to explain it is to describe how it works. Imagine if you will that I am the one seeking spiritual direction.

First of all, I must find and ask someone to be my spiritual director. I might ask for a referral from the Jesuit vocation director, a priest, or another person whose judgment I trust. (For someone considering becoming a Jesuit, a Jesuit spiritual director is preferred because he would be familiar with our approach to the spiritual life.)

Once I have found a director, we meet regularly (perhaps monthly) for about an hour each time. I tell my director what has been going on in my spiritual life. This includes talking about my prayer, how I’ve been praying, what’s been going on in my prayer, whether I’ve felt drawn by the Lord in any particular way. I might also talk about how I’ve been finding God (or perhaps not finding God) in my daily experiences, such as in my relationships, work studies, leisure, and other areas of my life.

I could talk about my temptations, what’s going well, what’s not going so well, my moral life, how I’ve been living out my faith in practice through volunteer work, being helpful to friends, and so forth. If in vocational discernment, my spiritual direction would include telling my director how I feel moved regarding my vocation.

My spiritual director then gives me feedback regarding what I’ve shared. He might talk about what movements or patterns he hears, what seems to be coming from God and, conversely, what seems to stem from negative sources.

The director is like a spiritual guide. Experienced in the spiritual life, he ushers and mentors me down new and unfamiliar paths, enriching my ability to observe and absorb from what is going on around and within me. A spiritual director in the Jesuit or Ignatian tradition will use St. Ignatius’s guidelines from the Spiritual Exercises to help interpret my experiences.

*Why is spiritual direction important?*

If I’m trying to discern (“figure out”) God’s call to me, I must pay attention to what God is saying to me. For that to happen, I must pray regularly – preferably daily – for an extended period (say, a half hour). I must pay attention to the patterns of what I hear in my prayer, the various spiritual movements within me. The guidance of a spiritual director makes me better equipped to do these things for several reasons.

Regular meetings add accountability into the discernment process. When I know I will be making a report shortly to my spiritual director, I am challenged to look more carefully at my experiences so that I can articulate to my director what’s been going on in my life.
In articulating my experiences to my director, in a sense I “put my experiences out there” to be looked at together. This helps me more clearly explore my inner experiences, detecting patterns, themes, and “movements.”

My director serves as a companion in my spiritual life and offers support. This is very important, because in our secular culture, trying to lead a life of prayer and faith and hear God’s call can be difficult.

Spiritual direction can also greatly reduce the possibility of self-deception. It is said St. Theresa of Avila noted: “The person who has himself as a spiritual director has a fool for director!” In going it alone, it becomes too easy to misinterpret our inner experiences. Unconscious biases can lure us away from listening to God’s voice. Instead we can end up paying more attention to voices other than God’s such as the values of our secular culture, family, or friends. Not that family and friends can’t be helpful. It’s just that we cannot assume that their will is always the same as God’s.

Finally, a willingness to enter spiritual direction can be a kind of vocation litmus test. Committing myself to these initial basic practices shows that I am serious about determining God’s will for me and whether or not I have a religious vocation.