

A spiritual director, seeking direction

By [Jeff Nelson](#)

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In one of the cabinets of my office, I keep a small glass holder big enough for a single tea light candle. I received it my first semester of seminary, during which I'd taken a class called Spiritual Formation. The professor, a soft-spoken gentle spirit, led us each week in reflecting on the writings of figures such as the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Teresa of Avila, Francis of Assisi, and Ignatius of Loyola. We learned about lectio divina, walking the labyrinth, prayer postures, and many other time-tested spiritual practices and disciplines.

This class was an oasis during a rough period of adjustment to this new life chapter; a balm that helped make a jarring experience of transition more gentle. I recall the night I received this candle holder: we were studying the practice of sabbath, during which we were invited to light a candle to mark the beginning of this time of rest. For these exercises, we were often invited to find our own quiet corner of the administration building. I remember the shadows caused by this little flame dancing on the walls as I sat in silence, contemplating, resting. At the end of that evening, we were told that we could keep our candle holders. Mine has been used many times since, both a reminder of that class and an ongoing tool for prayer and centering of spirit.

I credit that early class, as well as many other experiences of prayer practice throughout seminary, with my ongoing interest in spirituality. It was during those years that I first heard that there exists such a thing as spiritual direction, and that people could be certified for this ministry of guiding others in their awareness of the divine in their lives. As future clergy, we were occasionally encouraged to seek out such a figure once we entered the field, which at times can be quite spiritually draining.

While I let that concept and encouragement by the wayside for my first few years of ministry, I never forgot it. I retained an interest in several prayer practices and even taught a class myself, and eventually realized that maybe this would be my next educational venture, to be woven into my evolving sense of vocation.

As it happened, the [Ignatian Spirituality Institute](#) at John Carroll University had been sending me a pamphlet every year at the church, inviting me to an open house, encouraging me to consider whether this was the right call for me or for someone I knew. After receiving this flyer enough times and prayerfully weighing it against a few other options, I decided that this was the correct next step on my journey.

That was three years ago. Three months ago, I completed my studies and was officially certified as a spiritual director.

The ceremony itself came at the end of a weekend-long retreat, which serves both as an introduction to studies and responsibilities for the first-year and second-year classes, as well as a final commissioning and benediction to those about to be certified. There is worship, there are group sessions tailored to people in each stage of the program, and there is personal time either for reflecting on distributed material or just for recharging.

During the final worship on Sunday morning, members of the graduating class were asked to give a two-minute reflection on what the ISI has meant to them. I told the story of my first interview for the program.

It was August 2011. I was set to meet with the director and two prior graduates late one afternoon. Most of the drive up was fine, with a moderate amount of traffic and no problems . . . until I was almost to campus.

Right before you hit John Carroll, you have to navigate a multi-lane roundabout, the lanes marked with big white arrows as to which involve turns and which are meant to continue around the circle. For whatever reason, this completely confused me, and I just kept driving around and eventually found myself traveling back the way I came.

Noting that the time for my interview had passed, I called the director, whose first words after I identified myself was, "Where are you?" She helped me with some directions, and I finally found my way. It wasn't the best first impression, but they accepted me anyway.

Since then, I've journeyed through Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* myself (which produced [this experience](#), among others), spent a year delving into the theology behind the *Exercises*, and racked up 80+ practicum hours. I've gained new friends and colleagues, diverse in theological and vocational background. I found

support, sustenance, and clarity in these things in the midst of a transition to a new pastorate and the welcoming of a daughter. I was aided in my discernment during times when I was frantically traveling around in a circle, wondering which path to take.

At the end of this stage of the journey, I think I know the answer to the question, "Where are you?" a little better. Or, at least, I received a few answers when I repeatedly asked. As for how I will use these new skills, whether in the local church or beyond it, I'm still asking. But as Ignatius would say, I need to discern the spirits at play and see where the good ones are leading.

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