

To counsel the doubtful is a spiritual work of mercy. Doubt is a spiritual burden, and it is an act of mercy to offer counsel and help lighten the load.

A person who is doubtful is uncertain, undecided or confused about what to think or believe; unsettled or hesitant about a decision to be made; wavering about what to do next; or afraid.

Counsel comes from the Latin word “consilium,” and it means to give advice, help make a plan, develop a strategy, resolve a problem or help make a decision. It requires prudence. The prefix “con” means “with,” which implies that counsel is done by two parties together in a cooperative process, rather than as a one-sided affair in which an expert provides the answer.

As a spiritual work of mercy, it focuses on spiritual matters. It is not about the dinner menu or the right paint color, but rather, values, beliefs, meaning, personal relationships, vocational choices and the guiding principles for a decision.

There are vastly different approaches to counsel. Worldly counsel asks, “What would make you happy?” “What would be healthy or beneficial for you?” Spiritual counsel asks, “What is God’s will in this?” “What is right and true?” “What is the ethical or moral thing to do?”

The Christian doubtful want counsel from a person who is grounded in Jesus and the Gospel; has a compassionate heart and a listening ear; is respectful, empathetic, honest, humble, gentle, open and wise; provides an opportunity for discussion; gives personal attention and constructive feedback; and offers new perspectives, alternatives, encouragement and prayers. The doubtful do not want condescension, a rush job, quick answers or pat answers.

A spiritual counselor prays for the doubter, seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit and intercedes with Mary, who is both the Seat of Wisdom and Our Lady of Good Counsel. Then, the counselor listens before speaking, explores the person’s past experiences and present concerns, attempts to see things from the person’s vantage point, and thoroughly discusses the issue, particularly the Christian call to virtue and holiness. Instead of providing the answer, a good spiritual counselor helps the person come to his or her own decision.

Jesus encountered many who were doubtful throughout his ministry. The classic example is St. Thomas, who doubted the resurrection; Jesus appeared to him and showed him his wounds to strengthen his belief (Jn 20:24-29). Nicodemus was confused about what to believe, and Jesus discussed the nature of faith with him throughout the night (Jn 3:1-15). St. John the Baptist doubted that Jesus truly was the Messiah, and Jesus cited evidence to reassure him (Mt 11:2-5). The disciples were confused about the parable of the sower, and Jesus called them aside to explain it to them (Mt 13:1-9, 18-23). St. Peter doubted as he sank into the sea, so Jesus reached out his hand to help him up (Mt 14:31). A rich young man was confused about what is necessary for eternal life, and Jesus patiently explained what is needed (Mt 19:16-22). The disciples were terrified during a storm at sea, and with a mighty deed Jesus calmed their fears (Mk 4:35-41).

Jesus had great compassion for the doubtful, and with mercy he helped them to achieve greater clarity and confidence.