



General Secretariat for the Synod of the Bishops



The Spiritual Conversion

What is spiritual conversation?

Spiritual conversation focuses on the quality of one's capacity to listen as well as the quality of the words spoken. This means paying attention to the spiritual movements in oneself and in the other person during the conversation, which requires being attentive to more than simply the words expressed. This quality of attention is an act of respecting, welcoming, and being hospitable to others as they are. It is an approach that takes seriously what happens in the hearts of those who are conversing. There are two necessary attitudes that are fundamental to this process: Active listening and speaking from the heart.

What is the primary goal of spiritual conversation?

The aim is to create an atmosphere of trust and welcome, so that people can express themselves more freely. This helps them to take seriously what happens within them as they listen to others and speak. Ultimately, this interior attentiveness makes us more aware of the presence and participation of the Holy Spirit in the process of sharing and discernment.

What is the focus of spiritual conversation?

The focus is on the person with whom one is speaking and oneself, and what we are experiencing on a spiritual level. The fundamental question is: "What is happening in the other person and in me, and how is the Lord working here?"

a) Active Listening

- The goal is to try and understand others as they are.
- Listening not only to what the other person says, but also to what he or she means and what he or she might be experiencing on a deeper level. This means listening with a heart that is open and receptive.
- This way of listening is "active" because it involves paying attention to more than one level of expression of the other. In order to do so, one must participate actively in the listening process.
- Listen to the other while he or she is speaking, and do not focus on what you are going to say afterwards.
- Welcoming, without judgment, what the other person says, no matter what one thinks about the person or what they have said. Each person is an expert on his or her own life. We must listen in a way that is "more disposed to giving a good interpretation to what the other says than condemning it as false" (Spiritual Exercises, no. 22)
- We must believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the other person.

- Welcoming without prejudice is a deep way of welcoming the other in his or her radical uniqueness.
- Active listening is letting oneself be influenced by the other and learn from the other.
- Active listening is demanding because it requires humility, openness, patience, and involvement, but it is an effective way of taking others seriously.

b) Speaking from the Heart

- This means sincerely expressing oneself, one's experience, one's sentiments and thoughts.
- It involves speaking about one's own experience and what one truly thinks and feels.
- We take responsibility not only for what we say, but also for what we feel. We do not blame others for what we feel.
- Share the truth as we see it and as we live it, but do not impose it.
- Speaking from the heart is offering a generous gift to the other, in return for being actively listened to.
- This process is greatly enriched by a regular personal practice of the Examen Prayer. Without a habit of discernment and knowledge of oneself, one cannot actively listen or speak from the heart.

What are the desired attitudes for spiritual conversation?

- Active and attentive listening
- Listen to others without judgment
- Pay attention not only to the words, but also to the tone and feelings of the speaker
- Avoid the temptation of using the time to prepare what you will say instead of listening
- Intentional speaking
- Express your experiences, thoughts, and feelings as clearly as you can
- Listen actively to yourself, mindful of your own thoughts and feelings as you speak
- Monitor possible tendencies to be self-centred when speaking

What form can spiritual conversation take? Suggested Schedule (for a 2-hour period)

1. Welcome the participants and begin the Discernment Circle with a short opening prayer, which can include a fitting passage from Scripture (5-10 minutes)
2. Introduce or appoint someone to take notes (2 minutes)
3. Ask for a volunteer as a timekeeper (2 minutes)
4. Set the tone for the Discernment Circle and describe the process (6 minutes)
5. First round of sharing (40 minutes)
6. Break (15 minutes)
7. Second round of sharing (45 minutes)
8. Invite members to share a prayer of thanksgiving, perhaps including a song (5 minutes)

a) Time for prayer and silent meditation

Spiritual conversation normally begins by actively listening to oneself and to what the Spirit is doing at the outset. This involves time for silent personal prayer and reflection, which can take one of the following forms:

Introduction: A brief introduction invites participants to share with the group one or two words that describe their interior state at that point.

Prayer: A longer time of personal prayer and reflection over the question at hand or the decision to be made, often lasting 30 minutes. At the end of this prayer period, you can decide what you will share with the group.

b) The first round

Each person speaks about what happened during the prayer time (or the group sharing). Each person has 5 minutes to speak. The focus is to listen to others, rather than simply thinking about what you want to say. Open your heart and your mind to listen to the one who is speaking. Between each person, take a 30 second pause to recall what was said. The facilitator can nominate someone to start, then participants can share one after the other. After, a longer break can help participants absorb what was said, take a breather, and return for the second round.

c) The second round

No one is obliged to speak, and participants speak spontaneously without any particular order. However each person can only share once in this second round. This round is generally shorter than the first. This is not a time for discussing or refuting what someone else says, nor for bringing up what you forgot to mention in the first round. Rather, it is an opportunity to ask questions like:

- How were you affected by what you heard?
- Is there a common thread in what was shared? Is there something missing that you had expected would be said?
- Were you especially touched by a particular sharing?
- Have you received any particular insight or revelation? What is it?
- Where did you experience a sense of harmony with others as we shared with one another?

This second round enables the group to realize what unites them. It is here that signs of the action of the Holy Spirit in the group begin to manifest themselves, and the conversation becomes an experience of shared discernment.

Pray to conclude the spiritual conversation.

(cf. Global Colloquium of the Jesuit Education Network; La conversation spirituelle)