

The 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.

The aim of spiritual conversation 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.

The focus of spiritual conversation is on the person to whom we are listening, on ourselves, and what we are experiencing at 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

- Through active listening, the goal is to try and understand others as they are. We listen 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.
- We listen to the other while he or she is speaking, and do not focus on what we are going to say afterwards.
- We welcome, without judgment, what the other person says, no matter what we think 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 of Saint Ignatius, 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 learning 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.
- We 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 prayerful self-examen. Without a habit of discernment and knowledge of oneself and how God is present in one’s life, one cannot actively listen or speak from the heart.

In summary, what are the desired attitudes for spiritual conversation?

- Listen actively and attentively
- Listen to others without judgment
- Pay attention not only to the words, but also to the tone and feelings of the one who is speaking
- Avoid the temptation of using the time to prepare what you will say instead of listening



- Speak intentionally
- 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

Carrying out Spiritual Conversation: The Basic Steps

Estimated time: About 2 hours

1. **Preparation:** Before coming to the group meeting, participants carry out a time of personal prayer and reflection over the question at hand. Usually some background information as well as some points and questions for prayer are provided. An adequate time of about 30 min to 1 hour can be set aside for this. At the end of the prayer period, participants take stock of the fruits of their prayer and decide what they will share with the group.

2. **Gathering:** Ideally each group can comprise about 6-8 persons. A facilitator is appointed for the group meeting and he or she welcomes all the participants. An opening prayer is said, and each person may share one or two words that describe his or her interior state at that moment. The facilitator may also briefly recap the sequence of steps as below. Usually volunteers are also requested for note-taking and time-keeping.

3. **The First Round:** Each person takes turns to share about what happened during the personal prayer time and shares the fruits of his or her prayer. Everyone is given the same amount of time to speak (e.g. 3 minutes). The focus is to listen to one another rather than simply think about what one wants to say. Participants are invited to open their hearts and minds to listen to the one who is speaking, and be attentive to how the Holy Spirit is moving. Between each person, the group may take a brief pause to absorb what was said. During this round there are no discussions or interactions between participants except to ask for clarification about a word or phrase if necessary.

4. **Silence:** A time of silence is observed, during which participants attend to how they have been moved during the first round, what struck them as they listened, and what were the notable points of consolation or desolation if any.

5. **The Second Round:** Participants share what emerged within them during the time of silence. No one is obliged to speak, and participants can share spontaneously without any particular order. This is not a time for discussing or refuting what someone else says, nor for bringing up what participants forgot to mention in the first round. Rather, it is an opportunity to respond to questions like:

- How was I affected by what I heard?
- Is there a common thread in what was shared? Is there something missing that I had expected would be said?
- Was I especially touched by a particular sharing?
- Have I received any particular insight or revelation? What is it?
- Where did I 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.

6. **Silence:** Another time of silence is observed for participants to note how they were moved during the second round, and particularly what key points seem to be emerging in the group.

7. **The Third Round:** Participants share what emerged from the preceding time of silence. They may also take note of the ways in which the Holy Spirit may be moving the group. A prayer of thanksgiving can conclude the conversation.

8. **Review and Report:** Finally the group can briefly review and reflect on how the conversation proceeded, and decide on the main points they will report from the conversation.

* *Note:* In the *Vademecum* and all of the accompanying appendices and resources, the term "diocese" refers to local Churches in general, and can be substituted with the terms *eparchy*, *ordinariate*, or any other equivalent ecclesial body.



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