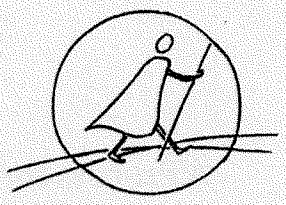
Spiritual Conversation and Communal Discernment



While spiritual conversation can explicitly treat spiritual topics, it mainly concerns the quality of listening and the quality of speaking. Spiritual conversation is about *paying attention* to the spiritual movements both in oneself and in the other participants. Such a quality of attention is an act of reverence and hospitality for oneself and for others. Spiritual conversation creates an atmosphere of trust and welcome. The purpose of small group spiritual conversation is to strengthen the communion of hearts and minds, not to be confused with unanimity of opinion, so that the group may become a more discerning group, that it may discover how the Spirit of Christ is active in the group.

Two basic skills or practices make up spiritual conversation: **active listening** and **intentional speaking**.

Active Listening

The goal of active listening is to understand others as they are. Such listening is called "active" because it involves *paying attention* to more than one level of expression. It involves listening not only to what the other person is saying, but also to what they mean to say, and to what they might be experiencing interiorly. This listening is a profound welcome of the other person in his or her radical uniqueness. This intentional welcome is rooted in an expectation that the Spirit is speaking to us through the other.

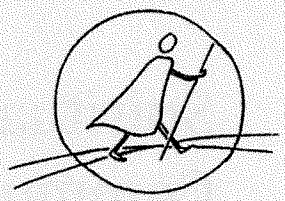
Active listening means welcoming whatever the person says, no matter what you think about what is being said, or what you think about the person. Each person is an expert in his or her own experience. One listens from the point of view of the Presupposition of the Spiritual Exercises, that is, to be "more ready to put a good interpretation on another's statement than to condemn it as false" (*Spiritual Exercises* n.22). Through active listening you offer to others the profound gift of taking them seriously.

When you are not speaking, active listening is your main role. Please do not comment in any way on what another has said, not even to say something positive like "I agree with so-and-so." Such comment or "cross talk" at this stage may inadvertently cause someone to change what they intended to say, or feel that this is not a safe place to speak freely.

Active listening means allowing oneself to be affected by the other. Active listening is demanding, for it requires humility, openness, patience and involvement. It means listening to the other now as he or she is speaking, and not concentrating on what one will say next.

Intentional Speaking

The goal of intentional speaking is to express one's experience, feelings and thoughts. Intentional speaking is based in a habit of listening actively to oneself. This inner self-awareness then guides how one engages in the conversation, sharing the truth as one sees or experiences it and remaining free of selfish motivations in what one says. When speaking, try not to let your sharing be influenced by what another has said, and do not try to influence other's sharing by how you express your own sharing. Intentional speaking means taking responsibility not only for what one says, but also for what one feels.



A Process for Spiritual Conversation

First Round: Sharing the Fruits of our Prayer

Following a period of prayer in which all the members are invited to pray with a contemplation (ask for a grace, focus on a specific question, etc.), the members of the group gather to share the consolations of their prayer.

The leader reminds the members to speak intentionally (i.e., to concisely share the fruits of their prayer that seem most important for the group to hear). Depending on the size of the group, it may be necessary to **limit this intentional sharing to 2-3 minutes** and to proceed in a clockwise fashion around the circle rather than waiting for people to chime in when they want. Of course, people always should have the freedom to pass if they are not ready to speak.

Prior to the sharing the members are also reminded to listen actively, that is to *pay attention* not simply to the content of what is being shared, but also to how one is being moved interiorly as one listens. This is akin to how one listens when doing spiritual direction, and it enables members to attend to how they are consoled by the sharing of the group.

Following the round, people are invited to pause in silence and reflect on how the contributions resonated with them and in what ways they were moved.

Second Round: Reflective Sharing

The leader invites the members to share what they heard and how they were affected by what they heard. They might wish to focus on these sorts of questions:

> What did you hear?
> Were you struck by a common theme?
> Is something you expected to hear absent?
> Where did you experience harmony/dissonance with the others as they shared?
> What emotions are you feeling now?
> What insights occur to you?

The second round enables the group to notice what is happening spiritually to them through the conversation. These reflective responses begin to manifest the communal movements of spirits in the group. These responses are essential data if the spiritual conversation is to take on a communal discernment character.

Third Round: Discussion

In this round, the group seeks to name the spiritual movements they have recognized based on the second-round sharing. Here the mode of exchange can be more discussion-like than in the previous two rounds.

May or may not lead to decision. Process can be repeated over time as needed.

Adapted from: "COMMUNAL APOSTOLIC DISCERNMENT: A TOOLKIT" (CDA)