

Spiritual Conversations and a Pastoral Council

Background

In a Church that is being called by the movement to synodality to renew how it understands itself and listens to all the practice of spiritual conversation integrates active listening, intentional speaking, moments of silence and respect for each participant's input. It can transform the way we listen to the Spirit moving in and through our faith communities as we pray and discern together.

Overview of the process

The method outlined below may be used for both faith-sharing and for group decision-making. It comprises four steps.

1. Welcome and a brief introduction to the discernment process. [5 mins]
2. Personal reflection this might be through a guided scriptural contemplation. [10-15 mins]
3. Spiritual conversations - Three rounds of reflection, listening and sharing in small groups [25-30 mins]
4. Larger group reflection and reporting back.



Step 1 | Welcome and brief Introduction

During the welcome, the leader:

- welcomes the group and explains that we engage in spiritual conversation to strengthen and deepen the bonds of community, and to share deeply with vulnerability and great respect for ourselves and each other.
- briefly outlines the process for the group.
- asks people to silently reflect on their own lives in this place at this time (if the process is being used for *prayer and faith-sharing*)
or
- briefly introduces any question or issue for discernment (if the process is being used for *group discernment*).



Step 2 | Time of personal prayer

Spiritual conversation begins with a significant time for each participant to engage in personal prayer with scripture. One suggested option is to begin with imaginative contemplation, a form of prayer made popular through the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola. However, some groups may prefer to utilise other forms of praying with scripture – in front of the blessed sacrament, a time of contemplative music, a walking prayer, or providing personal questions for prayer.



Step 3 | Spiritual Conversations

The larger group then breaks into smaller groups of four or five people, each led by someone acting as facilitator and timekeeper, who can either participate in the conversation themselves or not.

During this stage, each group undertakes three rounds of spiritual conversation—a process of active listening, intentional speaking and being attentive to the movement of the Spirit. More information is provided below.

This material is based on the Archdiocese of Melbourne *Take the Way of the Gospel* resource.

Round One [2 mins per participant]

The process begins with a round of personal sharing on 'the fruit of my prayer'.

Begin with a time of quiet prayer (about 1–2 minutes) in which participants recollect their experience of the time of personal prayer, asking themselves: **What were the main movements, modes, feelings and/or insights in my prayer time?**

After the time of quiet prayer, each person shares with the group, beginning with **'In my prayer, I ...'**

During this conversation, participants practise active listening and intentional speaking.

Active listening:

- involves a profound welcome of the other
- asks, 'How is the Holy Spirit speaking to me and to us through the other person?'
- asks, 'How am I affected by what is said?'

Intentional speaking:

- involves speaking from *my* prayer (not from someone else's)
- avoids story-telling
- shares from the heart.

A few practical matters:

- speak one after the other, moving clockwise around the group. For online groups, the facilitator can direct the order of speakers.
- Each speaker is timed and should not go for longer than 2 minutes.
- There are no comments or crosstalk, even in one's own sharing. This is not an opportunity for discussion.

Round Two [2 mins per participant]

This is where the communal movements of spirits start to emerge.

Before sharing, allow a minute or two to reflect quietly on the question: **'How was I affected by what I heard in the first round?'**

After reflecting quietly, each person shares with the group, beginning with **'In the group, I heard ...'** or **'I was moved by ...'**

Some prompts might include, for example:

- What did you hear in the first round?
- Were you struck by a common theme or one comment?
- Did you experience harmony or dissonance with the others as they shared?
- What are you feeling now?

Some practical matters:

- This is a short intervention—be disciplined and intentional in speaking.
- There is no particular order of speakers.
- Speak only once. No crosstalk.
- This is not a chance to say something you forgot to say in the first round.
- Each speaker is timed and should not speak for longer than 2 or 3 minutes.

Round Three [1 min per participant]

This is an opportunity to discern together the main themes and discernment of the conversation.

Again, allow a minute or two of quiet reflection before beginning the conversation.

Open the group to a time of discussion, asking them to:

- name the spiritual movements that were recognised in the second round of conversation
- keep the same attentiveness and sincerity of the previous rounds
- keep their contributions to about a minute each.

If there is a particular question to be considered or an opportunity to give feedback to the larger group, this is when a communal response may be formulated.

Conclude the time of small-group spiritual conversation with a 'Glory be'.



Step 4 | Large group reflection and reporting back.

All participants return to the large group.

If this process has been used for *prayer and faith-sharing*, the leader invites those present to *reflect on their prayer and conversation and what they have heard from the Holy Spirit and each other.*

If this process has been used to discern about a particular decision or issue, the leader encourages participants to report on what they have heard and how they feel the Holy Spirit is leading the group to respond to the particular issue being discerned.



Ignatius gave guidelines to those engaging in spiritual conversation. Don't take sides, he said. Be considerate and kind, listen so to understand well the other person, and then be slow to speak. And like anything else, our spiritual conversation should be about glorifying God. How often do we use this basic human tool in our faith lives? We've all heard of 'idle talk' (like gossip), that which does no benefit to anyone, let alone glorify God.

Spiritual conversation, on the other hand, is about adding a new dimension of relationship and intimacy to our spiritual lives.

'Spiritual Conversation'. Ignatian Spirituality Website

