

# SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION - INPUT

## INTRODUCTION

Having a spiritual conversation means communicating from our center, in a way that is unique and true to our inner selves, speaking of our deepest desires, from that which give us our energy for life. It is at this level of our inner life that God lives in us and gives us life. This spiritual conversation is rooted in faith; it is humble, poor, open, wishing to welcome and to share, to receive and to give, to love and be loved.

## MAIN IDEAS

While spiritual conversation can explicitly approach spiritual topics, it mainly concerns the dynamic that we wish to nourish within a group, specifically the quality of listening and the quality of speaking. This expression (lat. *conversatio* – to keep company with) evokes the attitudes of familiarity, simplicity, openness, trust and intimacy that are important in building a community and in discerning together.

This type of conversation is spiritual because it invites us to discover – in all of the realities of life – the working of the Spirit. It is about paying attention (with reverence and openness) to the spiritual movements both in oneself and in the others.

The purpose of spiritual conversation within small groups is to strengthen the communion of hearts and minds, so that the group may become a more discerning group, that it may discover how the Spirit of Christ is active in the group (this is not to be confused with unanimity of opinion). At this level, spiritual conversation is not simply sharing, it becomes prayer, the prayer of a group that discerns, listening to the Spirit that speaks through brothers and sisters in the group.

Moments of spiritual conversations are not a time to enter into discussions or debates, nor a place where we are concerned with presenting perfect answers, theories or doctrines.

It is an encounter where we actively listen to someone else's story and intentionally speak with a spirit of discernment. For this end, it helps to remember that discernment is not a method or a technique, but a way of being attentive to the signs and call of God in all areas of existence, especially to inner movement that brings one to, or pulls one away from, life in its fullness. This way of being must be carefully nourished on a personal level, for it to be possible at the group level. As a preparation for the spiritual conversation, it is therefore key to encourage each participant to take time to pray about each of the suggested themes that you want to approach in your meeting.

Cultivating the below attitudes also helps:

- Listening with respect. Being attentive to the “signs of the times,” the cultural, social, economic, and religious challenges that exist in the world to which we belong and where God is active and present.
- Growing in inner freedom to welcome what will be given, the unexpected, the surprises of the Spirit. Developing the courage to share our truth.
- Developing trust in what we are because of our history and because it is God who is at the origin of it.

## Ten “rules” of spiritual conversation

The below guidelines are provided to encourage listening and sharing in small groups

1. **Ensure an atmosphere of mutuality and equality:** Spiritual conversations are best done in an environment of openness, and safety. For this purpose, sitting in a circle could help. In a circle, each person occupies a similar space and has an equal voice, from the youngest to the oldest, from the most to the least educated. The Holy Spirit is speaking through each one.
2. **Invite each group member to nourish an attitude of attentive listening** with respect, empathy and gratitude. This attitude will help the group to develop an atmosphere of trust and freedom that is necessary for the process. Having the courage to speak truthfully and openly is an act that deserves a profound respect, and invites those who listen to give thanks.
3. **Emphasize that each person is the expert on his or her own existence.** Each person’s experience, feelings, and reactions are unique. No one else can speak of my own experience in the same way that I can. When listening, I may have other feelings about the same thing, or have a different opinion from the person who is speaking, but that does not give me the right to question his or her authenticity.
4. **Times of silence are appropriate and necessary.** We must not be afraid of silence. Silence allows words to become meaningful, mature. Moments of silence help the group to maintain an atmosphere of prayer. After each person speaks, a moment of silence will help the group to take in and savour what was said. Silence will also help the group members to be conscious of inner movements provoked by what was shared. Silence can sometimes be more meaningful than words. If someone does not wish to speak, he or she should not be forced. The other group members must learn to welcome the silence of each person. If one person chooses not to speak at each session, it is important to talk to him or her about reasons for the silence.
5. **Respect what is confidential.** Trust cannot be built unless each person knows that what is said in the group will remain confidential. Outside the small group, it may be possible to speak about what was said without naming the person who said it unless he/she agrees to be named.
6. **Each person will have a chance to speak,** sharing no more and no less than he or she wishes to or is able to. The group will listen to each person without interrupting so that each member feels listened to. An effective and concrete way of helping to create an atmosphere of respectful listening is to pass around an object that symbolizes listening. We suggest using a feather. A feather is placed at the center of each small group. Whoever speaks takes the feather and holds it until he is finished. This custom is borrowed from the traditional native american «sharing circles» and helps the members of the group speak in great truth and authenticity and listen with greater freedom. Someone may even hold the feather without speaking, thus giving oneself time to reflect and elaborate what he would like to share. It is important to remember, however, that no one must share more than he or she wishes.

7. **Speak briefly and clearly.** As much as each person should take advantage of this space to say all that he or she wishes, the sharing must also remain simple and precise. Written preparation will help the participants to share what is essential. The small group is not meant as a place to share all the details of our personal lives, but to share what will help the discernment to progress. It is important keep to the time limits to maintain the energy of the group.
8. **Use “I” when speaking; do not use “we” or “you”.** In the group, it is important to share personal experiences, and not to speak of concepts or general ideas. How do I see things? What is **my** experience? A common sign of drifting away from personal experience is when the speaker begins to use “we” or “you”. It is important to be attentive to this. Speaking personally, using the first person “I”, is a measure of the truth and the commitment in the words spoken.
9. **The group is not a place to discuss or resolve personal problems.** It is also not a place for discussion or debate, for speeches, for converting others to our way of thinking, explaining our favourite ideas or resolving the problems of others. Neither is the group a place of therapy, even if healing is possible during the process. Each person must feel able to share his or her pain without having ten therapists or spiritual guides who want to help or solve the problem. Do not hesitate to encourage the participants to speak with their spiritual guides about the questions raised during the meetings. This can help the group’s sharing to accomplish its aim.
10. **Choose a timekeeper.** It is important to make sure that the different steps are worked through at each meeting within the time limits.

### **Anticipating difficulties that might occur**

Some physical, psychological or spiritual difficulties may occur during the process. The rules and the conditions for sharing are an effective aid in building an atmosphere of listening and deep sharing. They can also be a factor in revealing some of our own incapacities and limits in relationship. Some difficulties include:

- Lack of listening.
- Inability to share freely, to speak for myself (using “I”).
- Difficulty reviewing my personal prayer and sharing it (either I tell everything, and the essential is buried, or I say almost nothing and the essential is left unsaid).
- Personal prayer time is not taken seriously, or is simply an intellectual reflection.
- Lack of trust: inability to trust oneself, others, or God.
- Resistance to change. Unconscious aggressive or passive attitudes. Projection.

The group is a microcosm of the larger community. What happens in the small group, and how it happens (not only the content of the sharing) could be an important lesson for the identity and mission of our organizations today. Facilitators are invited not to interfere too much in the group dynamics and are asked to be a simple witness of what happens. If there is a difficulty, do not hesitate to ask the group to discuss it together. **Except in rare cases, the group has the energy and the wisdom to handle its own difficulties.** A facilitator is invited to believe in the group, and believe that God is working in the group. Normally, once the participants have understood the stages of the meeting, they will be able to run the meeting on their own. If a particular meeting were especially difficult, it would be good to take a few minutes at the end of the meeting to evaluate what happened.

## Spiritual Conversations: The “three rounds” of sharing

As a general rule, we invite you to conduct each meeting in the following way.

### The First Round

In the 1st round, each participant is invited to say something that came up from his or her personal prayerful reflection. Participants speak in turn (with the help of the feather), without being interrupted, sharing the fruits of their personal prayer time with the help of notes from the review. The other participants listen actively, and may take notes if they wish (these notes will be helpful for the second round). They welcome what is said in silence.

### The Second Round

In order to prepare for the second round, the timekeeper of the group proposes a small time of silence to reflect on what was shared during the first round.

The suggested questions may help the reflection:

- What have I heard, perceived, even beyond the spoken words ?
- What has touched/moved me in what others have shared?
- What has given me peace, joy, trust ? What troubles me or discourages me?
- What new perception or understanding have I received? What new light?
- What are the consequences of the truth we have shared?

Following this time of silence, those who wish are invited in the second round to share some answers to those questions. Once they have finished, it is good to give a space to a more spontaneous/free interaction among the participants, remembering to remain in the spirit of contemplative listening. It is during this time, that the important movement begins from individual to community, from “I” to “we”. Participants begin to see how the Spirit is working in the group as a group. At the end of this round, it helps to name common themes that are emerging from the sharing. When has the group experienced movements of joy, of peace, of hope, of love, of communion? Which points helped the group discover unity, clarity, truth, agreement?

### The Third Round

In the 3rd round, the group freely converses together with the Lord who is present among them. This time is a time for prayer and free expression to God – in word or song, a thanksgiving, a request for light or forgiveness, etc.. emerging from what has been shared in this time of spiritual conversation. Often this prayer will flow from the grace experienced by the group during the sharing.

## Spiritual Conversations: Guidelines for Organization

1. **Arrangement of the space:** Form a circle, preferably without a table in the center, unless it is a low table where you can place a candle, an image, some flowers, or a feather. The circle should allow all the participants to see one another easily. In order to enter into the required contemplative attitude for spiritual conversation, it is necessary to hear and see the other members of the group. Body language can also give an important message. Make sure the chairs are comfortable and that the lighting gives a comfortable atmosphere.
2. **Length of time:** For a group of five or six people, an hour and a quarter should be enough time. If there are more people, allow for more time. The sharing should never last longer than an hour and 45 minutes. It is preferable not to take a break during the time of sharing. It could dissolve the prayerful atmosphere, which is absolutely necessary for the discernment process.
3. **Structure of a meeting**
  - Welcome
  - Moment of prayer to enter into the time of sharing (silence, a short song or reading, etc.) 5 – 10 minutes
  - Sharing (3 stages) Between 1 hour, 15 minutes and 1 hour, 45 minutes
  - Break
  - Presentation of the next step 10 – 15 minutes
4. **The concrete work of the facilitator**

### During the meeting

- Prepare the meeting place.
- Introduce the moment of prayer and the time of sharing.
- Explain the sharing process the first time and remind the group if necessary.
- Remind them that there will be at least two rounds of sharing.
- Tell everyone at what time the group will stop. Say how much time, approximately, each one will have for sharing during the 1st round.
- Inform them that you will give a small signal with your hand to let them know when their time is almost finished.
- Make sure that the three stages of sharing are carried out harmoniously.
- Present the next prayer theme after adapting it for language and content if necessary.

### After the meeting

- Take notes on what was experienced during the meeting:
  - Note the essential content of the exchange during the time of sharing.
  - Note the spiritual movements that were lived in the group: joy, peace, hope, trust, resistance, fears, discouragement, sadness, etc.
  - Has a consensus come forth from the sharing? It is essential to recognize this aspect. The elements of consensus are the touchstone of community discernment.
- Evaluate the meeting to see what went well and what could be improved. Is trust growing? Is each person able to freely express him or herself? Is there an atmosphere of contemplation? Has the requested grace been obtained?
- Pray for each of the members of the group.

## IGNATIAN NOTE

In the Constitutions, spiritual conversations are mentioned as one of the apostolic works of the Society. These conversations were primarily taking place within the context of the Spiritual Exercises and confession but were not limited to that.

The opportunity to engage people in spiritual conversations can be done in many different ways and is open to religious and lay people alike. We all have a real and deep desire to communicate from the center of our being, to speak in a way that is authentic to our inner selves and to be genuinely listened to. This sharing allows solid bonds to form and improves our capacity to work and make decisions together.

In the Ignatian literature, the terms “to converse” and “conversation” are used with an unusual frequency: Altogether, they appear 39 times, and 316 times in Ignatius’ letters (Arana, 2005). This repetition is not a semantic coincidence as St. Ignatius rarely referred to conversation in generic terms or practiced it in an irreflexive or futile way. “Converser” (as defined in the dictionary of Sebastián De Covarrubias published in 1611) means “a gentle encounter... a communication between friends...”. Ignatius’ call for spiritual conversations and his understanding of these tools as close and friendly encounters with a certain level of intimacy indicates his care for the whole person and desire to know them on a deeper level. He provided guidelines to those engaging in spiritual conversation (not taking sides, being considerate and kind, listening to understand, being slow to speak...). Ignatius suggests that 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). These attitudes are explored more deeply in Module 2.

This approach to conversations is rooted in the way Jesus himself interacted with those who approached him (be it his disciples, the Pharisees, sinners...). The intimate conversations in which he engaged with others (bring to mind the woman at the well, Nicodemus,...) were opportunities for intimate sharing, deep connections and renewal.

*Refer to the Resources section for German Arana’s full article and more references on spiritual conversations.*

## EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Experience the transforming and edifying power of sharing and listening
2. Introduce a process and guidelines for spiritual conversations
3. Experience more deeply how the Spirit is manifest and working within us and others