

The Synodal Method: Carrying out Spiritual Conversation in Small Groups The Basic Steps

Recommended estimated time: About 1.5 - 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.

SOME GUIDELINES:

1. The major activity of any small group sharing is grateful listening.
2. Every person is an expert on his/her own experience.
3. Times of silence is very appropriate and needed.
4. Confidentiality is important. No one should be “quoted” outside the group conversation.
5. Participation in a small group is not a communal performance. Share what you can, not what you can’t. Listening is an important form of participation. As you go around the circle if you choose not to share simply indicate this by saying: “I’ll pass for now.”
6. Describe your experience, views, concerns, questions, etc., in a brief, clear manner. Small group interchange is not the place to homilize, monopolize, convert others to your point of view or continually “impose” your favorite topic or idea upon others. Make “I” statements not “we” statements.
7. This is not the place for extended discussions, solving problems, rescuing, deciding, debating, interfering with one another’s contribution.