

Spiritual Conversation Formation for Facilitators

Introduction

- Welcome to this simple formation session, we hope that through spiritual conversation we serve our brothers and sisters and draw closer to Christ
- Being a facilitator of spiritual conversation (SC) is both a challenge and a blessing
- St. Ignatius and the First Companions often engaged in spiritual conversation
- Giving the Spiritual Exercises is a kind of spiritual conversation
- Spiritual conversation springs from the experience and spirit of the Society of Jesus

The Role of the Facilitator

- The role of the facilitator is to help participants recognize the presence of Christ in their community
- More specifically, a facilitator helps the community to see how the Paschal mystery (the suffering, death and resurrection) of Jesus is present in their experience together
- With this background, the group can then more easily hear the voice and current invitation of Jesus for the group
- The process of SC has value in itself: it allows participants to get to know each other more deeply and develop deeper bonds
- SC fosters the integration of faith and justice (right relationships)

- The most important role of the facilitator is to be open to the Holy Spirit and to trust in the Spirit
- Accordingly, the facilitator needs humility and inner freedom to let go of his or her own opinion and notice the direction in which the Spirit is leading the group, this is not easy
- When participants share honestly, it is easier to recognize and name the movements of the Spirit
- As much as possible, the facilitator should provide a comfortable environment, such as a room with windows, comfortable chairs, air conditioning if necessary, etc.)
- More profoundly, the facilitator should provide an environment where people feel safe and can trust each other (e.g. where interruptions, insults or domination of the conversation are not acceptable)
- In general, 6 participants is a good number for SC (this is not absolute, if more people participate, just consider that more time will be needed and participants may get tired as they listen)



The Foundational Elements: Active Listening


- The goal of active listening is to understand the other as he or she is
- People use body language to express listening and following (e.g. eye contact, head nodding, etc.)
- As much as possible not do two things at once (e.g. look at a phone while listening)
- The speaker is an expert in his or her own experience
- When listening, do not interrupt others (exception for the timekeeper)

- If I criticize or challenge a person before trust has been established, the other person may not feel free to express himself or herself in the future
- Trust that the Spirit can speak through any person
- Be willing to put a good interpretation on a participant's statement rather than condemning it (*Spiritual Exercises #22*)
- Active listening requires patience, humility, and openness
- Active listening does not mean I need to agree with the opinion of others
- Respectful listening (irrespective of the actual content) builds community

The Foundational Elements: Intentional Speaking

- Sincere expression of one's experience, feelings and thoughts
- I am aware of how I feel interiorly when I listen to what others are saying (at least notice the major or consistent movements e.g. anger, resonance, hope, etc.)
- Do not blame another person for what I am feeling
- Use "I" statements, e.g. instead of "You make me angry" say "I feel angry when I hear..."
- Distinguish between people and their opinions; if someone does not agree with me, it does not mean that they are attacking me
- When it is my turn to speak I can choose to express my emotions or not
- Active listening and intentional speaking complement one another; love consists in a mutual sharing between two persons (*Spiritual Exercises #231*)

Basic Format for Spiritual Conversation



Prayer
Check-In
Personal Reflection Time
Round 1
Round 2
Round 3
Review of the Meeting

Prayer

- Facilitator leads the prayer; it can be simple
- Ask the Holy Spirit to be present and lead the group
- Prayer sets the tone for the rest of the session

Check-In

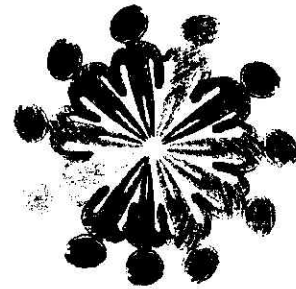
- How are you? Each person shares briefly about their current mood
- The facilitator should not respond to each participant, however, it can be helpful to acknowledge if someone is in significant anxiety or pain
- Allows people to practice active listening and intentional speaking
- The check-in allows participants to express feelings; if there is no check-in, people may express feelings or frustrations indirectly during the rest of the session
- If people meet often, be creative (e.g. What animal represents your feeling today?)
- When sharing, the facilitator should avoid being the first person to share (here or in any round) because the facilitator has authority and may influence others

Time for Personal Reflection

- The facilitator provides material for personal prayer and reflection
- It may be a Scripture passage, a document, or a focus question of common interest (such as a topic to be discerned)
- Members ask for Christ's guidance then take time to reflect and pray individually (the amount of time allotted for this is variable—long enough for people to become aware of their inner movements in regard to the material and decide what they would like to share); If appropriate, the material and reflection question can be emailed to people prior to the gathering date so there is enough time to pray and reflect

First Round of Sharing

- The group gathers together after personal reflection, each person shares something of the fruit of their reflection on the topic or question
- Select a time-keeper who lets people know when their time is up and firmly but kindly stops the speaker if he or she goes beyond the limit
- Sharing occurs in sequence, for example, beginning with one person and then proceeding to the right
- At the beginning of Round 1, the facilitator reminds the participants of the specific question (to help focus the sharing) and the spirit of Round 1 (share the fruit of your reflection)
- Includes a time limit e.g. 4 minutes per person (the time depends on the number of people and length of the meeting)
- Participants use intentional speaking and active listening
- As much as possible, participants do not comment on what others have said, but rather, share about the fruit of their own prayer
- No interruptions or corrections; the facilitator must ensure this, otherwise participants may be inhibited
- The facilitator simply thanks each person after they have spoken
- It is good to pause a few seconds after each speaker



Second Round of Sharing

- At the beginning of the second round, the facilitator reminds participants of the spirit and content of the second round (e.g. What did I hear in Round 1? What struck me most? Did I hear any common points?), then gives a moment of silence for reflection
- Suggestion: After this silent reflection, the facilitator can remind people that this round is about expressing what they heard others say, rather than expressing my own opinion
- Round 2 is shorter than the first round e.g. 2 minutes per person
- Each person does not have to share; sharing can happen in any order ('popcorn' style)
- The second round is often where the communal movement of spirits starts to manifest
- The group begins to shift from *experiencing* consolations and desolations to *identifying* them

Third Round of Sharing

- The group may or may not have a third round
- The facilitator reminds participants of the content and spirit of Round 3
- This round is less structured and quicker in pace than previous rounds
- It takes the form a free discussion based on what has emerged in Round 2 and its significance (the group still maintains active listening and intentional speaking)

Round 3 For Discernment in Common:

- The facilitator asks participants to articulate consolations and desolations e.g. When did I sense Christ most present? What is Christ saying to the group at this time?
- Round 3 is often when consensus often emerges and is named
- Before having free discussion facilitator can ask: Do you think we have a consensus, if so what is the consensus?
- The shorter time (e.g. each person 1 minute) helps participants notice the essence of the conversation, and to discover whether or not there is a consensus
- Time gets shorter each round, a kind of natural funnelling from Round 1 to 3
- If this format is not used, Round 1 can easily become Round 1 (we do not want people to simply share personal opinions again, but rather notice what the Spirit is expressing in the group today)
- After checking of the status of consensus, there can be more free discussion
- Please refer to "Different Kinds of Consensus" in the next handout
- If communal consolation is greater than communal desolation, this is a sign that the content of the conversation is being led by the Spirit

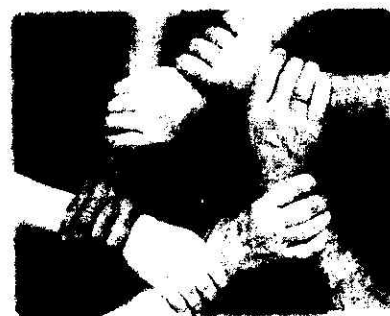


Other Points About Consensus

- Consensus is a gift, a grace from God
- It is not the responsibility of the facilitator to arrive at consensus
- If participants feel respected throughout the process of spiritual conversation, they often arrive at consensus even though they may have different opinions at first

Review of the Meeting

- Review the quality of the conversation and participation
- The review is flexible and can take many forms
- For example, each person share about a focus question such as: For what are you most grateful? What was helpful and what was not so helpful about the meeting today? What are you taking away from the meeting today?
- Try to focus on format rather than content of the meeting
- It is a chance to show respect for the opinion of each person
- It is also a chance to notice blind spots and improve next time (e.g. next time we need to be firm about time limits so that it is fair for everyone)



What Facilitates Spiritual Conversation?

- Openness to Christ and a habit of personal prayer
- Inner freedom, coming with desires but not agendas
- A willingness to put aside my own opinion (and wounds) for the good of others
- Accustomed to noticing my own inner movements such as consolation and desolation

It Helps If The Facilitator Is Familiar With:

- Signs of Communal Consolation and Communal Desolation
- Types of Consensus and how to proceed accordingly
- Being aware of practical issues but also being sensitive to how the Spirit is leading the group overall

Issues Often Faced By Facilitators:

1. *A Participant Shares Beyond the Time Limit*

- At the beginning of each round express the time limit clearly
- The time-keeper should be firm about the time limit, express it with kindness (it helps to first affirm that what the person is sharing is important)
- This may feel uncomfortable, however, when participants go beyond the limit and nothing is done, this often makes people uncomfortable or even angry

2. *When a Participant Is Sharing, Another Participant Interrupts*

- The facilitator must let people know immediately that this is not appropriate
- Suggestion: affirm the person who is interrupting, remind the person he or she will have an opportunity to speak later, end with a question (e.g. Are you okay with this?)

3. *During Round 2 A Participant Shares Mainly About His or Her Own Opinion*

- At the beginning of Round 2, remind participants to share about what they have heard, not supplement their own opinion
- If necessary, the facilitator can remind the group during Round 2 (between sharings)

4. *A Participant Shares With Intense Emotion*

- Do not fear emotions, for example, it is okay if people cry
- However, the facilitator must maintain a safe environment, so angrily attacking another person is not acceptable

5. *A Participant Begins to Use A Phone*

- When explaining active listening, explain that this is not appropriate
- If a participant is using the phone during spiritual conversation, the facilitator can remind the group between sharings or between rounds; it is a way of respecting others

6. *A Participant Does Not Speak About the Given Topic*

- Remind people of the topic at the beginning of each round
- If a person continually shares content unrelated to the discussion topic, the facilitator can remind the group between sharings; also know that some people may not be able to change in one day; people who participate in SC should be able to perform active listening and intentional speaking, especially for discernment in common

Serving as a facilitator for spiritual conversation is both a challenge and an opportunity to cooperate with the lead of the Holy Spirit.

I am with you always, to the very end of the age. – Mt. 28:20

