

The Ignatian Guide to Spiritual Conversation

(Source: Michael Hansen, SJ. *Four Guided Retreats: An Adaptation of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*. Quezon City: Christian Life Community of the Philippines, Inc. 2014. 354-9.)

Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her. (Lk 10:38-42)

Endeavor to be profitable to individuals by spiritual conversations, by counseling and exhorting to good works, and by conducting Spiritual Exercises. (see *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, #684. Institute of Jesuit Sources, St. Louis, 1996)

The good angel touches the soul gently, lightly, and sweetly, like a drop of water going into a sponge. (see *Spiritual Exercises*, #335)

The three texts above introduce sacred listening, spiritual conversation, and discernment of spirits. These lie at the heart of spiritual conversation. Both speakers and listeners seek to understand how God is at work in their daily life. It is not about teaching, proselytizing, or counseling. For Ignatius, the spirit of such conversation is clear: be slow to speak, listen quietly, treat others as equals, be humble and sincere, speak with kindness and love, and see the Trinity at work in all.

During the First Spiritual Exercises, the content of spiritual conversation will be on what happened in a spiritual exercise, or some days of exercises, what was noted in Listening Books after prayer, and what was just heard in listening to others. (Listening Books are introduced in *The Ignatian Guide to Spiritual Journaling*.) A plan for spiritual conversation in a group is set out below:

SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION PLAN		MINUTES
Time of Silence	Contemplative silence in the loving Trinity	5
Listening	Sharing one new thing from my prayer	15
Conversation	Reflecting on my prayer experience	20
Discernment	Sharing mini-discernment of spirits	15
Time of Silence	Contemplative silence in the active Trinity	5

Spiritual conversation begins and ends with silence. Silence creates the space for listening. Silence also allows one to simply be, simply be in the now, simply be in the

presence of the other. Contemplative silence is simply being in the presence of God. This is the “better part” that Mary chose over Martha’s activity.

To begin Spiritual Conversation, I imagine the Trinity, God the Father, Son and Spirit, surrounding me. I imagine them loving me unconditionally, then I remain silently in this loving presence for five minutes. When I am distracted, I return to the presence of the Trinity by simply praying, “I receive your love.”

After silent prayer together, there are three phases. The first phase is sacred listening. Here each shares something of their prayer experience if they wish. Everyone listens in the manner set out below in “The Practice of Sacred Listening.” (Each phase has its own “practice of” list.)

The second phase is spiritual conversation itself. Here the group has the opportunity for dialogue on the graces experienced in prayer, those just heard or those noted in Listening Books. Ignatius sets out below the quality of such conversation in “The Practice of Spiritual Conversation.” These instructions come verbatim from two letters he wrote, to men he sent out on mission, on how to deal with people in conversations.

The third phase is discernment of spirits. Here the group may share, if desired, the results of any mini-discernment described in The Practice of Discerning the Spirits (found in The Ignatian Guide to the Discernment of Spirits). It is very important that the group returns to only listening in this phase; there is no discussion on another’s experience of the spirits. Rather, listening here is to appreciate, with some awe, just how the good spirit works in everyone.

Silence ends the session as it began. The only difference this time is that I imagine the active Trinity surrounding me, each person desiring to work in and through me. If distracted I return to the presence of the Trinity by praying “work through me.” I remain in this contemplative presence for five minutes and the session is ended.

To conclude, each person I am listening to, or conversing with, should be afforded the same loving reverence I would give if Jesus himself were the one before me. So Ignatius writes, “Let no one seek to be considered a wit, or to affect elegance or prudence or eloquence, but look upon Christ, who made nothing at all of these things and chose to be humbled and despised by men for our sake rather than to be honored and respected.” (see Letter of Ignatius to the scholastics at Alcalá. [Unpublished Historia de la Assistencia de España, Book 1, ch. 6. 1543])

LITANY FOR LISTENERS

Dearest Lord, companion on the road,
voice in the night, here we are, gathered to listen.
Open our ears, our whole being,
that we may become a listening presence to each other,
that we may enjoy the gift of our spiritual conversation.

Give us the generosity to listen with openness.
the wisdom to understand what is heard
the strength to be changed by what is shared
the listening that never judges
the curiosity of a child.

Listen to us
Listen to us
Listen to us
Listen to us
Listen to us

Increase in us the peace to forgive and be forgiven
the reverence to honor both gift and loss
the acceptance that allows failure to be shared
the prudence to know when not to speak
the surrender that treasures silence after word.

Listen to us
Listen to us
Listen to us
Listen to us
Listen to us

Enliven in us the freedom to let mystery be
the joy to celebrate new discovery
the readiness for laughter when it rises
the grace to listen with humble love
the awe to hear you speaking in us.

Listen to us
Listen to us
Listen to us
Listen to us
Thank you.

THE PRACTICE OF SACRED LISTENING

1. *Listen before speaking.*

Allow the person who is speaking time to complete their thought; wait a few seconds before responding. Ask “Is there anything else?”

2. *Listen to yourself.*

Be in touch with your inner voice. Ask “What wants to be said next?”

3. *Listen with an open mind.*

Be curious and appreciative of what you are listening to. Listen for new ideas instead of judging and evaluating.

4. *Listen for understanding.*

You do not have to agree with what you hear, or even believe it, to listen to understand the other person.

5. *Listen with empathy and compassion.*

Put your agenda aside for the moment. Put yourself in their shoes.

6. *Listen with patience and presence.*

Listening well takes time and your full “listening presence.”

7. *Listen in relationship. Let the speaker know that you have heard them.*

Use body language; nodding, facial expressions. (Practices 1-7 from Top Ten Powerful Listening Practices. Kay Lindahl, www.sacredlistening.com, 2003)

8. *Listen with reverence to the Divine in the other.*

Every person is created in the image of God. Listen with humility.

9. *Listen for the Spirit at work in the other.*

Listen for the Spirit who touches the soul of the other “gently, lightly, and sweetly, like a drop of water going into a sponge.” (see *Spiritual Exercises*, #236, 335)

10. *Listen for Jesus who may seek me through the other.*

The friendship Jesus offers is communal – one vine but many branches. Jesus may speak to me through the graces of another.

THE PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION

1. *Spiritual conversation is a great opportunity. Be prepared.*

Associating and dealing with many people for the salvation and spiritual progress of souls can be very profitable with God's help. In the following notes, which may be modified or amplified according to need, we may be able to offer some assistance.

2. *Be slow to speak. Be considerate and kind on matters discussed.*

Be slow to speak. Be considerate and kind, especially when it comes to deciding on matters under discussion, or about to be discussed.

3. *Listen quietly, to understand. Learn when to speak or be silent.*

Be slow to speak, and only after having first listened quietly, so that you may understand the meaning, leanings, and wishes of those who do speak. Thus you will better know when to speak and when to be silent.

4. *Be free of attachment to your own opinion.*

When matters are under discussion, I should consider the reasons on both sides without showing any attachment to my own opinion, and try to avoid bringing dissatisfaction to anyone.

5. *Do not cite authorities. Deal with everyone equally.*

I should not cite anyone as supporting my opinion... and I would deal with everyone on an equal basis, never taking sides with anyone.

6. *In giving your opinion, speak with humility and sincerity.*

If you ought not to be silent, then give your opinion with the greatest possible humility and sincerity, and always end with the words "with due respect for a better opinion."

7. *Accommodate yourself to the convenience of the other.*

If I have something to say, it will be of great help to forget about my own leisure or lack of time – that is, my own convenience. I should rather accommodate myself to the convenience of him (or her) with whom I am to deal so that I may influence him (or her) to God's greater glory.

8. *Ask the Spirit to descend with abundant gifts.*

Pray and lead others to pray particularly to God our Lord...to send forth his Holy Spirit on all who take part in the discussions...so that the Holy Spirit may descend in greater abundance with his grace and gifts upon the conversations.

9. *Awaken knowledge and love in souls.*

Awaken in souls a thorough knowledge of themselves and a love of their Creator and Lord.

10. Adapt yourself to others.

First consider their temperaments and adapt yourselves to them. If they are of a lively temper, quick and cheerful in speech, follow their lead while speaking to them of good and holy things, and do not be serious, glum, and reserved. If they are shy and retiring, slow to speak, serious, and weighty in their words, use the same manner with them, because such ways will be pleasing to them.

(Pts 1-9, Letter of Ignatius to Lainez, Salmeron, Favre [Ep. 123], 1546; Pt 10, Letter of Ignatius to Broet, Salmeron [Ep. 18], 1549.)

PRAYER BEFORE A SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION

Lord of Emmaus, give me the time I need for this conversation.

Help me to let go of my own convenience and work,
to be fully present to each person here.

May I be slow to speak. Give me the wisdom to listen quietly,
to sense the meaning, positions, and desires of each speaker,
to know whether to be silent or to speak.

Free me to listen without prejudice, to treat each speaker equally.

Keep me considerate and kind with matters that arise,
sincere in my opinion, respecting better opinions.

Help me to hold each speaker's prayer experience reverently,
their talents and faith gently,
and to enkindle in them love of our Creator and Lord,
and to serve them in body as well as in word.

Let the Spirit descend upon this circle with an abundance of her gifts.

Above all, give me the greatest possible humility,
to be simple rather than eloquent, as you are to us all. Amen.