

Spiritual conversation and communal discernment

While spiritual conversation can explicitly treat spiritual topics, it mainly concerns the quality of listening and the quality of speaking. Spiritual conversation is about paying attention to the spiritual movements both in oneself and in the other participants. Such a quality of attention is an act of reverence and hospitality for oneself and for others. Spiritual conversation creates an atmosphere of trust and welcome. It allows all parties to express themselves frankly. It allows all parties to take seriously whatever is going on within each participant.

The purpose of small group spiritual conversation is to strengthen the communion of hearts and minds, not to be confused with unanimity of opinion, so that the group may become a more discerning group, that it may discover how the Spirit of Christ is active in the group.

Two basic skills or practices make up spiritual conversation: active listening and intentional speaking.

First Round: Personal Sharing

Active listening:

The goal of active listening is to understand others as they are. Such listening is called “active” because it involves paying attention to more than one level of expression of the other. It involves listening not only to what the other person is saying, but also to what they mean to say, and to what they might be experiencing interiorly. This listening is a profound welcome of the other person in his or her radical uniqueness. This intentional welcome is rooted in the expectation that the Spirit is speaking with us through the other person.

Active listening means welcoming non-judgmentally whatever the person says, no matter what you think about what is being said, or what you think about the person. Each person is an expert in his or her own experience. 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). Through active listening you offer to others the profound gift of taking them seriously.

When you are not speaking, active listening is your main role. Please do not comment in any way on what another has said, not even to say something positive like “I agree with so-and-so”. Such comment or “cross talk” at this stage may inadvertently cause someone to change what they intended to say, or feel that this is not a safe place to speak freely.

Active listening means allowing oneself to be affected by the other. Active listening is demanding, for it requires humility, openness, patience and involvement. It means listening to the other now as he or she is speaking, and not concentrating on what one will say next.

Intentional speaking:

The goal of intentional speaking is to express one's experience, feelings and thoughts. Intentional speaking is based in a habit of listening actively to oneself. This inner self-awareness then guides how one engages in the conversation, sharing the truth as one sees or experiences it and remaining free of selfish motivations in what one says. This self-awareness gives one's speaking its "intentional" character.

When speaking, try not to let your sharing be influenced by what another has said, and do not try to influence other's sharing by how you express your own sharing.

Intentional speaking means taking responsibility not only for what one says, but also for what one feels. By not blaming the other for what you are feeling, you keep the exchange transparent.

Intentional speaking is a free, generous gift to another, in reciprocity for being actively listened to.

Second Round: Reflective Sharing

The leader invites the members to share what they heard and how they were affected by what they heard.

What did you hear?

Were you struck by a common theme?

Is something you expected to hear absent?

Where did you experience harmony/dissonance with the others as they shared?

What emotions are you feeling now?

What insights occur to you?

The second round enables the group to notice what is happening spiritually to them through the conversation. These reflective responses begin to manifest the communal movements of spirits in the group. These responses are essential data if the spiritual conversation is to take on a communal discernment character.

Third Round: Discussion

In this round, the group seeks to name the spiritual movements they have recognized on the basis of the second round sharing. Here the mode of exchange can be more discussion-like than in the previous two rounds.

From: "COMMUNAL APOSTOLIC DISCERNMENT: A TOOLKIT" (CDA)