

Conversation in the Spirit

Conversation in the Spirit, or Spiritual Conversation, is an ancient practice of the Church particularly helping all the voices to be heard when people are gathered. It can be used for faith sharing, difficult conversations, or when lots of creativity or ideas are needed. We have used it to discuss best practice in youth ministry, synodal leadership across Catholic Social Action Network, an academic conference and formation sessions for a diocesan Assembly. It has also been used for conversations about finance, mission, working conditions, and responding to clergy sex abuse. It is an excellent tool to ground any conversation in the Spirit, open us to new voices and possibilities, and move us to action when appropriate.

Practical Considerations

Conversation in the Spirit is a strangely practical art. It relies on good communication – being able to hear and understand one another. This can impact people with poor hearing, those with English as an additional language, or those whose verbal skills are not so strong. This applies to all conversations, of course, and conversation in the Spirit is more accessible than ordinary chatting because of the slower pace and the silences. You just need to be aware of the needs of your participants.

Room set up

Small groups need to be spaced out from each other so that they can hear others from their small group clearly and not be distracted by other groups. We have found that you can have one or three plus groups in a room, as long as the room is big enough. Two groups do not work as you will be listening to the other group when you are supposed to be reflecting! Small groups work well in informal café/lounge spaces – church pews not so much...

Crafting a question

Give some time to your question. Something that encourages people to tell stories without right or wrong answers is better than diving straight into critique. This can be helped by using the word 'how'. For example, 'How have you experienced decision-making in the church?' is better than 'What's wrong with church decision-making?'.

A Method for Conversation in the Spirit

Begin with a few moments of silence to allow ourselves to ponder the question.

First round of conversation:

Each person has a chance to speak. There is no discussion in this round, and there is a time of silence to allow for reflection.

Second round of conversation:

Share what struck you most or what resonated for you in the first round and what moved you during the time of silence. Once again this is followed by a pause for reflection.

Third round of conversation:

Finally in the third round participants reflect on what moved them most deeply. What new insights arise? What are the common themes or fruits of the conversations?

Good and Bad Habits

It can be helpful to share with the group before starting some habits of conversation in the Spirit:

- Listening to the views of others
- Encouraging everyone to speak
- Being aware of your own 'air-time' – keep contributions brief and to the point
- Remain curious – don't dismiss views that you don't agree with but ask why people think that. They may well have a good reason for their view.
- Keeping confidentiality. The meeting should feel like a safe place for people to be able to express their views. Share the learning, not the story.
- Being aware of time. We generally ask people to think about their own bad habit and be aware of it! Remaining curious is at the heart of this kind of conversation: even if we don't agree with one another, we can find out why someone holds a particular view, and what their story is. Confidentiality is another key element – creating safe spaces for people to speak heart-to-heart.

Silence is very important – and not everyone likes it, especially if they had to 'sit in silence' at school. For those who find it difficult, we recommend people write down their thoughts, doodle, or take their imagination for a walk and enjoy God's creation.

If the group is finding it hard not to talk over each other, you can reset with a moment's silence and a gentle reminder. Alternatively it can be helpful to have a stone or a talking stick. Whoever is holding the stone talks and everyone else listens. The process of putting the stone down and picking it up also helps to slow the pace of the conversation and aids listening.

Although this method feels slow, giving people time to think before they speak can make for very effective conversations. All voices are heard, and with each round, the wisdom of the group is built on, and people start to see new connections and possibilities. Drawing out the fruit of the conversation in the final round brings it back to next steps, and makes sure the benefits are not lost. We have found that listening to all the voices makes for a richer and more considered conversation – and better decisions at the end. As we would expect for a conversation rooted in the Holy Spirit!

Sr Nathalie Bequart, Assistant Director of the Office for Synod, says "You only learn synodality by doing it." Even if this feels a bit complicated, we encourage you to have a go. It is amazing how transformative it is to listen and to be listened to!