

## **A Brief Guide for Spiritual Conversation**

The leader presents subject matter for personal prayer, focusing on a specific question, reading a particular document, or reflecting on a specific experience. Time is allotted for personal prayer either before the group meets or during the group meeting.

The leader or a group member offers a brief opening prayer. The leader reminds the group of the necessity of confidentiality and the need to honor time limits for sharing. Members of the group then participate in a conversation in three rounds:

### First Round: Personal Sharing

Members share the fruits of their prayer, focusing on their *interior movements*: consolations, desolations, insights, memories, feelings, emotions, attractions, repulsions, desires, etc.

Two basic skills or practices make up spiritual conversation:

*Active listening* 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. Active listening means welcoming non-judgmentally. 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” (n.22). Focus on what the other is saying, not on what you will say next. Do not comment on what another has said.

*Intentional speaking* is expressing one’s experience, feelings and thoughts. When speaking, try not to let your sharing be influenced by what another has said, and do not try to influence others’ sharing by how you express your own sharing. Use “I” statements, not “you” statements.

Following the round, the leader invites group members to pause in silence to thank God for what was shared and to reflect on how the contributions resonated with them and in what ways they were moved.

### Second Round: Reflective Sharing

The second round is a response to what was shared in the first round. It is not a time to supplement what was shared in first round. The leader invites the members to share what they heard and how they were affected by what they heard. Group members may focus on these sorts of questions:

*What did you hear?*

*Were you struck by a common theme?  
Was there something absent that you expected to hear?  
Were you especially touched by a particular sharing?  
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.

### Third Round: Discussion

In this third round of spiritual conversation, the group directs its attention to its own conversation and interactions in order to identify or name what consolations and desolations they were experiencing in the first but especially the second rounds of sharing.

The group may be asked to try to reach a consensus about a particular question.

In the third round, the mode of exchange can be more discussion-like than in the previous two rounds.

The *movements of consolation and desolation* discerned in the qualities of the interactions in the group indicate when the group is in harmony with the action of the Spirit among them, and when the group is resisting the action of the Spirit. As a rule of thumb, anything that enhances or energizes the group's active listening and intentional speaking is probably a communal consolation, and anything that detracts from or depresses its active listening and intentional speaking is probably a communal desolation.

More specific signs of consolation can be: where the group found insight, union, harmony, truth, peace, acceptance, greater inclusivity, an increase in energy, etc. More specific signs of desolation can be: withdrawal from the group, dissonance, decrease in energy, not listening actively, not speaking intentionally, avoiding reality, not telling the truth to each other, etc.

Once an approximate agreement has been reached about the identification of some communal spiritual movements, the leader may then conclude with a review of the meeting, followed by a closing prayer of gratitude.

(adapted by Kevin O'Brien, S.J.)