

Spiritual Conversation and Communal Discernment: An Overview

I. Distinguishing among personal discernment, spiritual conversation, and communal discernment

Both personal and communal discernment use the felt movements of consolation and desolation to identify the presence, activity, care and will of God. Personal discernment looks within the person for these movements. While communal discernment presupposes personal prayer and discernment, it also looks outside the self to seek the movements of consolation and desolation in the interactions within a group, and in the qualities of these interactions. Thus, what distinguishes communal discernment from personal discernment is the role of spiritual conversation and social interaction: a group's conversation is a basic part of the matter for communal discernment.

Like personal discernment, we can engage in spiritual conversation without doing communal discernment. Spiritual conversation can occur naturally between friends or colleagues in a non-structured way. It can also take place in a group setting, such as in faith-sharing. Spiritual conversation becomes communal discernment when those involved in the conversation become aware of and name the communal spiritual movements in the conversation. Spiritual conversation provides much of the data for communal discernment. In this way, communal discernment is basically a structured and guided group spiritual conversation.

II. Purposes of communal discernment

Communal discernment helps a group to recognize how the Spirit of Christ is active among them and, in some cases, what decisions the Spirit is inviting them to make. It helps the group to recognize how they are responding to or resisting the Spirit, and allows them to use this recognition to make good communal choices. Communal discernment is not about debating positions and winning arguments, nor is it about solving problems. Like personal discernment, it is about putting God's will first, following the lead of grace and attending to the quality of our engagement in God's presence to us in the issue at hand.

Communal discernment can be practiced for two purposes: to build community and to make apostolic decisions. These two purposes are closely related. Most find that good community building is not only inwardly focused but leads outward to mission: it witnesses to what we hold dear and animates us for mission.

Communal *apostolic* discernment occurs when the group's discernment concerns a question about what they will do. This leads to decision-making and implementation.

III. Process for spiritual conversation and communal discernment

The leader presents subject matter for personal prayer, such as 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.

Following the period of prayer, the leader convenes the group. He or she reminds the group of the necessity of confidentiality and the need to honor time limits for sharing (which the leader will gently enforce).

The leader or a group member offers a brief opening prayer (similar to how we begin a personal examen).

Members of the group then participate in a conversation in three rounds:

First Round: Personal Sharing

Members gather to 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 and intentional speaking.

- *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 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” (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. Focus on what the other is saying, not on what you will say next. 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.

- *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 others’ 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. Use “I” statements, not “you” statements.

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

Prior to the sharing, the leader reminds the members to listen actively and speak intentionally as above, as well as to speak concisely. Depending on the size of the group, it may be necessary to limit this intentional sharing to 2-3 minutes and to proceed in a clockwise fashion around the circle rather than waiting for people to chime in when they want. Group members are free to pass if they are not ready to speak.

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. Active listening and intentional speaking remain essential skills for this round.

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. These responses are essential data if the spiritual conversation is to take on a communal discernment character.

Third Round: Discussion

Communal discernment occurs when a group engaged in spiritual conversation seeks to identify the communal movements of spirit that they are experiencing. This new level of reflection moves the group from the *experience* of communal spiritual movements to their *identification*. 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 *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. Consolation indicates that the group is probably in harmony with the Spirit's action, and desolation probably indicates the group is not in harmony with the Spirit's action. Recognizing both the moments of harmony and disharmony can help the group infer how the Spirit is drawing them forward.

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.

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

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

IV. Communal decision-making

Communal *apostolic* discernment occurs when the group's discernment is about a question about what they will do. This leads to decision-making.

The process of communal decision-making is that of communal discernment as explained above, with the addition of five new elements:

- a question for decision
- the relevant data
- the grace of consensus
- the grace of confirmation
- implementation

The key element is the *grace of consensus*. The other elements listed above either lead up to it or support it. While a communal decision-making process can last over many meetings, depending on the nature of the decision to be made, basically the third round of a communal discernment process turns into a search for consensus.

In a religious community, normally the superior is the decision-maker, not the community. A religious community may still go through such a process. In this case, the community makes a decision tentatively, and it is up to the religious superior to confirm it or not.

Adapted by Kevin O'Brien, S.J. from "Communal Apostolic Discernment: A Toolkit," produced by the Spiritual Exercises Commission of the Province of Jesuits in English-Speaking Canada

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 *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.

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