



Synod 2021 – 2023 • For a Synodal Church

Spiritual Conversations Facilitator's Guide



Thank you for agreeing to serve as a facilitator for a Synodal Spiritual Conversation taking place at the Church of St. Francis Xavier. Your task is to help create and sustain a sacred space for your small group to share and listen to one another about our journeys with the Church. Your task also includes the logistics of keeping track of timing and helping participants stay focused on the questions being discussed. This guide contains (1) a script for you to use as you facilitate the conversation, and (2) some tips to help you in your role as facilitator. Read this guide before we meet and keep it handy as you facilitate the conversation.

Overview of Entire Gathering (total duration: 60-90 minutes)

1. Welcome and Opening Prayer 5 mins
2. Overview of Synod and Synodality 10 mins
3. Reading and Affirming Ground Rules 3 mins
4. Synod Preparatory Examen Prayer 10 mins
5. Spiritual Conversations in Small Groups 50 mins
6. Reassemble; Naming the Graces 2 mins
7. Closing Prayer 2 mins

Your role as a facilitator takes place in the “Spiritual Conversations” phase of our gathering.

Facilitator's Script

INTRODUCTIONS

Once we have broken into small groups for spiritual conversation, read the following to your small group.

Thank you all for joining this Synod Spiritual Conversation. During the next 50 minutes, each person will be invited to share on a series of questions.

- Each person will have 4 minutes to respond freely without interruption to the first question, which will be followed by a time of silent reflection.
- The second round is an opportunity to respond to what struck you in the first round. You will have 2 minutes for this response followed by a time of silent reflection.
- Finally, all will have a final minute to name what the Holy Spirit might be saying to us through this conversation.

Let's begin by introducing ourselves! Please tell us your name and something about any part of your name that tells us something about you. *Call each person by name, inviting them to share.*

ROUND 1

After all participants have introduced themselves, read the following to your small group.

We will now begin with our first round of conversation. Again, you will have 4 minutes to respond to the question. Anyone can begin, and then we will continue moving counterclockwise. I would invite you to listen attentively to what each person is saying. You are most welcome to take a few notes while others are speaking.

The main question for our conversation this evening is:

What have been the joys and obstacles in your journeying together with the church?

Please share a brief story that illustrates your experience.

I invite you to take a minute of silence now to collect your thoughts. [Silence for one minute]

Now we will begin our first round of sharing. Please share those insights you have received in your prayer. Again, anyone can begin and then we will continue counterclockwise. You will have 4 minutes each. I will let you know when you have 30 seconds left.

Only one person will speak at a time, while others listen. Share on your own personal experience, not about general considerations. You are the expert of your own experience. I will call on participants to speak in order.

After everyone has spoken, read:

Let's pause for 1 minute in silence. Consider the comments from the other participants in the first round. What resonated the most for you? What was particularly powerful in what was shared? [Silence for one minute]

ROUND 2

Now read:

Now we will begin our second round of sharing. Anyone can begin and then we will continue Clockwise. You will have 2 minutes each. I will again let you know when you have 30 seconds left.

The question for this second round is:

What resonated most for you in the last round?

What was most powerful? What touched you?

After everyone has spoken, say:

Let's pause for a few moments to reflect on what seems to be converging or emerging as we consider our journey together as Church. [Silence for one minute]

ROUND 3

Now read:

We will now begin our final round of sharing. This time we will not go in any particular order. Anyone can begin and anyone who feels moved can follow.

The question for this last round is:

Reflecting on our conversation, how might the Holy Spirit be prompting you, and all of us as Church, to improve the ways we are able to journey together?

Once the conversation is over, your group can continue to talk and discuss about these topics until the convener asks everyone to reassemble in one group.

Facilitator Tips

In facilitating these spiritual conversations, you are creating sacred, safe spaces for people to share their experiences in our Church, to respond to Pope Francis' invitation to hear from all the People of God. Here are some tips for the process.

Your role as a facilitator

- **Welcome.** Create a welcoming and prayerful space for Spiritual Conversation
- **Script.** Follow the script closely for introduction, three rounds of sharing, and evaluation
- **Guidelines.** Keep the conversation on track using ground rules
- **Timekeeping.** Be sure that each participant adheres to the time limit
- **Silence.** Observe times of prayerful silence between rounds

Some Expectations for Spiritual Conversations

- **Own Experiences.** The first round is a time to share one's own direct, personal experiences in the Church, particularly experiences of the heart and spirit—joys, affirmations, sorrows, challenges.
- **Listening sessions.** In these sessions, we are listening with attentiveness and openness to others' experiences and stories, and we are allowing these stories to touch our hearts. We are not expected to solve any problems nor defend positions.
- **Sacred spaces.** People are sharing the fruits of their prayer and aspects of their spiritual journeys. Participants are invited to enter this space with reverence and to be open to the presence of God in our midst.
- **Safe spaces.** Participants should know and trust that their words will be heard with respect, kept confidential, and not judged nor criticized. Likewise, they will respect others, especially those who are particularly vulnerable or wounded.
- **Everyone is the expert in their own experience.**
- **Prayerful process.** It is hoped that all will have had time to pray on the key question in advance of this session. If not, the facilitator may arrange for that before starting the conversation. Also, between the rounds of sharing, we encourage a couple of minutes of silent prayer to allow time to listen to any interior movements in one's heart and spirit.

It is NOT the place for:

- Debating, defending, or arguing
- Correcting others, feeling obliged to teach others, even if well-intentioned
- Counseling (Facilitators are not trained for this.)

Possible problem situations and ways to address them:

- **Exceeding Time Limits.** The biggest challenge in facilitating is keeping all participants to the pre-determined time limits. Track the time so that there is time for everyone to speak and to complete the three rounds of sharing and final evaluation. You may want to establish a plan up front where you will say, “15 seconds to wrap up.” Then say, “Thank you, let’s move to our next participant.” Or, “Sorry to have to interrupt you; your time is up. Thank you for your input, we need to move to our next participant so that everyone gets a chance to share.”
- **Interrupting.** If a participant interrupts a speaker or jumps in before others have had a turn, you might say, “We ask you to hold your responses until each participant has had a turn. In the second round, you will have a chance to make your response.”
- **Non-experiential inputs.** Despite having been told in the introduction to share their own personal experiences or feelings of joy, sorrow, disappointment, etc., some people may find this a difficult thing to do. Instead, they may express ideas, opinions, or judgements. In this case, you may decide to let them continue speaking so long as they are respectful of others; do be sure to keep them to the allotted time.
- **Pastoral correction.** A participant may try to correct another participant or challenge them to debate an issue. In this case, gently interrupt this participant: “I would like to acknowledge that you have a concern, but I want to remind you that this is a session for listening to one another’s experiences with openness and respect. Each person is the expert of their own experience. It is not a place to judge, correct, or challenge another.”
- **Strong emotion.** In general, a facilitator simply thanks each participant for sharing. It’s important not to value one input more than another. However, if someone is very emotional, you might feel it important to acknowledge that. You might say, “Thank you for your sharing and for trusting our group here with your story.”
- **Upset.** If a participant is visibly upset, it would be important to acknowledge that. You might say, “I can see that this situation is upsetting for you. Since we won’t be able to resolve this here, would you like to speak with me or the moderator after the session?” Whether the response is yes or no, be sure to mention this situation afterwards to the moderator who can follow up as necessary.