




piritual Conversation

At the Heart of Ignatian Spirituality

Josep M. Lozano





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For the participants in the Vicens Vives Programme,
who have taught me to converse.

And for Àngel, Rai and Sira,
who have helped me learn how to.

I have been trying to show how Jesuit spirituality, when viewed under other aspects, is not only applicable to lay men and lay women, but in some ways may be even more appropriate for them than for the Jesuits themselves.

John W. O'Malley S.J.

In Venice at That Time He Occupied Himself in Giving the Exercises and in Other Spiritual Conversations (August)

We know from Ignatius himself that in the Exercises we find the core of the personal journey that he invites us to embark on: "The Spiritual Exercises are all the best that I have been able to think out, experience and understand in this life, both for helping somebody to make the most of themselves, as also for being able to bring advantage help and profit to many others."¹ Yet at the same time, if we heed the words from the Autobiography that head this section we could say that they are a form –the most important form– of spiritual conversation. In fact, the early Jesuits had it very clear in their own minds that spiritual conversation was a structural and structuring element of the Ignatian way. Thus Lainez, when summarising how Ignatius grew in his desire to help others, associates this *helping* from the beginning with three components: example, Exercises and spiritual conversation. For that same reason we would do well to bear in mind who, in Nadal's words, Ignatius was: "Who was he? An unlettered lay knight."² We could perfectly well apply to spiritual conversation what Pope Francis said about spiritual direction: "Spiritual direction is not a clerical charism, it is a baptismal charism. The priests who do spiritual direction have the charism not because they are priests, but because they are lay people, because they are baptized."³ As we will see, spiritual accompaniment (or direction) is one of the forms that spiritual conversation can take, because spiritual conversation as such is an invitation to all those are baptised. For this reason we must bear in mind right from the start that to recognise, integrate and assume spiritual conversation as a manner of proceeding that lies at the heart of Ignatian spirituality is not just to put it where it belongs. It is also to do what V. Codina proposed: "it is intended as an act of 'tradition' or deliverance of Jesuit spirituality to lay Ignatian spirituality."⁴

In this respect, our journey will have five stages. In the first stage we will strive to show this central position that spiritual conversation occupies in the Ignatian way. In the second we will put forward some

1 SAINT IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA (1996). "Letter to Fr. Miona". *Personal Writtings*. London: Penguin Books, p. 139.

2 NADAL, P1 Alcalá, 24.

3 [Pope explains that the laity can carry out spiritual direction of others](#)

4 CODINA, V. (2020). *Ignacio ayer y hoy*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 10.



considerations regarding our cultural context, so substantially different from that of Ignatius, to realise the extent to which conversation as conversation is threatened. Consequently, in the third stage we will tackle three proposals that have arisen in recent years with a view to recovering and rebuilding the importance of conversation, highlighting some of the lessons we can learn from it, and at the same time some of the contributions we can make from the experience of spiritual conversation. In the fourth we will try to bind all this together, showing some of the theological vectors on which spiritual conversation hinges. Lastly, in the fifth we will show how the whole gospel can be read in terms of spiritual conversation.

We Don't Preach; but Speak About Things of God with Certain People in an Informal Way (Au 65)

9 *Converse* and *convert* have the same etymological root, something which Ignatius was obviously unaware of. Yet for him this link was an existential truth from the very start. His conversion process was inseparable from changes in his conversation, with which he did their souls good (Au 11). And due to these external changes in his manner of talking, those who looked after him at home began to notice the change that was occurring within him. In fact, the first time that such a centrally Ignatian term as *helping* appears is in connection with the conversations he had with those who went to see him and talk to him when he was in Manresa. It is not fortuitous, then, the moment when he began to experience great inner turmoil, which caused him to wonder "What new life is this we're beginning now?", brought him to recollect the spiritual conversations that he sought in others and that others sought in him (Au 21).

From the very beginning, then, the link between *helping* and *conversing* gave structure to Ignatius' journey. The Ignatian expression about helping souls refers to people as such, in their totality, not to one aspect of their life. Ignatius helped through example. He helped by attending to the vital needs of those before him, without being restrained by any of these needs and without identifying *helping* with attending to just one specific need: helping means being sensitive to the reality each person is experiencing, and responding to it. And he helped with conversation, which may –or may not– lead on to the Exercises. This threefold *helping* would always accompany him, albeit in different forms and with different contents (sometimes in stark contrast) depending on depending on persons, times and places. Exemplariness, sensitivity towards the needs of others and spiritual conversation are, therefore, the components of *helping*.



Our Vocation and Way of Life

In this respect, right from the very beginning he stressed what we could call the enabler of any spiritual conversation: listening. Not passive but receptive listening. Because the quality of listening is the necessary condition for this relational spirituality that characterises spiritual conversation. In the Autobiography, Ignatius soon reminds us that, even at the outset, his custom was not to talk to others at mealtimes but to listen. To listen in order to understand and grasp the reality of the other, and once he has finished, to speak about God on the basis of what he had heard; in other words, on the basis of the situation of the other (Au 42). In fact, Polanco confirms that "his manner of conversing was to be silent"⁵ at mealtimes in order to have a spiritual conversation at the end depending on what he had heard, but he adds: "without having thought it out in advance, and if on some occasion it was premeditated, it did not go so well."⁶ Spiritual conversation is a relational and contextual experience, not an instrumental one. It is not the right time to talk about what has already been decided beforehand, nor an opportunity to deliver a prefabricated discourse. It must respond to the reality of the other, seeking his good. Responding in order to help. And helping means attending to the reality and the need of the other in an attempt to accompany him on his –his!– way to God. The fact that spiritual conversation responds to a relational spirituality means that it occurs within the relationship, from the relationship and on the basis of the relationship. Nadal reminds us that "two things must be observed in the conversations. Firstly, to know the temperament of your interlocutor in order to be able to permeate his state of mind more easily, so that you do not tire or bother him. Secondly, not to start at once with spiritual things; rather, one should start with what is yours and his and return to what is yours, said Fr. Ignatius."⁷ Ultimately, listening means not conversing from a position of egocentrism, no matter what form it takes and no matter how supposedly 'spiritual' it is.

Without attentive and welcoming listening, then, there is no spiritual conversation. But it is a conversation with a purpose. For this reason, when in Salamanca he was asked what he and his first –and unsuccessful– group of companions preached, he replied: "We don't preach, but speak about things of God with certain people in an informal way" (Au 65). The circumstances that help us to understand this answer, at the same time intelligent and cautious, are well known. What we are interested in stressing now, however, is that it is not a matter of conveying or preaching a pre-established doctrine, but of talking familiarly

5 ALBUQUERQUE, A. (2005). *Diego Laínez SJ. Primer biógrafo de San Ignacio*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 148.

6 POLANCO, J. A. (2021). *Vida de Ignacio de Loyola*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 75.

7 NADAL, P31 Colonia, 19.

with some, and of speaking about things of God. Let's leave it for later to explore what we can understand today by 'talking about the things of God'. But from now on we should not forget that without talking about things of God, again there is no spiritual conversation.

If there is one thing the early companions (and Ignatius himself) recognised, it was that spiritual conversation was the pivot around which the bond between them all and with Ignatius revolved, and what accounts for Ignatius' impact on the transformation of their lives. In Paris, spiritual conversation and the Exercises nurtured their relationship and the dealings he had with the companions he fell in with, to the extent that he was described as "one who lead students astray" (Au 78). This was particularly important in his relationship with his fellow lodgers (Xavier and Favre). In this light, especially with Favre, Polanco reminds us that he decided to interrupt the spiritual conversations so as not to impede their studies.⁸ Ignatius himself confessed that he had time to study because "I'm not talking to anyone about the things of God. But when the course is over we'll back to normal" (Au 82).

It was clear for the first Jesuits that (spiritual) conversation characterised the Ignatian way of dealing with others and helping them. Câmara recognised that "as for his way of talking to others, he has received such gifts from God that they can hardly be written about."⁹ And many of the early companions (Xavier, Bobadilla, Rodrigues and, of course, Favre) remembered the conversations with Ignatius when recalling their own process of conversion. Because it was not talk for talk's sake, to pass the time of day or share student life. It was talk with a purpose, which activated in all of them a strong desire to devote their lives to following Jesus; spiritual conversation articulated a community of experience. It is not by chance that Polanco, when referring to the Montmartre vows, singles out the desire for "a life dedicated to honouring Christ," immediately adding that "the second way of keeping these companions was mutual familiarity and frequent communication among them."¹⁰ It follows that in Venice Ignatius referred to all of them in a letter as his "friends in the Lord,"¹¹ an expression that we find in none of his other surviving texts, which Arrupe and the GCs did not retrieve for the Jesuits until the second half of the twentieth century. "They were not a group of friends who founded a congregation, but individuals of differing ages and life journeys who became friends on their journey until together they founded the Society of Jesus."¹²

It should come as no surprise, then, that once the Society had been set up, in the diversity of ministries and apostolates they carried out,

8 POLANCO, J. A. (2021). *Vida de Ignacio de Loyola*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 8g.

9 GONÇALVES DA CÂMARA, L. (2004). *Remembering Íñigo: Glimpses of the life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola: The Memoriale of Luís Gonçalves da Câmara*. Leominster: Gracewing, p. 131.

10 POLANCO, J. A. (2021). *Vida de Ignacio de Loyola*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 124.

11 SAINT IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA (1996). "Letter to Juan Verdolay". *Personal Writings*. London: Penguin Books, p. 144.

12 SOSA, A. (2021). *Walking with Ignatius*. Dublin: Messenger Publications.

"they all achieved their end through some form of conversation. Indeed, conversation was a hallmark of almost all the Jesuits' ministries, [...]. It was, in fact, a hallmark of the way they understood themselves."¹³ Therefore it was not a mere apostolic instrument (although it was that too), nor just a common denominator of their manner of proceeding (that too), but rather it arose out of the heart of the spiritual path that had led them to found the Society of Jesus. They all left testimonies of how they talked, both about their journey of conversion, referring to their own conversations, and about their apostolate, mentioning the conversations they had with a wide variety of people. They would often talk about the Exercises as a form of spiritual conversation or about the conversations as a road leading to the Exercises.

We can sum it up with what Favre tells us in his *Mémorial*, as Ignatius said of him that it was he who gave the Exercises best and that he could strike water off a rock.¹⁴ Favre was a man who had an "untiring friendship for men,"¹⁵ helping them in their weaknesses, healing their wounds and desiring "to help all the living in all their needs, first spiritual, and then bodily."¹⁶ He said that in order to help we need, for sure, spiritual lights; but he immediately goes on to mention the eyes, the ears and all the senses and all the qualities of the soul and the body. Hence the trilogy with which Favre defines his itinerant activity and his ministries: confessions, conversations and Exercises. Conversations always figure as the meeting point with the other that connects, opens and sustains other forms of helping.

It may be worth asking ourselves, however, whether spiritual conversation gradually shifted from nurturing a core experience of encounter with the other in God (we could say it like this: between friendship in the Lord, i.e., among themselves, and talking familiarly about things of God i.e., with others) to being a preferential apostolic activity. Obviously they are not incompatible; on the contrary, and both form part of the way the Jesuits understand themselves. But putting stress on the latter may lead us to see spiritual conversation as a preferential apostolic activity, to some extent to the detriment of its central place in all spiritual life of Ignatian inspiration, aside from the concrete ministries carried out by the Jesuits.

At the risk of oversimplifying, we could find an analogy between the mist that has come to blur some dimensions of spiritual conversation and the thick fog that blotted out communal discernment (which was absent from Jesuit language until well into the second half of the twen-

13 O'MALLEY, J. (1993). *The First Jesuits*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 91.

14 NADAL, P6 Austria, 24.

15 DE CERTEAU, M. (2006). "Introduction". Favre, P. (2006). *Mémorial*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, p. 56.

16 FAVRE, P. (2006). *Mémorial*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, n. 400.



tieth century). In fact, the so-called deliberations of the first fathers (which ultimately led to the founding of the Society of Jesus) provide us with the key as to what spiritual conversation is about: "We decided to assemble before the day of separation and discuss for a number of days our common vocation and the way of life we had adopted."¹⁷ Discussing (our) common vocation and way of life is, then, the form and the framework taken by the spiritual conversation experienced profoundly by any Christian. But if we focus excessively on the process carried out at that foundational moment (as if it were just a very finely tuned decision-making method) we may be missing the fact that it was not a process that started and finished in itself, but rather was the result of a long shared spiritual journey, which bears the hallmark of this manner of conversing, and is explained by being able to feel 'friends in the Lord'.

17 [The Deliberations of Our First Fathers](#)

18 ALBUQUERQUE, A. (2005). *Diego Laínez S.J. Primer biógrafo de S. Ignacio*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 184.

19 NADAL, P4 *Coimbra*, 179.

Curiously, though, this peak of common deliberation also marked the beginning of a rapid decline. Polanco made this very clear, also talking about the way to proceed to Venice: "in that which required resolving, after quiet prayer they resolved it, opting for the inclination of the majority; and in this way they acted until they chose a superior."¹⁸ Spiritual conversation did not disappear so drastically, but it gradually retreated to be reduced to some extent to a preferential apostolic instrument in the development of the Society of Jesus.

The Constitutions

Of course, seeing it like this also depends on how we read the Constitutions. Because the Constitutions are more than just a legal or canonical text. We could say that they are the institutional dimension of Ignatian spirituality, and that they always demand a spiritual reading. They cannot be separated from the Exercises, among other reasons because they were born of the same womb, as Ignatius' Spiritual Diary bears witness. So, if anything is to be gleaned from the Constitutions it is that the Jesuit is a man of conversation. Nadal, who according to Ignatius had best understood the spirit of the Constitutions and who explained them to the first generations of Jesuits, insisted that they could help in any ministry of the word ("that which is understood in good conversation"), and that it is always possible to "teach the Christian doctrine, not preaching it, but in conversation."¹⁹

In fact, conversation is a constant presence throughout the text of the Constitutions, from their evaluation in the general Examen for candi-



dates to the profile of the General (where Nadal said that Ignatius had portrayed himself), who must "discern the various spirits and to give counsel and remedies to so many," as well as "conversing with such various persons from within and without the Society" (Co 729). They cannot all receive the same mission, but they can all help others through their conversations: candidates, brothers, students, the ordained and those who were sent to important missions. Because it applies to all of them that "in their spiritual conversations they should strive to obtain the greater interior progress of their neighbour" (Co 115). For this reason, in order to be admitted to the Society "a pleasing manner of speech, so necessary for communications with one's fellowmen, is desirable" (Co 157). And, in general, it is necessary to know at least "the languages which are ordinarily found necessary, such as the vernacular of the place of residence and Latin" (Co 146). Accordingly, when Jesuits are sent to the various missions, conversational ability (including outward appearance) is a determining criterion in the choice of who to send (Co 624). And in the educational Institutions the Rector "should also consider which of his subjects should deal with their neighbours inside the house or outside of it, and for what length of time they should do this, in spiritual conversations, conducting exercises, hearing confessions, and also in preaching or lecturing or in teaching Christian doctrine" (Co 437). Even to the extent that it should be properly assessed whether persons who have notable disfigurements or defects are suitable for the Society, among other reasons because they "do not help toward the edification of the neighbours with whom, according to our Institute, it is necessary to deal" (Co 186).

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When all is said and done, however, we should not get lost in the niceties of the various specifications, because ultimately it is all about the fact that "the manner of speaking may assist that of feeling" (Co 62). That the manner of speaking may assist that of feeling should give us the key to understanding spiritual conversation, insofar as *feeling*²⁰ is a fundamental term in Ignatian spirituality that connects with a unified anthropology, an experience that is modulated over the weeks of the Exercises, a dimension that structures discernment, and the way of experiencing the bond and the presence in the Church. And for this reason it should also be stressed that spiritual conversation is inseparable from Ignatian *helping*, because we must never forget that, according to Nadal, Ignatius had from the beginning an "insatiable desire and inclination to help his neighbour"²¹ and not just to chatter.

20 The Spanish word is 'sentir'.

21 NADAL, P1 Roma, 13.

The Letters

"For Ignatius and the first generation of Jesuits, spiritual conversation was a fundamental part of their life and mission, but they had not properly defined it, and they had not coined a single expression to talk about it."²² In any event, intimate communication among all of them was a core manner of proceeding of their identity. This was authoritatively present in their recollections and memoirs, where they also habitually acknowledged who excelled in conversation. They all made reference to this: Favre, Xavier, Bobadilla, Jay, Rodrigues, Coduri... and it was recorded by exceptional witnesses such as Polanco, Lainez, Câmara and Nadal. Hence the importance of maintaining this communicative link in the organisational makeup of the Society and the interest –encouraged and demanded by such a key figure as Polanco– in making epistolary communication the hinge around which the expansion of the Society pivoted. Nonetheless, the importance of correspondence was not just a decisive organisational innovation for an increasingly global institution. In the same way as the Constitutions were, as we said earlier, the institutional form of Ignatian spirituality, letters were the relational and organisational form of Ignatian spirituality, insofar as those who experienced it were scattered missionally all over the world. Of course, letters served to be mutually informed. But what was sought through the information was the cherishing of mutual affection and the union of hearts and minds²³.

22 NORGAARD, D. (2023). "Instrucciones para conversar en el Señor". *Manresa*, Vol. 95, p. 138.

23 The Spanish word is "unión de ánimos".

24 IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA (1991). "An instruction on the manner of proceeding". *Spiritual Exercises and selected Works*. New York: Paulist Press, p. 359.

The letters, then, reflected pragmatically –i.e., in the form of advice, indications, prescriptions, recommendations, criteria and so on– how Ignatius and the first companions understood many central elements of their spirituality. One of these was spiritual conversation, which, as we said above, fluctuated between cultivating friendship in the Lord and the union of hearts and minds, on the one hand, and talking about divine things, on the other. In other words, between intimate communication and mutual edification, on the one hand, and –increasingly– apostolic activity and spiritual conversation as ministry, on the other. We have already underlined the importance of spiritual conversation and mutual communication for nurturing friendship in the Lord, first, and strengthening the union of hearts and minds, subsequently (especially when they ceased to be a group of laymen to become a religious order). In this respect, the apostolic dimension of conversation (explicitly spiritual or otherwise) gained weight and importance, as "Through spiritual conversation they can be of help to everyone they deal with."²⁴ For this reason, for example, in 1553 Ignatius wrote to D.



Miró (who was hesitant to accept to be the confessor of the king of Portugal) that “according to our vocation, we talked with everyone.”²⁵ In the Society, conversation and vocation work in tandem. “You shall converse with everyone,” (Xavier); “in order to be able to converse with everyone,” (Bobadilla); “[the Jesuit] has freedom in the Lord to converse and deal with everyone,” (Nadal). And we could go on: the Jesuit is a man of conversations.

But this is not done just any way, or as it comes. Let us take a closer look at just two of the several letters in which Ignatius makes recommendations about conversation.

When the Pope sent Broët and Salmerón to Ireland, Ignatius wrote a series of recommendations on how to start up conversations: “be slow to speak and say little [...], be ready to listen for long periods and until each one has had his say.”²⁶ Not only does he stress listening to understand the other, but also adapting to his reality to speak to him, and striving not to impose one’s own perspective but anchoring it in the other’s preoccupations, character and contexts, with particular attention to the emotional situation from which he talks.

25 SAINT IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA (1996). “Letter to Fr. Diego Miró”. *Personal Writings*. London: Penguin Books, p. 249.

26 To Fathers Broët and Salmerón

27 SAINT IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA (1996). “Instructions for the undertaking at Trent”. *Personal Writings*. London: Penguin Books, p. 164.

28 SAINT IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA (1996). “Instructions for the undertaking at Trent”. *Personal Writings*. London: Penguin Books, p. 164.

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As “it is not possible in our calling to avoid such a conversation,”²⁷ Ignatius recommends Lainez and Jay, sent to Trent, to listen attentively and not to speak in haste; and not only as a conversational technique but also because such an attitude is always considerate and amicable. In other words, “keeping quiet so as to sense and appreciate the positions, emotions and desires or those speaking. Then he will better able to speak or to keep silent”²⁸ (incidentally: knowing how to be silent also forms part of conversation). Because, once again, as it is a matter of ‘helping souls’ an effort should be made to avoid controversy between two people; and, if the issue is important, to make sure to give one’s own opinion “as calmly and unpretentiously as possible,” bearing in mind that “it will be of great help to forget completely one’s own occupations and lack of time, i.e. my own convenience, and adapt myself completely to the convenience and requirements of the person I want to deal with, so that I can urge them on to God’s greater glory.” And, at the end of the day, the fathers attending the Council should talk about how the day has gone and how to approach the next day, helping and correcting each other in everything that might improve the service they are doing. Because it is important not to lose sight of the good of the other and the apostolic purpose for which they were sent, without conversing around themselves and their own ideas.



Spiritual conversation lies, then, at the heart of Ignatian spirituality. This entails both working and developing the skills that make it possible, such as attending to one's inner world, and the life of prayer and the Examen that sustain it. The question we must ask ourselves now is whether this understanding of spiritual conversation is viable in the midst of the society we live in.

The Most Productive and Natural Exercise of the Mind, in My Opinion, Is Conversation

Montaigne wrote this not many years after the foundation of the Society of Jesus.²⁹ It seems unlikely that he would say it if he had to rewrite his essay on conversation today. At the very least because each society and each period change the topics, the manner of conversing and the assumptions from which conversation is conducted. We could say that conversation too, and the way it is understood, is modelled according to 'persons, times and places,' and does not follow a pre-existing norm on what to do. But if conversation lies at the heart of Ignatian spirituality, how can it find its centre today? And, at the same time, how can it contribute to helping souls in our context?

²⁹ [Essays of Michel de Montaigne](#), Montaigne, M. (2007). *Assaigs. Llibre tercer*. Barcelona: Proa, p. 229.

Nowadays we often hear that we live in the information society. But, as we have seen, conversing is not only, or fundamentally, conveying information or managing it. Nor a communicative skill. Nor a manner of talking. Conversing is dealing with the other and building a relationship. A relationship in which, first and foremost, we are present, fully present. To converse is to propitiate a quality present, and there are no quality presents without quality conversations. This quality is not derived from the content but from mutual presence. In conversation we are present in both senses of the word: we are there fully, and we give each other the present –the gift– of our presence.

To converse is to recognise that relationships are more important than things and goals. And therefore that what matters most is to grasp what we are saying to each other and not just what we are talking about. Conversation ultimately evokes the intimate inner space –the source– from which we speak, not the agenda of items to be discussed. The intention of the conversation arises out of that inner space, not from the goals we have set. Therefore, there is no conversation unless we talk and listen from the source that gives us life, and we become its vehicle. For this reason the primordial requirement for being able to converse is attention: attention to the inner world, to the outer world and to others. And it is wise to bear in mind that attention is not an exclusive requirement of conversation: thought requires an attentive mind, empathy and compassion require emotional attention, and courage requires the



attention of the will. Consequently, the more distracted and scatter-brained we are, the poorer our conversation will be. And for that same reason, the weaker our thinking is, the more barren our empathy, the more fictitious our compassion, and the feebler our courage will be.

This is not the moment to go into considerations about the changes that define the transition from the world of yesterday to the emerging society, before which sometimes it seems that the Church is only capable of acting the prophet of doom or pointlessly reminding us of very general principles with which it is impossible to disagree. We are entering an era in which human evolution will be a co-evolution with smart machines and in which the question we will have to face will be what it means to be human in a world of smart machines. And if, as A. Cornella says, the future of humanity is to become human, we will need to rework how to do it, how to conceive it and how to be it, as all the paths of humanisation will be affected; including, therefore, what we recognise as conversation and what we understand by conversing. Because, contrary to what is often said, smart technologies are not just extensions of ourselves (and, therefore, it does no good to keep repeating rhetorically that it all depends on how we use them); rather, we also become extensions of them. And consequently, indeed, it is important not to equate being in favour of conversation with being against technology.

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If the primordial requirement for being able to converse is attention, in this transition we are experiencing a series of changes that radically affect our capacity to focus our attention. We live immersed in an attention economy, in which the fight of all against all (companies, parties, schools, churches, NGOs, networks...) is above all a fight to grab our attention. Not without reason has Byung-Chul Han insisted that "the crisis of religion is a crisis of attention."³⁰

The attention economy –and crisis– have a direct effect on our conversations and their quality. Living in an attention economy³¹ is relevant biographically and generationally because it will shape our lives: ultimately, the life we have led will be the outcome of that which we have paid attention to, in a context where everyone conspires to grab it. So, who we are (or who we become) is the result of the intersection between what attracts our attention and where I decide to place it. Because attention is not an ability that we are given at random, or the passively accepted outcome of our temperament: it is a function of the attention habits we have developed.

30 BYUNG-CHUL HAN (2023). *Vita contemplativa: In praise of inactivity*. Cambridge: Polity Press. Barcelona: La Magrana, p. 124.

31 See, for example, HARI, J. (2021). *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention*. London: Bloomsbury. WU, T. (2016). *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads*. New York: Knopf.



Today everything pushes us towards the fragmentation of our attention. The myth of so-called multitasking masks the reality that we train ourselves daily to exert a jumpy attention that hops from one micro-stimulus to the next. It is easy –and well-founded– to decry the social media for the way they incentivise the most primitive neural layers until they become a wheel on which we go nowhere fast, like new technological hamsters. Nevertheless, to give just one example that goes beyond the media, I prefer not to reproduce the studies documenting what people do while they are in a virtual meeting: the media explain who we are and what happens to us, but they are no substitute for our responsibility. However, what I am interested in underlining now is that our attention demands some kind of slowness, because this is a receptive attention. And that, insofar as *attention* belongs to the same family of words as *tending towards*, a crisis of attention is at the same time a crisis of intention: a wandering attention necessarily means a weak will. When all is said and done, in an attention economy we can fritter away two essential components of a full life: focus and wonderment. In other words, we find it increasingly difficult to concentrate on anything steadily, and also, paradoxically, to digress.

In fact, alarm bells have been ringing everywhere for some time. Especially in connection with the gradual replacement of conversation as a way of relating to contacts as a way of connecting, with the consequent changes in what we used to call politeness. It is now an acquired habit to answer calls in the middle of a meeting, check one's email in mid conversation or replace calls with consecutive voice messages. Because, among other reasons, these behaviours are no longer perceived as interruptions, but as new connections that cannot wait. It has become normal and habitual to have contacts without it requiring either our attention or our presence; and to assume as inevitable the anxiety that now and always there are more things that are more interesting that we could attend to, or that a more stimulating contact is possible. In the end, the implicit assumption is that what I am experiencing is nothing more than the acknowledgement of what I am missing out on: there must always be more life or more stimuli somewhere else. Even when you arrive at a retreat house or a spirituality centre, the first thing they do at reception –often without being asked– is to give you the Wi-Fi password! Perhaps because of all this, it is increasingly difficult to sustain silence, to be able to narrate meaningfully what is nothing more than a succession of micro-events, or to face challenging conversations.



Alarm bells are ringing.³² But not only alarm bells. There are explorations of roads and ways of doing things that are intended to help us find ways to create space for conversations, and for better conversations with better quality. Explorations that accept that you come out of a conversation not with more information, but as a different person, inasmuch as what has occurred is simply an encounter between people. After all, "to start to have better conversations, we need to know what it is that we believe,"³³ and not just what we want to talk about. Spiritual conversation, then, stands today in the midst of this change of era, and can be enriched through these explorations, and at the same time contribute to them from its own specific standpoint. Because if conversation and conversion have the same root, experiencing a conversion also means discerning what conversations we want to form part of.

32 TURKLE, S. (2016). *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. London: Penguin.

33 KNIGHT, J. (2016). *Better Conversations*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin, p. 8.

The Art of Thinking, Feeling and Living Together

“Careful attention to inner experience, therefore, is a hallmark of Ignatian Spirituality; such attention is absolutely necessary if the individual wants to know God’s desires for him or her.”³⁴ Therefore, in order to be able to situate and understand better what place spiritual conversation can occupy in the context of the attention economy, we would do well to contrast it at least with three of the various proposals that are mooted today to improve the quality of our attention and of the relationships that help us to think, feel and live together. Through them, spiritual conversation can be expressed better, and at the same time can contribute to them from its specific approach.

Attentive Listening: Otto Scharmer (Theory U)

Scharmer has developed a methodology for helping organisations to open up to the future as it emerges and as they want to make it emerge, and to explore the most suitable changes to achieve their purpose. It has been stressed that his anthropology and his process have many points that connect to those of the Exercises, and indeed several institutions and religious congregations have used them in their transformation processes.

Scharmer,³⁵ whose proposal we will mention only in part, summarises the contemporary situation by stating that we are immersed in three simultaneous divides. An ecological divide (of humans with nature), a social divide (of humans with each other), and a spiritual or cultural divide (of humans with themselves). The singularity of Scharmer’s analysis is that he considers it impossible to resolve these fractures separately; they are so interrelated that we cannot resolve any of them if we do not resolve the other two. In this respect, he considers that we need to shift from an ego-system to an eco-system. We must not wait for the future to answer the questions we ask ourselves and respond to the challenges before us: we ourselves must contribute to the emerging future. And this path of transformation leads us, at the same time, to

34 BARRY, W. A. (2001). *Letting God Come Close: An Approach to the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises*. Chicago: Loyola Press.

35 SCHARMER, O. (2009). *Theory U. Leading from the Future as It Emerges*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler. SCHARMER, O. (2013). *Leading from the Emerging Future*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler. SCHARMER, O. *The Essentials of Theory U*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler. SENGE, P. ET AL. (2004). *Presence. Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*. New York: Doubleday.



relate better to others, to the system as a whole, and to ourselves. In an accelerated world, everyone focuses on what they have to do, the results they seek to achieve (the *what*) and with a bit of luck they will put some thought into the process to achieve them (the *how*). Seldom do they have any awareness of, or connection with, the *why*.

However, Scharmer also emphasises that we tend to neglect a key issue: we want to act and intervene, but we pay no attention to the inner space of the person who acts and intervenes, which after all is the space from which we act. In other words, the blind spot of our actions is the inner space of he who intervenes, the place from which he intervenes. We often see this in our conversations, whether they are personal interactions or formal meetings. We care a great deal about the what and the how, and sometimes we even remember the why at some stage. But we keep well locked away the inner space from which we converse. Or we simply ignore it. So it is important to remember that there is no spiritual conversation without prayer. Spiritual conversation is born of prayer and returns to prayer, and without it no spiritual conversation is possible. Our conversations are lacking not only in communication skills and abilities. Most of all, they are lacking in prayer. Prayer that heeds what the Spirit is saying to us in our present reality –both personal and collective.

Scharmer insists that energy (our vital energy) follows our attention. Wherever we put our attention, our energy will go there: “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Lk 12:34) and vice versa. In order to be able to learn from the future that emerges, rather from the adaptive repetition of the past, we need to open our mind, our heart and our will. All three, at the same time. When that happens, this receptive attention becomes a response to a call, the call of that which emerges in the reality we are experiencing. Conversing spiritually also means being open to what emerges in our conversations, and not simply criticising what is happening or saying what ought to happen.

We need, then, to transform our capacity to focus, both personally and collectively. And this transformation leads to the transformation of our capacity to listen and to open up. Our veritable technology as human beings is our capacity to open our mind, our heart and our will. In other words, the capacity not to be prisoners of the patterns of the past, the capacity to empathise with others in different contexts, and the capacity to connect with our purpose from our inner space. This, in the context of spiritual conversation, means that there is no con-



versation without conversion; that conversation is not the result of our effort, although we may well make an effort, but rather the result of responding to an invitation and a call. And therefore it is a matter of our attention and our conversation being moved by “the social meaning of existence, the fraternal dimension of spirituality, our conviction of the inalienable dignity of each person, and our reasons for loving and accepting all our brothers and sisters.”³⁶

This is why –Scharmer will say– we need to create a space for deep listening. It is not fortuitous that the book that brings together Pope Francis' catecheses on discernment in Spanish bears the title *El poder de la escucha: the power of listening*.³⁷ Because likewise, there is no spiritual conversation without active and deep listening. And this is a long learning pathway that never reaches its destination. If we take a look at what Scharmer calls the four levels of attention (or listening) and ask ourselves where we move habitually in our (spiritual) conversations, it may help us to understand why this is so.

- 36 POPE FRANCIS (2020). *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 86.
- 37 POPE FRANCIS (2023). *El poder de la escucha*. Madrid: Ciudad Nueva.

- *Level 1.* When we stand on this level we listen from our pre-assumed patterns and judgements. In fact, what we hear merely confirms what we already think and believe, personally and about other people. Before the other person speaks we already know or anticipate what he is going to say: it's what he always says, we know it well enough. This may happen in a chance encounter or in a formal meeting, but deep down the centre is always me and what I already thought or had ready beforehand. It is commonplace not to say what I think but what others want to hear, or show routine courtesy, or avoid conflict if I am not in a position of power, or impose myself if I am. Ultimately, when I am silent I am not listening but preparing my monologue, or simply waiting in absent-minded silence for the encounter to end. Because I know right from the start what I am going to hear and what I am willing to say. And, if we want to play for time without making any progress, we can always set up a commission or a taskforce.
- *Level 2.* When we stand on this level we bring into play our mental (and perhaps argumentation) capacity. We roll up our sleeves and get involved as topics, arguments or facts appear that interest us or provide us with something new. Or, if necessary, we confront the positions of others from our own, seeking to win them over (or simply win) with better arguments or more irrefutable facts. The key is to argue better and support our arguments with facts. I talk and listen only from my viewpoint and I identify with it: I am my viewpoint



and my arguments. I say what I think, undoubtedly, but only with the intention of winning (or winning over). Because what I intend is to exchange views and, at most, may the best man win. On this level listening and talking is no more than a form of transaction.

- *Level 3.* When we stand on this level we connect emotionally with others and we endeavour to see and understand the situation from their perspective. We are attentive to the other and value him as a person, and we try not to give high priority to our personal agenda as the place from which we listen. When I talk I feel part of a whole made up of bonds and relationships in which we all re/cognise each other and ourselves. This putting oneself in the other's place is reciprocated, and a bond is created that includes all the interlocutors as people, and does not reduce them to their ideas, proposals or thoughts. What I 'want and desire' is to explore with the other what we are seeking jointly, which does not necessarily mean that we will reach an agreement, but we do acknowledge the other's position and in one way or another we put ourselves in his place.
- *Level 4.* When we stand on this level, listening means that we open up to the life and the future that is latent and emerges in our conversation. It is about learning not only from the past but also from the emerging future. We listen insofar as we connect with the inner space that nurtures our life and with the call and the purpose that bring us together. Silence occurs in the conversation not as an absence of words but as an opening up to the presence that dwells within us and situates us beyond ourselves. We listen and talk from a position of full presence, and for this reason listening attentively is a way of shedding habits, 'deshabiting' ourselves, paying attention to the life and the future that arises between us. We open up to the experience that flows through our conversation and we are fully present in it. Because in attentive listening we are moved by our attention to the life and the future that emerges and that will give rise to new forms of presence.

These four levels of conversation can help us to realise what register we are in at different moments of our daily life. But above all it can help us to open up to spiritual conversation and understand better what blocks it. All too often, our conversations or our community meetings are limited to listening without listening, just putting up with the other repeating what we already know he will say, neither he nor us moving an inch. Too often, our conversations or our community meetings are a fight to win, or to win over, to impose our own theological or liturgical view, or to pass off as a consensus the watered-down agreement re-



sulting from a compromise between the different positions. Too often, our conversations or our meetings are emotionally intense moments that generate well-being and a sense of companionship but then leave no trace. We repeat: there is no conversation (or deep, active listening) without conversion (and here I depart from Scharmer in that sometimes he seems to be talking simply about four levels of listening that are freely available for us to choose the right one at any given moment). Spiritual conversation is a path towards what Cardinal Bergoglio said in the conclave from which he emerged as Pope: "In Revelation, Jesus says that he is standing at the threshold and calling. Evidently the text refers to the fact that he stands outside the door and knocks to enter... But at times I think that Jesus may be knocking from the inside, that we may let him out." Spiritual conversation happens when all those involved let Jesus into –and out of– that conversation.

26 Scharmer adds that as we advance towards a deeper level of listening we have to cope with three voices that Ignatius might say are in me but do not spring from my free will and choice (SE 32). According to Scharmer, these three voices are the voice of judgement, the voice of cynicism and the voice of fear. The first one we find is the voice of judgement, which leads us to give our opinion, assess, or criticise everything that is proposed, thus making any progress impossible and keeping us at a distance, in the prejudgements that make us give our opinion, assess, or criticise in this way. If we manage to cope with the voice of judgement, we come up against the voice of cynicism, which shuts our heart tight and blocks empathy, leading us to all kinds of emotional disconnection, due to arrogance, contempt, scepticism or mistrust towards others. Lastly, on the final level we find the voice of fear, which makes it difficult for us to become fully present, because listening from a perspective of openness may require us to let go of that which is familiar to us and surrender, with the sensation of losing our footing on what was once our safe ground. In short, we may be called upon to leave the land of our parents and go to a place that is the emerging but unknown future, with trust in the promise.

Recognising the voice of fear, embracing it and transforming it forms part of spiritual conversation. It forms part of it because spiritual conversation makes us more vulnerable, as we no longer seek support and safety in the comfort of our prejudices and an 'it's worked fine like this up to now' attitude. Becoming fully present, with nothing to protect or defend (that is, without protecting and defending ourselves) opens us up to understanding that "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head"



(Mt 8:20). And understanding it not only in the silence of prayer but also in the vulnerability of a trusting relationship. "To talk about oneself is to decide to go through life with a degree of lucid naivety, because it is to choose to become freely vulnerable, liable to injury. The life that opens up and is given by the word is the beginning of a vital dispossession, it is to start to be shaped by a special type of poverty. [...] To converse in this way is to submit trustingly, to put our life in the hands of others and at the same time to hold the life of the other in our hands."³⁸ And obviously it also means not instrumentalising fragility and vulnerability (one's own and those of other people) at the service of our hidden agenda. Spiritual conversation is attentive listening, trained on a daily basis, to the Spirit that only speaks if it is through our words, and the bonds and decisions they can generate.

Attentive Talking: Edgar H. Schein (Helping)

There is no spiritual conversation without active and attentive listening. Undoubtedly. But conversation is not just listening. It is also talking, a fact that is often forgotten. So, there is no spiritual conversation without what we could call, for want of a better expression, attentive talking. Listening with attention, for sure, but talking with attention too. If in listening the place from which we listen is decisive, in talking too it is decisive where we talk from. In talking too, our intentions, motions and purposes are also present. In the same way that listening is not a way of gaining time to prepare what we want to say, talking is not an opportunity to get our premeditated messages and prescriptions across. After all, being listened to and giving advice can be very gratifying, and a rather unobtrusive way of affirming oneself. Unfortunately it is still considered too eccentric to create spaces of silence in the middle of a spiritual conversation –as we have seen done in the Synod– to prevent the flow of words from coming alive and diluting the presence of those who are conversing. Attentive talking is a manifestation of the purpose of helping souls. Talk that heals the person as a whole, as we see in the way Jesus talks to the paralytic (Mk 2:1-12) and where the question to ask ourselves is that of the teachers of the law: why does this fellow talk like that? How do we talk?

Talking to help. *Helping*: this word with Ignatian resonances is the title of Schein's proposal, and the key to interpreting it.³⁹ He writes for managers and professionals, but he can help us to understand better our ways of talking/helping. Although it may seem obvious, the focus

38 GARCÍA DE CASTRO, J. (2019). *La voz de tu salud*. Santander: Sal Terrae, p. 48.

39 SCHEIN, E. H. (2009). *Helping*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler. SCHEIN, E. H. (2013). *Humble Inquiry*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler.



of the conversation is not placed on two or more people. Two people considered separately: one who speaks and one who listens, who have their say in turns. Instead, the focus of the conversation is laid on a relationship that is built. Conversation –talking– is always contextual, situational; non-doctrinal (in all the meanings of the word). If with Scharmer we saw that listening from presence always puts us in a position of vulnerability, talking from presence likewise makes us vulnerable: spiritual conversation is not conducted from a position of security and self-affirmation or to reinforce a relationship of dependence, but out of trust. Because if helping is such an important relationship, it is equally important to offer and give it as it is to ask for it and receive it.

Schein contends that any person who wants to help has to choose between the roles of expert (who has knowledge, provides information and clarifies situations in order to say what needs to be done or what can be done), doctor (who diagnoses problems and prescribes treatments) or someone who focuses on relationships, from which emerges the sort of help that needs to be proposed. He emphasises that in our culture (also in our ecclesial culture, I might add) we tend to identify talking/helping with the first two, and neglect the last one. Obviously, different situations may require us to activate circumstantially any of the three roles, among other reasons because the person asking for help may be looking for an expert or a doctor, and not a healing relationship. But the third role becomes pivotal because it is built on an attitude of accompaniment that seeks to attend to what is and what is not needed in the thoughts, ideas or feelings of the helper.

28

What is the key attitude for talking and helping by accompanying? According to Schein, humility. Humility because this is a relationship that seeks the other's good and for the other also to have a say, and not to be subjugated, replaced or condemned to dependency. Câmara recalls in connection with Ignatius that "there was one thing in conversation that he could not abide, and that not only among ourselves, but even among outsiders: this was to speak pompously and authoritatively, as though laying down the law, as for example if someone says, 'It is necessary that we do so and so; there is no other possible way than this; the truth of the matter is so and so,' and other similar modes of expression. Our Father used to call those who employed such expressions 'decretists,' and as I say, he reproved them."⁴⁰

Humility means that we give the art of inquiry all the importance it has. Asking good questions is an essential component of speaking well:

40 GONÇALVES DA CÂMARA, L. (2004). *Remembering Iñigo: Glimpses of the Life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola: The Memoriale of Luís Gonçalves da Câmara*. Leominster: Gracewing, p. 121.



one of the services we urgently need is the art of asking good questions. Humble inquiry means that we recognise the other as such and are interested in him: inquiry is a privileged form of re/cognition. And humility means that we investigate and that, in doing so, we ex/pose ourselves. Inquiry from a position of humility is the opposite of converting the other into the receiver of a manual of answers that are prepared in advance. In short, the opposite of what the legend attributes to either De Gaulle or Mitterrand saying at the beginning of a press conference: I've got the answers, has anybody got any questions?

Schein highlights one of the greatest difficulties of attentive talking with the intention of helping. This is none other than the fact that we live immersed in a culture of talking and doing (and talking to say what needs to be done). A culture that only knows how to talk in terms of objectives and results. A culture that attaches much greater value to the performance of tasks than to the building of relationships. And, above all, the difficulty that we are not aware of this cultural bias: that we find it 'natural' that interactions should work this way. Hence the frequency of the complaint –the complaint!– that spiritual conversation takes time (something which lately, for example, is one of the main difficulties that symptomatically are alleged in order to downplay communal discernment). We do not realise that when we say that we have lost the game, because by accepting time pressures we are accepting an alien framework of values, and all we are left with is how we can justify ourselves. Sometimes meetings seem to be held with the assumption that if the Spirit doesn't say anything in the timespan allotted to it in the agenda then that's its problem, and tough luck. Perhaps it is not that spiritual conversation is too slow, but that we live and try to live too fast, and therefore we confuse spiritual conversation with becoming eternal without concluding, or carrying on with no pattern or process, which is not the case; quite the contrary.

Talking and inquiring with humility entails occupying a point of maximum vulnerability in our cultural context: letting go of the pretence of controlling time, and relinquishing it (recall Ignatius' letter that we mentioned above, in which he said that it was very important "to forget about my own leisure or lack of time"). Humble helping therefore comes as a result of the intersection between attentive listening and attentive talking. Attentive not to themselves but to the Spirit that imbues and sustains them. This is why attentive listening and attentive talking need moments of silence, to and from the prayer. "Spiritual conversation acquires Christian meaning insofar as it is understood as



a search for the Spirit in the Spirit. Beyond these coordinates we will be building another sort of conversational relationship, also fully valid, but not the spiritual conversation we are studying here."⁴¹

Inhabiting the Conversation: (Socratic) Dialogue

There is no spiritual conversation without attentive listening and attentive talking. But a spiritual conversation is not a mere sum of two or more people who meet to take turns talking and listening to each other. It is a relationship, and it cultivated and built as such. What makes us grow humanly and constitutes us as human beings is not rationality but relationality. Spiritual conversation, therefore, is not a group of people talking together in a more or less orderly fashion, but a shared space that is asking to be inhabited and cared for. Perhaps on the basis of a certain understanding of the dialogue we will be able to understand better the relational specificity of the conversation.

To engage in dialogue⁴² (and conversation) is to build the relationship we inhabit. Not just any way of talking together constitutes a dialogue, therefore. Often what we do in meetings, including community meetings, is to share parallel monologues, where the predominant note is politically correct language, hiding of conflicts, the supposed politeness of repeating empty stereotypes, or explicit or implicit submission to power relationships. It can be done shoddily or subtly, but when all is said and done they are parallel monologues.

Also, more often than it seems, we engage in discussion. 'Discussion' has the same root as the word 'percussion', and many arguments seem exactly that: a way of percussing or drumming, with our ideas, arguments and information, on the heads and the feelings of others in order to win, or to win them over. Ultimately, we discuss things to win or to defend ourselves. This is why we also call it debating, which likewise is derived from the Latin term for beating. Obviously, recognising this does not mean that ideas, arguments and information lack importance. It means that the intention behind them is also important (very much so!), and it is not enough that the ideas are religious, the arguments are theological, and the information is found in the Bible or the magisterium: the why and the how do not replace the why and the whence. When we merely discuss and debate, either we win or we negotiate. Or we give the name 'consensus' to the bain-marie of the minimum that is acceptable to all. Hence, for example, when in a communal dis-

41 GARCÍA DE CASTRO, J. (2019). *La voz de tu saludo*. Santander: Sal Terrae, p. 164.

42 BOHM, D. (1996). *On Dialogue*. New York: Routledge. ISAACS, W. (1999). *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. New York: Doubleday. KNIGHT, J. (2016). BERGER, W. (2014). *A More Beautiful Question*. New York: Bloomsbury. ZELDIN, T. (2000). *Conversation. How Talk Can Change Our Lives*. Mahwah: Hidden Spring.



cernment someone says "let's finish this and vote", one thing is for sure: what's finished is the spiritual conversation.

This is so because in many cases when we call for a vote we have ceased to inhabit a shared space and we have become a group of individuals talking and deciding together, that is, side by side. We belong to the conversation we are sharing, not to the ideas we have (among other reasons because often it is they that have us). When the only starting point is that we are right and that my ideas and arguments constitute my identity, not only do we aspire merely to debate/beat and win over/win, but we assume that the difficulties and obstacles always come from outside and from other people. So, if we perceive ourselves as separate we will end up thinking separately. And when we fragment the spiritual relationship and the spiritual bond and reduce them to topics that need to be clarified and problems that need to be solved, we forget that 'the Spirit of God fills the universe' and therefore also our conversations. And in the end we feel called not to joy but to more meetings.

31

Engaging in dialogue and conversation, then, does not consist in activating our mental and emotional patterns and putting them into operation. By saying this we do not mean that we should try to eliminate these patterns, but rather to put them in order so that they do not have the last word over us. And listening attentively to someone who is talking attentively makes us aware of the activation of our patterns, which we are often unconscious of, as the past often stops us from seeing and living in the present. But precisely because our patterns and prejudices are there, we are not advocating the magical naivety of expecting them to vanish, but the desire and the hope that they will not imprison us. And we will only get out of the prison if we listen, if we listen to each other, and if we are are listened to. Therefore, engaging in dialogue and conversation does not eliminate the possible tensions, but it does respect and integrate them. This does not preclude that it can sometimes be frustrating and, as we are talking about relationships, these can sometimes be difficult and painful. But, because of this, each spiritual conversation should generate its own "rules by which to perceive and understand to some extent the various movements" (SE 313) that are produced in that same spiritual conversation.

As we said earlier, spiritual conversation is a search for the Spirit in the Spirit. For this reason, so-called Socratic dialogue⁴³ can be a great help... although an insufficient one. The approach of Socratic dialogue

43 ABENOZA, S.; LOZANO, J. M. (2024): *Socratic Dialogue. Voicing Values*. New York: Routledge.



helps us to deconstruct fixed ideas and prejudices. It helps us to recognise that we have to go beyond our blind spots, inconsistencies and ignorance. And to try to get out of them: first, by recognising that they are there; and second, by listening to others and to the questions they ask us, and suspending the judgement that makes us give answers before exploring together what the question was. Dialogue and conversation are about the life we live and the life we want to live. And accepting that we have to rid ourselves of many adherences that we took for granted demands the courage to become consciously vulnerable. However, Socratic dialogue can also lead us to a cognitive and intellectualistic bias bringing us to confuse changing our ideas and our way of thinking with changing our life; it can reinforce the asymmetry in the relationship between the participants in the dialogue; and, above all, its positive impact can consolidate the belief that it is enough for us to listen to each other, without any need to listen together to the Spirit.

We cannot converse (or engage in dialogue) if first we do not ask ourselves how and to what extent we listen to ourselves. And here “to listen is to develop an inner silence. This is not a familiar habit for most of us,”⁴⁴ especially in the midst of an attention economy. But only from inner silence will we be mutually present and will our words have density and truth. And in this way “we discover that there is another world of possibility for listening. We can listen *from silence* within ourselves.”⁴⁵ Only if we talk from the silence that dwells within us will silence dwell within our conversation.

We listen together, and this breaks the dualism between listener and listened to. Although it is not possible to make clear distinctions, we could say that dialogue is *about* and spiritual conversation is *between*, without this distinction signifying mutual exclusion. However, one thing is for sure: spiritual conversation is always *between* and never just *about*. And that means that it is eminently concrete and that it gives prevalence to reality, because it can never be separated from what flows between the people participating in the conversation. When this does not happen, we may be involved in a seminar, a conference, an exhortation or the provision of guidance. But not a spiritual conversation. Spiritual conversation leads to friendship in the Lord between people and the union of hearts and minds in institutions. And therefore, in all its forms and registers, it becomes a way to “feel within the Church” (SE 352).

44 ISAACS, W. (1999). *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. New York: Doubleday, p. 84.

45 ISAACS, W. (1999). *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. New York: Doubleday, p. 101.

Looking from Year to Year, or from One Period of Time to Another, the Conversations I Have Had With Others (SE 56)

Up to now we have been sculpting some of the structural features of spiritual conversation: attentive listening and talking; encounter and acceptance among those taking part in the conversation; willingness to drop one's defences and make oneself vulnerable; the silence and prayer that must nurture it and from which it is expressed. All this not as an act of will or a tactical ability but as an expression of shared attention towards how the Spirit talks to us in the search for God's will. For this reason it is now appropriate to explore spiritual conversation more intrinsically, insofar as it lies at the heart of Ignatian spirituality.

33

The first thing we need to do is to take as our frame of reference the indissociable trilogy that we have identified as a constant of the Ignatian way: conversation-conversion-helping. A trilogy that Ignatius integrated into his spirituality as a layman, before his ordination and –obviously– before the Society of Jesus existed. In this trilogy, the bridge it contains and which sustains the link between conversation and helping is conversion. In the knowledge that “in any case, conversion never really happens in one fell swoop but is really a life-long process. Ignatius, for instance, never saw himself as having converted but as being a pilgrim.”⁴⁶ Because, after all, it is as pilgrims walking together that we converse and help.

Conversation, at the Heart of the Exercises

Conversation lies at the heart of Ignatian spirituality because it is at the heart of the Exercises. First of all, “the author of the Spiritual Exercises shows us again the trust he has in the word as an instrument that helps us to find God.”⁴⁷ The Exercises have a relational, conversational structure. So much so that the word leads to a familiar, intimate conversation with God. It is not a conversation brimming with words but

46 Sosa, A. (2021). *Walking with Ignatius*. Dublin: Messenger Publications.

47 KOLVENBACH, P. H. (1999). *Decir.. al "indecible"*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 16.



a conversation of feelings, in which our heart opens to God, without knowing "how God will give his non-verbal response."⁴⁸ A conversation that is not carried on in any given way, but in accordance with what is received and felt as the Exercises unfold.

So, right from the start, Ignatius proposed that all the meditations and contemplations should conclude with a colloquy, which is modulated over the course of the Exercises depending on the moment at which the person concerned finds himself. "A colloquy, properly so-called, means speaking as one friend speaks with another, or a servant with a master; at times asking for some favour, at other times accusing oneself of something badly done, or telling the other about one's concerns and asking for advice about them" (SE 54). And in this 'properly speaking' an important part is played by the prayer of petition, which is where we can express our most intimate desire and give it voice; and at the same time where we recognise that on our own, with our efforts alone, we are unable to attain it. This is where we draw the distinction Machado proposed between voices and echoes: "I stop to separate the voices from the echoes, / and I listen among the voices to only one."⁴⁹ Our inner world is a world full of voices "in me" (SE 32) in continual interaction, and we need to learn to discern them through our colloquies in order to listen to only one of them. Colloquy and petition, omnipresent in the Exercises, are a path of education and transformation of how we talk and listen, and they lead us to the heart of the experience. They also help us to avoid the ever-present risk of the experience being self-referential or getting lost for lack of purpose, in the knowledge that for Ignatius "the word is like a starting point for a mystical experience, which then can no longer be expressed in words."⁵⁰ And thus, spiritual conversation, in the practice of the colloquies and discernment, learns to seek and find the voice of God among the voices and echoes that are present in any conversation, including our unstoppable and insatiable inner conversation.

The colloquies invoke an intimacy that is not closed within itself. They invoke otherness, not subjectivity. It should come as no surprise, then, that in the fourth week of the SE one of the first things that is proposed to us is "To observe how Christ Our Lord fulfils the office of consoler, and to draw comparisons with the way friends are accustomed to console one another" (SE 224). It is precisely this office of consoling that opens us up to contemplation to attain love. Contemplation that is fully communicative and, therefore, relational. The frontispiece to this contemplation is "that love ought to find its expression in deeds more than

48 KOLVENBACH, P. H. (1999). *Decir.. al "indecible"*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 29.

49 *Retrato / Portrait*. MACHADO, A. (1975). *Poesías completas*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, p. 136.

50 KOLVENBACH, P. H. (1999). *Decir.. al "indecible"*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 20.



in words" (SE 230). Love cannot be hot air based on nothing but itself, neglecting deeds. But from this point of departure, there is a great deal of sense in the question posed by García de Castro: "What if words are deeds?"⁵¹ Because in the Exercises themselves it is immediately clarified that "love consists in mutual communication, i.e. the lover gives and communicates to the beloved whatever the lover has, or something of what the lover has or is able to give, and the beloved in turn does the same for the lover" (SE 231). Giving and communicating make up talking and doing. And above all, they are an appeal for attention. Attention to what? To ensure, in talking and doing, "that the love which moves me and makes me choose something has to descend from above, from the love of God" (SE 184). The question about attention is not a semantic speculation on the meaning of giving, communicating, words or deeds. The question that challenges me is about being attentive to what it is that moves me.

51 GARCÍA DE CASTRO, J. (2019). *La voz de tu salud. Santander: Sal Terrae*, p. 85.

52 FAVRE, P. (2006). *Mémorial*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, n. 126.

This is why we want to insist again on the conversation-conversion-helping trilogy; it is conversion (where does the love that moves me come from?) that builds the link between conversation and helping. It is conversion that makes the attentive listening, attentive talking and attentive helping that we described in the previous section become, more and more, spiritual conversation. It is an attention that is increasingly sensitive –through listening, talking and helping– to that which –and he who– moves me. Let us recall at this point that master of spiritual conversation, Peter Favre: "then I realised and had the clear feeling that by seeking God through spirit in good deeds, one then finds him in prayer, much better than seeking him first in prayer and then finding him in deeds, as is done so often."⁵²

This relational attention is present throughout the Exercises, from the very start. At the beginning, when we are required to bring to memory the history of our own sins, Ignatius proposes "first, to see the place and house where I lived; second, the conversations I have had with others; third, the occupation in which I have spent my life" (SE 56). It is important to emphasise the relational structure of the attention (the looking, the perceiving): it is not a matter of being confronted with a list of moral principles or memorising our duties and obligations, but rather of focusing on the relationships we experience. And, among these relationships, conversations.

We already know that for Ignatius conversing meant dealing with others, and this *dealing* remits to the whole person and lends atten-



tion to the whole person. The fact that he draws our attention to the conversations we have had at this precise moment of the Exercises gives us a vital key to the practice of the Examen, insofar as the Exercises are also an initiation to this practice that Ignatius considered to be inexcusable for our day-to-day life. The Examen involves attention to the conversations we have and what they reveal about us and our relationships. In this way, an attentive approach to our conversations can be an everyday way to make us more sensitive to the practical integration of the three types of interior knowledge proposed in the Exercises and into which we must delve as we advance along our path of conversion: "interior knowledge of my sins, and an abhorrence for them" (SE 63); "interior knowledge of the Lord, who became man for me so I may better love and follow Him" (SE 104); "interior knowledge of all the good I have received, so that acknowledging this with gratitude, I may be able to love and serve His Divine Majesty in everything" (SE 233). Because our spiritual conversations reveal and bring into play three kinds of knowledge, and unless we advance in all three we will advance but little in spiritual conversation. (And, incidentally, now we are on the subject: one day we should explore the price we will pay for the growing tendency to miss out 'his Divine Majesty' when we state 'in all to love and serve'.)

Spiritual Conversation, Depending on Persons, Times and Places

Spiritual conversation lies at the heart of Ignatian spirituality and it is an invitation not only to a concrete practice but also to a way of life made up of a (conversational) way of being in the world. It expresses a manner of being, not just a manner of doing things. This is why we do not like to talk about types, forms or classes of spiritual conversation, as if they were available options from which to choose the one that suits best, and blithely neglect the rest. Spiritual conversation reflects a basic set of attitudes and manners of proceeding; what changes is the context, not the pattern that gives structure to the conversation. It is true that each context requires different capabilities, sensitivities and manners of proceeding, as each context requires us to be able to discern what is best (Pp 1:9). But in all of them the same attitudes and manners of proceeding are modulated as we mentioned when we were talking about the core of spiritual conversation. Consequently, the same person, at different moments of his everyday life, might find himself in different contexts, and in each of them need to adopt an



attitude of spiritual conversation, as best suits the context. We will not talk of types or classes of spiritual conversation, then, but contexts of spiritual conversation (although we will not talk about them in detail, because this is not the purpose of these pages). And, in accordance with the approach we have taken, neither will we talk about two differentiated contexts of spiritual conversation: the account of conscience (because it is specific to Jesuit spirituality) and confession (because it is specific to the priesthood). We will only refer to the contexts in which Ignatian spirituality invites all the baptised to experience the path of spiritual conversation.

1. The context of informal conversation. This is that sort of conversation, aside from any protocol, in which two people open their hearts to each other and share the hopes, fears, worries, doubts or desires that move them on their path to follow Jesus. Often they are not scheduled, but arise on the occasion of a chance meeting or some circumstance, and also they may be encounters that occur repeatedly over a period of time. A conversation of this sort is an experience of freedom because each person exposes and exposes himself, apropos of any situation or event that moves him to do so. It is an act of radical trust in which the very fact of introducing a given topic into the conversation can shed more light, due to the simple fact of talking about it. In a broad sense of the expression it is an experience of friendship, and friendship in the Lord. (And incidentally, we should not necessarily identify it with long, 'deep' conversations: what characterises spiritual conversation is where one converses from, not how long one converses for, or the topic of the conversation.)
2. The context of the Christian community. Clearly, we are talking about the Eucharist. But we are also talking about 'any way' of sharing and communicating not only each person's path to follow Jesus but also the fact of sharing and communicating the path towards shaping the community as an 'us' that as such opens up a path, and in which everyone can find their place and be recognised. An 'us' that appears as such both inwardly and outwardly. In the same way as A. Sosa talks of transforming Jesuit communities "into spaces of spiritual conversation and communal discernment,"⁵³ we could say that a Christian community is a space in which a spiritual conversation occurs and is sustained over time. Or at least that a spiritual conversation sustained over time is both the source and the fruit of a Christian community that grows as such.
3. The context of apostolic ministry. Here we are talking about 'any way' of helping others to find the path towards their own humanity,

53 Baco, M. (2022). *Pratique du discernement en commun*. Brussels: Lessius, p. 5.



through the growth of their own human quality. And to do so standing alongside those who need it, unconditionally. In such a way that this 'standing alongside' is a way of making the face and the tenderness of God present, and when possible, putting words to it. It is in apostolic ministry, no matter what sort and no matter who does it, that it is made tangible that love ought to be put more in deeds than in words; and at the same time that there is no encounter with or service to others without putting words to it. Not one's own words but those given by the mission and the context at the service of which is the ministry. Incidentally, this is where it should be made particularly clear that "we should not try to clericalize lay-people, whether men or women, but should develop the mission of laypeople in the Church in order to collaborate in the mission from their own vocation."⁵⁴

4. The context of spiritual accompaniment. Having voice in this context is, as we have recalled through the words of Pope Francis, a baptismal charism, not a clerical charism. This is a very special context because our conversation and our silence must be wholly oriented towards aiding the encounter with God. Here the conversation is not about what the companion thinks or believes, or giving off-putting advice that starts with "if I were you I'd..." It is a conversation that is intended to help the other to dispose himself to the encounter with God, with the same disposition as the companion and in the confident certainty that he may be found (Is 55:6). In this context, the companion must be specially attentive not to take a leading role, but rather to dwell within the conversation from a position of attentive listening and talking. It is a conversation built on the radical acceptance of the other, with whom we are conversing not so that he will do what we see or want, or for self-gratification. Conversing to help, and "helping is a verb that puts the other person first, [whereas] achieving is a verb that puts me at the forefront."⁵⁵ Even if what we want to achieve is supposedly sublime from a 'religious' viewpoint.
5. The context of deliberation and communal discernment. These are two ways of proceeding with purposes that do not necessarily coincide, yet sometimes overlap to the extent that they are often confused.⁵⁶ We do not intend to go into this now, but to note that the Synod on synodality has put the spotlight on spiritual conversation (which the Synod calls conversation in the Spirit). Instead of delivering speech upon speech to the assembly, three rounds are held in which the aim is not to discuss or present arguments but to listen, with meditative silence having a place of its own. This meth-

54 Sosa, A. (2021). *Walking with Ignatius*. Dublin: Messenger Publications.

55 MOLLÀ, D. (2018). *De acompanyante a acompanyante*. Madrid: Narcea, p. 46.

56 RAMBLA, J. M.; Lozano, J. M. (2020). *Apostolic Discernment in Common*. Barcelona: Cristianisme i Justícia. GUIDES no 13.

od has in a short time become well known, has caused surprise and has caught the attention of many. Indeed, we could say that its success is its threat, in that it could be perceived as just a *new* method of a participatory nature that is useful for decision making. In other words, insofar as it is perceived as no more than a participatory method it may lead to the lamentable conclusion that spiritual conversation is not a way of experiencing faith as a Church but a way of conducting meetings. We should remember that A. Sosa presented spiritual conversation and communal discernment as indissociable for community life. The Church, like the Jesuits, has a long way to go along this road, as the recovery of the link between spiritual conversation and communal discernment is relatively novel and recent. It is a matter, of listening to what the Spirit tells the churches (Ac 3:22). And therefore it is not just about *me* listening but us listening *together*. And doing so moved by the desire to listen to what God wants of us.

6. The context of the Spiritual Exercises. When we talk about Ignatian spirituality we immediately think of the SE. But when we talk about spiritual conversation we run the risk of thinking exclusively of the SE. Giuliani once warned that "giving the Exercises will be nothing but replacing a spontaneous conversation, abandoned to the chance of divine inspirations, with another that is reflective and dominated by a more or less rigorous plan."⁵⁷ Just as spiritual conversation in the context of communal discernment is ultimately ecclesial, spiritual conversation in the context of the SE is ultimately personalised, since it is a process of personal transformation through which one seeks to rid oneself of all the disordered attachments and to seek and find the divine will in regard to the disposition of one's own life (SE 1). It is, then, an education of the feelings, because the path to rid oneself of all the disordered attachments and to seek and find the divine will leads through increasingly letting oneself be embraced by God (SE 15). In this respect, the annotations are the expression of the reference framework in which spiritual conversation moves in Ignatian spirituality, in this case between the giver and the receiver of the Exercises. This involves never losing sight of what we seek at each moment; radical respect for the other in his freedom, his discourse and his choices; attentively listening to the different movements and the agitation of the various spirits; always seeking what helps most in the process that is being undergone; adapting it to each person's reality and situation (since, as is often said, there are not different types of Exercises, but different profiles of exercitants). And, above all, leaving space for God to communicate. For all these reasons, it should be no surprise

57 GIULIANI, M. (2006). *Acoger el tiempo que viene*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 26. GIULIANI, M. (1968). *Oración y acción*. Madrid: DDB, p. 174.



that it was precisely Giuliani who said that "the charisma that befits the instructor of the Exercises will always be that of conversation."⁵⁸

We need to advance towards an ecclesial culture of spiritual conversation. In the knowledge that it is the diversity of contexts that give rise to different ways of feeling in the Church, depending on persons, times and places. And that means shunning the toxicity of pursuing a non-existent perfection or burning oneself out trying to 'do the right thing.' Here I will take the liberty to borrow the words of J.M. Rambla, proposing that for a moment the reader replaces 'discernment' with 'spiritual conversation': "it is also wise to bear in mind that communal discernment (like so many facts of Christian life) allows for degrees of quality within the most absolute faithfulness to its aims. Overlooking this may be at the root of some failures, when one aspires too soon to high ideals and squanders the abundant possibilities to practise the elements inherent in discernment that are offered by community life."⁵⁹ Not for nothing does the *Instrumentum Laboris* warn that in concrete situations, it is never possible to follow this pattern slavishly. Rather it must always be adapted.⁶⁰ And that goes for all the contexts of spiritual conversation.

Speak With Meaning About What You Experience and Thus You Will Be Praying⁶¹ (J. M. Valverde)

This need to adapt does not mean arbitrariness or opportunism. Thus, it may be relevant to underscore briefly four of the theological vectors that, from our perspective, imbue spiritual conversation, sustain it and make it possible.

Synodality

As we have already mentioned, in the public life of the Church spiritual conversation has been associated with the synodal proposal, almost forming part of it. In fact, in Pope Francis' proposal there is a common denominator that unites them both with discernment: "Conversation in the Spirit, discernment and synodality consist, above all, in listening."⁶² This understanding of listening is, then, a proposal that frames the transformation of the Church at the beginning of the third millennium. But precisely because we are considering what should characterise the Church, we run the risk of reducing it to the big organisational issues. It is therefore necessary to stress that spiritual conversation works at macro, meso and micro level, not only when dealing with

58 GIULIANI, M. (2006). *Acoger el tiempo que viene*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 25. GIULIANI, M. (1968). *Oración y acción*. Madrid: DDB, p. 172.

59 RAMBLA, J. M. (2022). *Moverse por el amor*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 427.

60 *Instrumentum Laboris*, no 41.

61 VALVERDE, J. M. (1976). *Ser de palabra*. Barcelona: Barral, p. 59. "Habla con sentido de lo que vives y estarás así rezando".

62 [Pope Francis pens preface to book on 'Conversation in the Spirit'](#). GUERRERO, J. A. (2023). *Conversación espiritual, discernimiento y sinodalidad*. Santander: Sal Terrae, p. 10.

macro and institutional issues. "While synodal procedure and events have a beginning, a process and a conclusion, synodality offers a specific description of the historical development of the Church as such, breathes life into her structures and directs her mission."⁶³

Spiritual conversation –and therefore also synodality and the practice of discernment– is a way of living the Church and of living in the Church that should be present in all ecclesial spheres. It cannot be restricted to particular contexts because, if this were the case, it could not take root even in those chosen as high priority. If synodality means walking together, we should add that it does not mean walking together in a disciplined way or in silence: it means walking together in spiritual conversation, making headway. The expression *making headway* here makes more sense than ever: the way is not ready-made, waiting for us to tread it, but rather we make it as we walk. This is why synodality focuses above all on the processes that are experienced –along the way that we make– and why synodality changes the question about the identity of the Church: the identity is the mission.

41 This walking together in spiritual conversation is not a pious wish, but affects the way the Church is articulated and organised. The ecclesial axiom of the first millennium is fully valid: what touches all should be approved by all.⁶⁴ It is not our aim to deal here with topics of governance and power, but it must be made clear that when we talk of synodality we are not talking of democracy, or strategy design, or conducting seminars, or creating commissions, or doing surveys, or participatory processes. Of course we can incorporate any of these ways of doing things at some stage, if appropriate. But we walk together because we listen together to the Spirit, which is owned by nobody; therefore, synodality is more important than the synod. Only as a result of this can we talk about organisational forms, distribution of power, responsibilities, and decision making. Furthermore, synodality enables us to distinguish between listening to the Spirit and moving in the terrain of good intentions without touching the ground or fixing details: "I dream of a 'missionary option', that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation."⁶⁵

This process of synodalisation of the Church requires listening to everyone, including those whose voice is abducted or silenced, inside and outside the Church. And it also requires tackling what is neatly

63 [Synodality in the life and mission of the church.](#)

64 LUCIANI, R. (2020) "Lo que afecta a todos debe ser tratado por todos. Hacia estructuras de participación y poder de decisión compartido". *Revista CLAR*, vol. 58(1), p. 59-66.

65 POPE FRANCIS (2013). *Evangelii Gaudium*, no 27.



called *the role or co-responsibility of the laity*, which so often, when it is bereft of spiritual conversation, ranges from a sort of auxiliary and subordinate incorporation (at one end of the spectrum) to a 'now it's our turn' approach (at the other). Synodality should be approached in terms of baptism and mission, not in terms of the sacrament of holy orders (without denying it or opposing it, of course). For this reason perhaps it would be wise, from the perspective of Ignatian spirituality, to reread in this synodal context the rules for feeling in (and with) the Church, which are so often absent when talking about the Exercises.⁶⁶

Pneumatology

It was clear right from the beginning that to talk of synodality is to talk of a path according to the Spirit. Furthermore, it has been said that the leading role in the Synod is held, and must be held, by the Spirit. Or, to put it more graphically, we must give the Spirit the mic.⁶⁷ The problem is that we cannot do so directly. We often forget that in the New Testament the Spirit appears more as an adjective than as a noun. And that in the Christian tradition *spiritual* is habitually an adjective that describes particular people, realities or practices. In fact, the noun *spirituality* –as a specific topic or subject for reflection– has existed for a relatively short time. In any case, without the Spirit the practice of the Examen becomes a sort of self-assessment, target compliance analysis, improvement opportunities identification, or moral life review. Only a watchful eye to the presence of the Spirit enables us to be aware of the nooks and crannies of our conversation, of "the conversations I have had with others" (SE 56).

So, spiritual conversation is indissociable from synodality and discernment. Because the Spirit moves, inspires, prompts, but has no message of its own, and is not constrained to a particular place. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going (Jn 3:8). We identify it by its fruits in our lives, and we never possess it. To listen to it in the silence of prayer and in the life options it generates. It is what moves us to live in reality following the way of Jesus, and at the same time what prevents us from putting our security in doctrines, projects and norms. We might come to think we 'know all about' Jesus; we can never 'know all about' the Spirit a priori, because we can only discern its presence in the concrete thing it inspires. For this reason, our attention should be increasingly finely tuned and subtle, because a great diversity of spirits move within us, and we have to learn how to discern what moves us at all times. To believe in the Holy Spirit is not a statement but to let us be educated by it and, in Favre's words, to ask it

66 O'MALLEY, J. W. (2022). "The history of synodality: It's older than you think". *America. The Jesuit Review*. February, 17.

67 GROGAN, B. (2020). "Give the Spirit the Mic. A Strategy for Communal Discernment and Synodality". *The Furrow*, vol. 71(5), pp. 259-268.

to discipline all the spirits that dwell within us in order to seek and find what motion we must follow.

As there is no spiritual conversation without discerning the presence of the Spirit within us, this means that, regardless of the context in which it occurs, we will not be spared from experiencing consolations and desolations, and there is no way of avoiding tensions and conflicts. Spiritual conversation is neither a relational bain-marie, nor some sort of community do-goodism, nor a form of shared religious tourism. It is to listen out for the Spirit that shows us, through our ambiguities, the path we have to follow. Therefore, communal discernment cannot be limited and reduced to being seen as a method for conducting meetings and making decisions. Because often its limitations and shortcomings are not due to flaws in the method or unwillingness by the participants but rather to deficits in the depth of the spiritual conversation for lack of daily activity in this respect in all the contexts in which we have the opportunity to do so. We are reminded of this by Favre: "I saw more clearly than ever, with signs of great evidence, to what extent it was important for the discernment of spirits to see whether we are attentive to ideas and reflections or whether the spirit itself, which shows itself through desires, motions, ardour or despondency, tranquillity or unrest, joy or sadness, and other like spiritual movements. For it is through these motions, more easily than through thoughts themselves, that a judgement can be made on the soul and its guests."⁶⁸ At the same time, we should always bear in mind that "on the evidence of Jesus' earthly life we can measure the authenticity of the motions we experience within."⁶⁹

43

In fact, we have repeatedly mentioned conversion as an integrating link between spiritual conversation and helping. However, in this case, perhaps we should talk just as much (or more) about discernment as about conversion. Sometimes in our ways of talking about Ignatian spirituality we turn its Christocentrism into a sort of Christomonism. To put it in a nutshell, like Easter without Whitsun. This results in a very unpentecostal 'feeling in the Church'. And without a pentecostal experience no spiritual conversation is possible. In any of its contexts.

Encounter

It may seem obvious, but reminding ourselves of the fact may be less so. Spiritual conversation presupposes a relational spirituality and a readiness for the relationship. And it demands building ecclesially a culture of encounter. This involves realising and relishing interiorly (SE 2) the other and the relationship with the other in the encounter that

68 FAVRE, P. (2006). *Mémorial. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, n. 300.*

69 RAHNER, H. (1968): *Ignatius the Theologian*. London: Chapman.



occurs. The encounter is never a mental operation but is strictly relational. This experience of the encounter is so insofar as one is present to oneself and open to the presence of the other. As conversing from presence can only happen between particular individuals, this means that there is no place for intellectualism or speculation, or any of the other habitual forms we have for avoiding encounter. In a world of contacts and connections, conversation activates within us all those dimensions about which it is only possible to speak in the first person. Because in conversation only narrative talking is possible, reflection acquiring its meaning only in the context of the narration that is built among those who participate in it, whose only desire is to speak out of the overflow of his heart (Lk 6:45), that of each one. If the reader will pardon the expression, more than humanism, spiritual conversation is manism, because it stands not on the terrain of universal values but on that of the event: of attentive listening to the face, the body and the words of particular individuals.

In any of the contexts of spiritual conversation, and with the specificity inherent in each context, the encounter with the other is the real place of spirituality, that is, of life in the Spirit and listening to the Spirit. This is why it is so important to go deeper into the ecclesial experience of Pentecost, because it amounts to re/cognising that everyone has something to say, and that if we listen properly we will understand what they say. The event of the encounter in conversation is an experience of walking together, of treading a path that is personal but not individual. And at the same time it is the sign and the place of an encounter in God. Spiritual conversation does not mean giving each other an emotional massage, but sharing a desire. The desire to seek God. And this desire involves helping each other to find him in the places where he may be found. Therefore conversation is also a space where we learn to open up and leave space for the other, and at the same time it helps us to recognise that this desire is always mingled with our resistance, our weaknesses and our inadequacies: conversation also confronts us with ourselves and immunises us against the fantasies that sometimes inhabit our inner life when we do not contrast it with someone else. It is when this experience of speaking out of mutual presence occurs to some degree that it becomes more feasible to cut through our feelings of vulnerability and self-defence, and at the same time gradually transform them into trust, because we know whom we have believed (2Ti 1:12).

When we learn to inhabit spaces of encounter, we also learn that anything can become a space of encounter. Because any experience of



God is a human experience, and for that very reason, any human experience is a place where God is present. As we advance along the path of spiritual conversation it becomes clearer and clearer that God communicates, finds us and embraces us, where we are and the way we are. Not where we would like to be and the way we would like to be. And if he finds us where we are, it means that where we are is our place to find the emergent God and life. This often leads to an inevitable clash with our prejudices and defence mechanisms. Therefore, to borrow the title of N. Mandela's autobiography, spiritual conversation is indissociable from our long walk to freedom.

Way

True conversation is always dynamic, flowing; often it is unforeseeable and unprogrammable in the way it unfolds. Hence we cannot talk of spiritual conversation without a theology of the way.⁷⁰ From the beginnings of the Bible, where the patriarchs wandered driven by the promise, to Jesus, who was an itinerant preacher, the way is a constant presence. Ignatius saw himself above all as a pilgrim, a pilgrim who remained so even though he did not move from Rome for years. Ignatius' life is the story of a pilgrim who lives out to the full his own question: "What can I alone be?" (SE 58). We walk, indeed, but –to a greater or lesser extent– we always walk together: each of us is one among many. And as we walk, encounters take shape. Often we do not choose who we meet; as we walk we converse and become friends in the Lord with those we come across along the way. The way is a gift, and so are our travelling companions.

70 Ruiz, F. J. (2000). *Teología del camino*. Bilbao: Mensajero.

Along the way there are places and moments that are milestones, that put us in motion and help us to carry on walking. Places and moments that dwell in us, but in which we do not dwell; they are not for dwelling in. Moments of transfiguration are full of light, but they may become a temptation. This is the temptation of feeling that "it is good for us to be here" (Mt 17:4) and forgetting that all events are just a beginning, and in this beginning in the end we see no one except Jesus (Mt 17:8). We seek God's will, but we do not conquer it or appropriate it, nor can we remain in spaces and events as if we were him: whenever we stop and decline to go further and deeper, it is as if we wanted to delimit the space of he who is always present but can never be encompassed. When this pretension of "it is good for us to be here" takes hold of us, in talking of 'our vocation' the 'our' gradually pushes out the 'vocation'. Because our vocation is ours only insofar as "we do not build our nest where we do not belong" (SE 322).

Seeking and finding God's will is, indeed, the way to undertake the long walk to freedom. Sometimes the fact of resorting to quick formulas leads us to forget that 'seeking and finding' is not an act of will, but requires "rid[ding] one's soul of all disordered attachments" (SE 1). Tendencies that are attachments, but not necessarily only intimate processes: they can be institutions, spaces, ideas, customs, habits, bonds, people, theologies, etc., that are our veritable blind spots and that often we can only see with the help of someone who accompanies and loves us. We call it spiritual conversation precisely because this trilogy (ridding-seeking-finding) is always present, to a greater or lesser extent, in our conversation.

"The *way* or *path* thus opens up to a horizon of meaning; it is not a concatenation of erratic steps or unilateral impulses of will. The nerve of this *way* or *path* is its pursuit. [...] The *path* is always the crystallisation of an encounter, not the unilateral designation of one of the interlocutors."⁷¹ And this crystallisation, in laypeople's lives, is undoubtedly born of their ordinary life and returns to it. Ordinary life –daily life– is the way. God makes himself present as, where and when he wishes; this is true. But not aside from daily life or in spaces set aside for (supposedly) "charging his batteries" so that he can then go out and discharge them again, among other reasons because there are no batteries to charge. Ordinary life is not a distraction or a limitation, but the only way. Being the only way does not mean that it is a prison or an inexorable fate, but that it is the place to live out the *ridding-seeking-finding* trilogy. Sometimes we would do well to ask ourselves whether in the last month we have lived 30 days or the same day 30 times. "The encounter with God happens wherever his will chooses to find us: at the office or in the kitchen, teaching or dressing the children, in the Eucharist or at a demonstration... We have to let ourselves be overwhelmed by God's way of doing things and overcome our *prejudices* that in order to have experience of God 'something I already know all about' has to happen to me."⁷²

The sphere of life in the Spirit (spiritual life), and consequently the theme of our conversation in the Spirit, is therefore the entire reality of human experience. The reality of human experience, with all its density and its ambiguities, its hopes and its joys; with the re/cognition of the immensity of the pain and the love that are scattered throughout it. When we do Exercises, there is always someone in charge of giving us 'the points'. Yet we cannot listen to 'the points' anywhere else but in what happens to us and we experience every day: ordinary life is 'the

71 RUIZ, F. J. (2000). *Teología del camino*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 124, 152.

72 RAMBLA, J. M. (2008). "La vida en los 'Ejercicios en la vida'". *Manresa*, vol. 80, p. 250.



points'. "It is, then, daily life itself that forms part of 'the things' that can be 'realised and relished' intimately."⁷³

We converse because no one has a totalising perspective, on either himself or others. We converse because we want to investigate, along the path we share, what place we should occupy at each moment. We converse because we cannot appeal to any norm or any ideal to deduce what we have to do, since, as Polanco recalls in his Directory, that which is simply better is not the best for each person.⁷⁴

We converse, then, and in doing so we learn to enhance the quality of our attention, when speaking and listening. And in doing so we learn to be aware of the presence of these four vectors that we consider essential conditions for the possibility of spiritual conversation: synodality, Spirit, encounter and way. All of which, we must not forget, are born of silence and takes us back to it, just as, "very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed" (Mk 1:35).

73 GIULIANI, M. (1997). *La experiencia de los Ejercicios Espirituales en la vida*. Bilbao: Mensajero, p. 27.

74 D20, 82.

The Way, the Truth and the Life

The gospel is (also) a story of conversations. Indeed, the entire gospel is an intermingled narration of the combination conversing/helping: if we eliminate the conversations and the help we end up without Jesus. Therefore, in order to learn the way of spiritual conversation we have to read the gospel from this angle. Hospitality, acceptance, listening and conversation constitute defining features of Jesus' lifestyle and of the encounter with Jesus. And it is through these conversations that we come to the way, the truth and the life.

Way (Lk 24:13-35): the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus

48 Who do we find in the story? Normal people. Not apostles or significant characters: normal people. Normal people who are devastated, submerged in pain and disappointment. Without hope. Furthermore, overwhelmed by the immense frustration and despair of those who have seen their hopes shattered. They are leaving Jerusalem. They are giving up. They are resigning and renouncing that which had opened up a glimmer of life for them. Sometimes we live in fantasy and confuse life and spiritual conversations with a Google search. Because often we imagine a spiritual life in Google terms: all sunsets, deserted beaches, snowy peaks on the horizon, people sitting in supposedly meditative postures with their eyes closed... As if pain, anger, frustration, bitterness and disappointment could have no place in it. Worse still: sometimes we confuse consolation with the photos and videos on Google, and desolation with that which denies or hampers these imagined images.

So, we have two normal people, conversing and discussing as they walk along the road. Facts, arguments and feelings are the exclusive subjects of their conversation. And then an encounter occurs. Somebody comes up to them and walks with them, on the everyday way home. He comes up to them in a non-invasive way, just being there: he asks, listens and provides company. Encountering, listening and accompanying: the encounter is not an excuse for something else, it is not a tactic to achieve certain objectives, it is not planned or scheduled



on the agenda. Quite simply, someone takes the initiative, is present and walks alongside us.

As they walk together the first thing is to listen to the voice of suffering and disappointment. Conversation is never only about facts, but also – and above all– about the meaning and the sense of those facts. Therefore in a spiritual conversation we share descriptions, but also express feelings and explore the upheavals that traverse our soul. However, a spiritual conversation is not an emotional firework display. It means listening and listening to each other in order to discover that reality is not limited to one gaze, and still less to our own gaze. In conversation we become companions exploring the interpretation and understanding of what has happened. Because reality is ambivalent, evil is present and often reality is reluctant to hand over the promise of meaning with which it is imbued. Conversation helps to jog the memory of the personal and collective story that illuminates reality. Conversation reminds us of sources of meaning that we have forgotten when pain and frustration fill all the space available. Conversation helps us to accept that reality does not submit to our hopes, that we need the realism to know that people don't change overnight, and that this may sometimes become brutally obvious. This is why spiritual conversation sometimes helps us to face reality itself and the perspective we have of it.

49

It is at this point that we can find an answer to the question that has been bothering us from the start: what does it mean to talk simply about things of God? Spiritual conversation does not mean talking about 'spiritual topics'; it means talking about "the things that have happened" (Lk 24:18). But it is a way of talking about the things that have happened in which we open up to the possibility of meaning and to the presence of the Spirit, which we must discern. What qualifies a spiritual conversation is not the what (everything that 'has happened' can be a topic) but rather the how, the who and the who with; and also the where from. (Moreover, there are verbal exchanges on 'spiritual topics' that have nothing in common with spiritual conversation!) In other words, if ordinary life is the way, spiritual conversation –in all its contexts– deals with whatever crops up along the way. In the Spiritual Exercises we are invited to perform the contemplations of the life of Jesus "as if I were present" (SE 114), and in spiritual conversation we are invited to contemplate what 'has happened' in our ordinary life, both in the big things and the little ones, "as if *He* was present."⁷⁵

The conversation is not over when everything that had to be said has been said. It ends with the giving of thanks and the invitation to share

75 RAMBLA, J. M. (2008). "La vida en los 'Ejercicios en la vida'", *Manresa*, vol. 80, p. 257 (the italics are mine).



their supper. Unlike what is so common among us: we've said everything we wanted to say, so let's be off quick because we've got lots of things to do. We are creatures of words, but we are not the word and we do not have the last word. We are relational animals, not merely rational ones, and spiritual conversation responds to the will to nurture this relationship. After all, we are companions (*cum panis*) because we share our bread. In Luke, this obviously symbolises the Eucharist. But it is also a symbol of our materiality, our corporeality: conversing is not the expression of our ideas, but of what we are like and what we experience, feel, suffer and enjoy as people. Curiously, in the text their eyes are opened when they share the bread: they already had the information, the meaning of the scriptures had already been explained to them, they had already heard the news from the women and the apostles who had gone to the tomb. But with information and meaning alone their eyes are not opened. We need the materiality of the body, of eating together, to feel that we are companions. Travelling companions.

50

This is the moment when the returning disciples understand and are able to put a face to what they already felt (their burning heart) but did not re/cognise: not even the burning heart is self-evident in itself; it too must be discerned. Spiritual conversation requires time because we have to go through the sequence in all its layers: first we have seen what has happened; next we have listened to what we have been told; then we have been explained its meaning; then we have celebrated and shared the encounter; and finally our eyes have been opened. At this point we connect more consciously with our burning heart, which was already present within us and was what got us moving, perhaps towards somewhere that was not our destination prior to the conversation. True, we need to know and understand things better, but what gets us on the move and revitalises us is the motions that we receive and embrace: that which sets our heart aflame. So we do not know if those two ever returned to Emmaus; they go back to Jerusalem, because encountering Jesus drives us to encounter others. This is the way.

Truth (Jn 4:1-42): the Samaritan Woman

And the way is sometimes hard going and tiring. Not only that: sometimes we are just tired of walking. And on top of that, we are overtaken by weariness at particularly difficult moments; in this case, having



to pass through Samaria is to have to pass through adverse territory. Sometimes life's path leads us through adverse territories. And we need to be reminded that conversations are not necessarily conducted under the ideal conditions described in the writings about conversations. In this text, unlike the one about Emmaus, the conversation is not the result of an initiative somebody takes but instead the result of an unforeseen and unexpected encounter. And those involved start to talk not about sublime spiritual matters, but about compelling everyday bodily needs: I'm thirsty, give me some water. Giving water to the thirsty is not only a Biblical imperative; we find it –understandably– in many traditions. It is the most primary symbol of the basic necessity of survival, and at the same time a powerful symbol to refer to the (re)birth of our vitality. However, when we talk, how many times do we do so to hide our need and our vulnerability! More still: on starting up this conversation Jesus not only shows the vulnerability of necessity, but gets himself into big trouble, a mess that nowadays we find hard to imagine: he enters into contact with Samaritans, with whom the Jews were at odds, and asks to use their impure utensils... from a woman, to boot! Hence the first reaction, as in so many debates and controversies, is defence. When we enter an encounter from the pattern of conflict we only know how to be reactive and defensive. And we turn differences into clashes: how can you ask for water from me, when I'm a woman and a Samaritan? How can you degrade yourself so? How can you degrade me so? As in so many of our debates and discussions, we see nobody in front of us: the Samaritan only sees a Jew who is thirsty. A category and a need. In short, a problem. Not somebody I'm talking to.

51

Spiritual conversation changes the register of the conversation, not the conversation itself. For the Samaritan, thirst is just a description of reality, and she only moves within the literal meaning of the words, thirst and water, nothing more. Jesus invites her to change register. Thirst has many layers of meaning. And therefore, when he talks about water, Jesus is talking to her not only about his own need, but also her desire: so, what is our thirst? In our conversations no doubt many of our needs are present; but what do we desire? What do we really want and look for? Therefore, the gateway to spiritual conversation is the question: if you knew the gift of God... if you listened, if you listened to yourself, if you were listened to... The conversation moves, for this very reason, in the register of the gift; this is something that is difficult for us to understand if today we believe that, deep down, there is nothing for free, and that all we have to do is debate/beat and win over/win.



But when we situate ourselves in this register the quality of the conversation changes. The Samaritan feels that we are talking about another sort of water. She is told that it is a source of eternal life, but she continues to ask for this source of eternal life to solve her everyday problems: to not have to draw water ever again. But gradually her trust grows and she lowers her defences. Through a series of questions her truth emerges. Indeed, the quality of spiritual conversation rests on the quality of the questions. Questions motivated not by love of gossip but by concern about the other. Questions that are not intended to violate intimacy but to make it grow. It is not an interrogation, but a way of getting to know oneself better through the gaze of the other. Questions through which one's own truth emerges. Pilate asks about truth and Jesus' only reply is silence (Jn 18:38). The Samaritan expresses her truth, and although she may not be entirely aware of it she puts words to it. The first question about truth is speculative, the second existential. Spiritual conversation is a path towards one's own existential truth, that of each of those present in the conversation, not hiding behind speculations, politically correct language or one's own defence mechanisms. The questions are therefore not a communication technique but a way of living and relating. In Spirit and in truth. It is another way of saying that ordinary life is the way. Because the time must come –and has now come– when we will not worship God in separate demarcated sites, controlled by the various religious factions, but in Spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24). Wherever we are and wherever life takes us.

As the conversation develops, the Samaritan stops identifying the person before her with a separating label (a Jewish man) and comes to wonder who he is, to the point where she asks him if he is the Messiah. And Jesus gives her an answer that for us is a radical query in relation to our conversations. Jesus says simply: I who speak to you (Jn 4:26). Obviously, we are not the Messiah, but the question is whether in our conversations we can say, in Spirit and in truth: I who speak to you. Not the colleague, the boss, the authority, the outcast, the expert, the subaltern, the politician, the partner, the migrant, the woman, the man... No. I can also be any of these things, of course. But, deep down, can we say simply to each other it's me who's talking to you, and who's talking to you is me? Earlier on we mentioned that to examine our relationships and bonds is to examine the conversations we have had: who is the 'I' who speaks in them?

And, once again, the fruit of true spiritual conversation is to go towards others. The woman, symptomatically, puts down the jug: it is no longer



this sort of thirst we are talking about. The fruit of the conversation is to go and seek all those who we can invite to join the conversation. In Spirit and in truth.

Life (Mt 20:29-34; Mk 10:46-52; Lk 18:35-43): the Blind

Here the conversation does not take place with someone who comes forward and takes the initiative, nor is it the result of an unforeseen chance meeting. Here the conversation is above all an exercise of attention, of attentive sensitivity: not ignoring someone who is sitting by the wayside and needs help. Ultimately, spiritual conversation is always about not ignoring, but sometimes it is eminently so, as in this case. Not ignoring whom? A person –any person– who survives as best he can along the roadside, and has given up walking, or is simply no longer able to. Falling by the wayside is to know that the others walk on by but I can't count on them any more. I have no strength left. I give up. For any number of reasons: physical, economic, professional, emotional... I give up, I can't carry on, this is where I stop. An attentively sensitive person does what marks the beginning of any spiritual conversation: he listens. He listens to those who suffer, listens to their clamour. Because sometimes the blind, the really blind, are those that continue on their way without looking or seeing those who do not form part of it, no matter how close they may be (Lk 10:25-37). Sometimes my way is so *mine* that I can't see, hear or feel anything else. In fact, many of those who were walking wanted to silence the blind man, so as not to be distracted from their goals: shut up, what a nuisance, he won't let us get on our way!

53

As we said earlier, the more distracted and scatterbrained we are, the poorer our conversation will be. And for that same reason, the weaker our thinking is, the more barren our empathy, the more fictitious our compassion, and the feebler our courage will be. Distraction and lack of attention is what causes us to want to walk on without looking, seeing and listening. Because those who live on the margins are not simply marginalised, nor are they simply invisible; they seem so because we have invisibilised them. And if they try to become visible, they cause a nuisance.

The first requirement for spiritual conversation is to listen. To listen deep down, to acknowledge the other and his presence, to show compassion and not just walk on by. And then ask. There is no interest in the other without good questions; there are no good questions



without spiritual interest in the other. Talking and helping go together, they are inseparable. Questions serve precisely to re/cognise the other: what do you want me to do for you? All too often, helping has more to do with the self-affirmation of the helper than with the recognition of the other. And to help is, before anything else, to respect the other's freedom. Asking questions means that the person who is helped has a say in how and with what he is helped, if he wishes. Asking questions means that helping is not merely a matter of deeds or merely a matter of words: it is about both deeds and words. So helping is always conversing too, and conversing is also always helping. In other words, helping is not synonymous with getting down to work, no matter how good the work is. In fact, Jesus' question seems a little redundant: what is the blind man supposed to want, if not to see? Isn't it obvious? Moreover, efficiency would dictate that the thing to do is solve the problem – return his sight – and carry on walking with the problem solved. Indeed, the problems people suffer can be solved without having to talk to them or acknowledge them. Therefore, the question 'what do you want me to do for you?' (Mk 10:51) is inseparable from the question 'what can I do for you?' Because it is not a matter of just solving the problem that I can solve. And also because what is possible is not always desirable, and sometimes what is desirable is not possible. It is a matter of helping, not of feeling almighty; nor of identifying being helped with the action of an almighty saviour. This is why Ignatius reminds us that "love consists in mutual communication, i.e. the lover gives and communicates to the beloved whatever the lover has, or something of what the lover has or is able to give, and the beloved in turn does the same for the lover" (SE 231): what he has or can, with no more pretensions than that.

It is a matter, then, of giving and communicating –both dimensions!– in which there may be asymmetry of abilities, skills and resources, but on the shared basis of communication, each from his own reality. Without communication –deep communication– between the two parties there is no spiritual conversation, and it is on this relational foundation that we will activate the giving of what we have or what we can: we are travelling companions, not superheroes. And as we are not superheroes, accepting the fact must bring us to recognise that, very often, in the help we give through spiritual conversation, the deficits are not about having or being able (whether or not we have and can); the deficits are deficits of communication.

But there is still more. It is no coincidence that the question is 'what do you want me to do for you?' Spiritual conversation is such because it



engenders words in all those involved. Because it asks not only about need, but about desire. Spiritual conversation enables each of us to express our deepest aspirations, which sustain it as a conversation. True, spiritual conversation can always deal with needs, to some extent or other. But it is spiritual conversation because sooner or later it gives voice to desire. If with the Samaritan women the need for water opened the door to expressing a deeper truth, the need for sight opens the door to the desire to see more and better, the desire for more and better life. Sometimes our conversations, our discernments and our deliberations leave us with a bad taste in the mouth, because we do not truly desire to seek and find the call of the Spirit in them. We want to exchange ideas and opinions, and improve them; or solve a problem, clarify a challenge or make decisions, but not to seek and find. Ignatius invites us to pray "I want and desire, and it is my deliberate determination" (SE 98) and we think that it is enough to go straight to the determination, even determining things that are good in themselves, without passing through the purification of wanting and desiring. Once he had recovered his sight, the blind man had what he needed, and could come out of the margins: everyone would have fulfilled their part of the bargain and nowadays we would feel there is nothing more to say. But it was not just a matter of retrieving his sight, but of transforming his gaze, which is why the text tells us that "immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road" (Mk 10:52). The transformation of one's gaze is a transformation of one's life, it is to get moving; it is not just getting out of the margins and that's that: it is to want to follow Jesus along the road, because we have been able to ask, to give voice and express our desire for more and better life, and we have been listened to. If spiritual conversation has revealed anything to us it is that it builds trust, precisely because it allows us to not hide and disguise our own vulnerability. And trust given and received, like conversation, is always healing. It is a source of more and better life.

"The death of need –not its denial– leads to the life of desire."⁷⁶ We will always be needy. We will always be liable to experience moments of frustration, disappointment and despair; we will always seek thirstily after a deeper truth within ourselves; we will always beg for pity and to be helped to see more clearly and more deeply along life's path. And, at the same time, we will always be able to embrace and receive the gift of finding friends in the Lord; we will always be able to experience the tasks of our way in the consolation of the union of hearts and minds; we will always be able to attune our attention to the presence of the Spirit, which is only present *through*. Spiritual conversation is not

76 Vasse, D. (1969). *Le temps du désir*. Paris: du Seuil, p. 81.



a sort of magic spell to encourage us in our needs, to offset them, or to enable us to charge non-existent batteries. Spiritual conversation is a privileged way of helping, accompanying and nurturing each other towards greater inner knowledge of that which, and He who, is for us the way, the truth and the life.



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