

## Towards a synodal mindset

# The spiritual conversation

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Listening and discernment are two of the most frequently used words in the theme of the upcoming Synod. If the Holy Spirit is the protagonist of this whole process and speaks in the midst of the people of God, it is necessary to understand how to listen to the Spirit's voice speaking in the community and, therefore, how to discern together the paths to be taken. The Vademecum (handbook) for the Synod on Synodality<sup>1</sup>, prepared by the Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, states that the synodal process is *"first and foremost a spiritual process. It is not a mechanical data-gathering exercise or a series of meetings and debates."* It proposes spiritual conversation as a *"suitable method for group dialogue which resonates with the principles of synodality can be used...promot[ing] participation, attentive listening, reflective speaking, and spiritual discernment."*

### *A three-round conversation*

How is spiritual conversation practiced? As explained in the Vademecum, there are three distinct rounds that are to be followed in small groups of 6 – 8 people, each with a moderator and a note-taking secretary.

In the *first* round, group members take equal turns sharing their fruits of reflection – including feelings and life experiences – around prior questions received or a given topic. There is an attitude of listening, in the belief that each person in the group has something to give and represents wealth for others. *"There is no discussion in this round – reads the Vademecum - participants simply listen deeply to each person and attend to how the Holy Spirit is moving within oneself, within the person speaking and in the group as a whole."*

After this first round – and also after the second – there are then brief periods of silence for self-reflection.

The *second* round is a time for everyone to offer reflections again. Each one expresses in no particular order what had struck him or her in the first round and what they were 'hearing' during the time of silence that followed the first round. In this way, each becomes a kind of sounding board for the work of the Spirit in the other.

Finally, participants reflect during a third round on what seems to have emerged in conversation, emphasizing points in common, proposals and themes that they feel most important for their lives and that of the Church, and trying to summarize the fruits of the spiritual conversation that took place.

#### *A method for forging relationships*

In an interview with the Italian *Vita Trentina*, Professor Pierpaolo Triani spoke of how discussions need to be mainly experiential in order to recognize the signs of the Spirit speaking in the lives of each person. He speaks of willingness to listen to others as fundamental in this regard.

Likewise, the Synodal Vademecum speaks of the importance of "spiritual conversation focus[ing] on the quality of one's capacity to listen as well as the quality of the words spoken. It is an approach that takes seriously what happens in the hearts of those who are conversing".

Thus, there are two fundamental attitudes: active listening and speaking from the heart. *Active listening* signifies 'trying to understand others as they are.' It is active because it implies attention to the person speaking without thinking of a later response or judgement. For the second attitude of *speaking from the heart*, the synodal document describes its meaning as "*sincerely expressing oneself, one's experience, one's feelings and thoughts.*" It is a sharing "*the truth as we see it and as we live it.*" Speaking from the heart is 'to offer a generous gift to the other' without imposing.

The discernment to which one wants to arrive through *spiritual conversation* is "*not only a one-time exercise, but ultimately a way of life, grounded in Christ, following the lead of the Holy Spirit*" for the mission of the Church today.

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<sup>1</sup> VADEMECUM for the Synod on Synodality:

[https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/vademecum/en\\_vade.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/vademecum/en_vade.pdf)