

Individual Conversations - Reaching the Margins

There are some people for whom conversation in groups just isn't their thing. There are some types of conversations that don't seem appropriate for groups and there are some people for whom formal structured faith conversations are just not possible.

We all probably find ourselves on a spectrum of belonging to the Church. It's important to think about who we are talking to and what are some appropriate ways of listening to people across the whole spectrum. One categorisation might be people who are:

- **Committed to Faith, regularly attend Mass and undertake responsibilities in parish life e.g. Parish Council, Prayer group, Reader...**
- **Committed to Faith and regularly attend Mass**
- **Occasionally attend Mass at Christmas, Easter, funerals... Faith and Church have some relevance.**
- **Spiritual but not religious. Church has little relevance.**

It is very difficult to provide a structured outline for such conversations, but below are a few examples and suggestions about how they might happen. They will need adapting to suit the relative formality of the setting and your knowledge, or not, of the individual people involved.

Two or three people

This method is a more relaxed version of some of the other group methods in the form of a chat in an informal ad hoc setting

Take a prayer card each.

Begin by reading the prayer together and then look at the guidelines on the other side. Talk a little about experiences of good and bad conversations all have experienced. Do the guidelines seem to be a good way of speaking and listening to each other? Perhaps each person could think quietly about which of these come naturally to them and which they struggle with.

Questions for reflection

Choose one, or two at the most, of the following questions.

- **What does it mean to you to be a Catholic today?**
- **What are some of your experiences of the Church doing something well?**
- **What are some of your experiences of when things have not gone so well?**
- **What are our dreams for the Church?**

Take a few moments for each person to think about their initial reactions rather than jumping straight in to talking. Have a chat about the question, taking time to listen carefully and speak graciously. It might be helpful to keep a prayer card nearby as a reminder.

After an agreed period of time, draw things to a close by noting the main themes of your reflection. This does not mean that you have had to agree with one another, rather that you agree the main themes of what you spoke about.

Individuals who have agreed to chat to you as part of the synod process

This conversation differs from the others in so far as your role is different. It is far more of a two-way conversation, with you engaging in your own gracious speaking and listening rather than facilitating others to do so. This obviously requires personal maturity and self-knowledge so that you are not simply putting your own words into someone else's mouth. It is important to remember that you are not an interviewer collecting data, but engaging in a spiritual conversation in order to discern the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Begin by reading the synod prayer together

Choose one, or two at the most, of the questions

- What does it mean to you to be a Catholic today?
- What are some of your experiences of the Church doing something well?
- What are some of your experiences of when things have not gone so well?
- What are our dreams for the Church?

Spend some time in silence pondering the question, either agree a length of time or wait until you both seem ready to continue.

Share with one another your reflections. If it feels helpful, at an appropriate time, take a pause for a few moments to gather your thoughts about what you have heard.

Take some time to agree the main themes of your conversation. This does not mean that you have had to agree with one another, rather that you agree the main themes of what you spoke about.

Unstructured conversations that don't seem to form part of the official synodal pathway

As ever, Pope Francis is keen that all we do reaches the margins. Wherever those margins may be. By definition, such listening will not take place in formal groups or even certain types of individual conversations. It would not seem inappropriate therefore to lay out a methodology for such conversations, but perhaps a few pointers may help our reflections upon how synodal listening might take place in such informal and unstructured settings. You will have a number to add yourself that reflects your own personal style and spirituality.

- Pray yourself before you begin
- Speak graciously and listen graciously yourself
- Find a way of creating a tone in keeping with a spiritual conversation
- Have in mind the broad themes of the synod questions
- Be open to wherever the conversation may go
- Express your gratitude to the person for their sharing

If appropriate, at the end of your conversation, you may like to ask the person if they would be happy for the main themes of your conversation to be included in the synod process.