

THE IGNATIAN ART OF SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION

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EVEN THOSE WHO SELDOM USE the Ignatian term ‘spiritual conversation’ may have had many spiritual conversations, whether in the formal context of the Spiritual Exercises, or with friends, or even in chance encounters with strangers. To go away from a conversation spiritually helped, or to find, to our surprise, that something we once said has helped another on his or her spiritual journey, is to have been a participant in spiritual conversation.

The powerfully transformative art of spiritual conversation passed on by Ignatius Loyola and explained by his trusted interpreter Jerónimo Nadal is, I believe, as meaningful for our relationships with one another and with God as it was for Ignatius and the first companions.¹ I hope to show here that spiritual conversation not only is an attractive and characteristically Ignatian practice, but also touches on what is at the very core of the Ignatian way of praying and serving.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of spiritual conversation in the Ignatian charism from its very first beginnings. Ignatius was passionate about spiritual conversation from his conversion onwards. The first companions were drawn together by conversation with Ignatius that deepened into the experience of the Spiritual Exercises. Learning from his practice and teaching, the first Jesuits themselves became adept in the art of spiritual conversation. This practice was present at foundational moments in the development of the Society of Jesus. Indeed, spiritual conversation was recognised as a special mark or characteristic

¹ I take the phrase ‘art of spiritual conversation’ from a helpful book on the topic: Thomas H. Clancy, *The Conversational Word of God: A Commentary on the Doctrine of St. Ignatius of Loyola Concerning Spiritual Conversation, with Four Early Jesuit Texts* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978). Clancy’s translation of an important text by Nadal on spiritual conversation is reprinted below, 25–29.

of the Society, both by the very first Jesuits and by those who came into contact with them.² Jerónimo Nadal was a second-generation Jesuit whom Ignatius trusted to explain the Jesuit way of life to others. In an important letter, Nadal passes on what Ignatius taught by word and example about the art of spiritual conversation. He encourages others to this ‘excellent method of helping our neighbour’: not only Jesuits, but lay women and men as well.³

This exploration of spiritual conversation, deepened and expanded in the articles that follow, will begin by identifying the ‘turn’ involved in each spiritual conversation. It then moves to Ignatius’ practice and teaching of this art, as mediated through his letters, the *Autobiography*, the Jesuit *Constitutions* and, above all, Nadal’s letter gathering together Ignatius’ teaching. I argue that Nadal is correct that, at one level, spiritual conversation is an important ministry of the Word, alongside others such as preaching, teaching, and giving the Spiritual Exercises; at a deeper level, however, it is more fundamentally a characteristic Ignatian way of proceeding in all ministry.

Whether he or she is accompanying someone in their prayer, making decisions in an apostolic institution, building community, performing the works of mercy, teaching or preaching, the Ignatian missionary disciple is doing so in a conversational mode, with a view to what is spiritually helpful and open to the guidance of the Spirit. The Ignatian apostle will look for ways to bring this discerning, dialogical style of interacting, which flows out of the Spiritual Exercises, into more and more contexts.

The Turn

What is spiritual conversation? I begin not with a definition but an example. It comes from the late Tony Horan, a Jesuit priest who devoted most of his ministry to accompanying laypeople in Ignatian prayer, community and mission, right up to his death at the age of 92. Once he was provocatively asked: ‘It must be fascinating being a priest, hearing people’s confessions, learning about all their secret sins?’ Tony laughed.

² For a historian’s account of the early Jesuit practice of conversation, see John W. O’Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard U, 1993), 110–113.

³ The letter is entitled, ‘And Any Other Ministration Wharsoever of the Word of God’, MHSJ MN 5, 832–841, here 836. See below, 25–29, for Thomas Clancy’s partial translation. My own translation here aims to be more literal, owing to the richness of the original text.

Then he replied, 'I find, as a priest, that in confession you see people at their best'. A good example of the art of spiritual conversation. What did Tony do? He executed a 'turn'. He went in through his interlocutor's door and came out through his own. By sharing a laugh and then disclosing a more positive aspect of his own experience, he turned the focus of the conversation from mere curiosity about other people's sins to something more spiritually helpful: the encounter with human goodness, even the encounter with grace.

Spiritual conversation often involves just such a turn from something relatively impersonal or superficial to something a little deeper, a little more personal, more spiritual. Ignatius' image for what I am calling 'the turn' may strike us today as problematic. In a letter to Paschase Broët and Alfonso Salmerón, sent on mission to Ireland, he says:

We may lead others to good by praying or agreeing with them on a certain good point, leaving aside whatever else may be wrong. Thus after gaining his confidence, we shall meet with better success. In this sense we enter his door with him, but we come out our own.⁴

Many may worry today that Ignatius' recommended tactics in spiritual conversation have a manipulative feel about them. Are we dealing honestly and openly with others if we go in through their door and come



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⁴ Ignatius to Paschase Broët and Alfonso Salmerón, early September 1541, in *Counsels for Jesuits: Selected Letters and Instructions of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, edited by Joseph N. Tylenda (Chicago: Loyola, 1985), 2.

out through our own? In a suspicious moment, we might hear in Ignatius the tone of Dale Carnegie's self-help classic, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. If so, few would want to be on the receiving end of such ministry!

Nadal's fuller explanation of the turn in spiritual conversation brings out the positive side of Ignatius' advice and may help us to receive it in a more acceptable sense today. Nadal explains that, for Ignatius, we should not launch forth from the beginning on spiritual topics. Rather, it is better to converse with people about those things that have a hold on their attention and interest:

... with a soldier [one talks of] war; with a merchant, of business; with a nobleman, his office or the political affairs of the kingdom or republic; with a cleric, of ecclesiastical matters and of the governance of the Church.⁵

'Going in by their door' puts the accent on adapting oneself to the other person and his or her interests rather than imposing one's own agenda. Listening, one waits patiently for an occasion to turn the conversation to spiritual things in a way suited to that person's inclinations and needs:

But in such conversations we should be on the lookout for an opportunity to alight on something in the conversation's subject matter—anything that provides an occasion to talk of the health [of the soul]⁶ in some apt way. Father Ignatius used to explain this method by the Spanish saying, 'Entering through their door and leaving through our own', that is, drawing closer to them by agreeing with their will, but leaving them having gained their agreement with ours. For he used to say that one should not speak immediately of vices, virtues and the mysteries of the life and death of Christ. For, before they hear us willingly, we would drive them off by our untimely zeal and make them unwilling to hear anything.⁷

This is a ministry, for Ignatius and Nadal, enlightened especially by a text from St Paul: 'I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some' (1 Corinthians 9:22b).

⁵ MHSJ MN 5, 834.

⁶ 'Health [of the soul]' here translates *salus*. Nadal uses *salus animae* in the same paragraph. See the reflection on this word below, 18.

⁷ MHSJ MN 5, 834–835.

There are also signs that at the heart of the Ignatian art of spiritual conversation is not manipulation but a deep reverence for freedom, one that can inspire us still. We know from the Spiritual Exercises—which are a special form of spiritual conversation⁸—that Ignatius has a particular concern for the freedom of the other in relating to God. Instead of exhorting a person along this or that path, the one giving the Exercises remains ‘in the centre like the pointer of a balance’, leaving creature and Creator to deal with each other directly (Exx 15).

Could such a delicate balance be appropriate in spiritual conversation more generally? Ignatius seems to concede that explicit encouragement in one direction or other may be more suitable outside the sensitive context of the Exercises. Yet, even then, notice that Ignatius (as reported by Nadal) is concerned to ensure that the other person hears us ‘willingly’. The principle enunciated in the Spiritual Exercises remains true: more fruit comes not when I try to get a person somewhere I want him or her to go, but rather when I accompany that person in his or her own process of freely receiving ‘the enlightenment of divine grace’ (Exx 2). Hence Nadal’s advice is wise: be on the lookout for the opportunity in what a person is saying for a turn—a loving turn of attention, not so much to one’s own agenda, but to where the Spirit may be most present, leading a person forward.

This kind of spirit-attuned turn is most easily recognisable from the practice of Ignatian spiritual direction, both to those who give it and those who receive it. In 2005 I was sent by my Provincial to Boston, Massachusetts, to do my doctoral studies. In time, I arranged to see a spiritual director, Jim Sheehan, an elderly Jesuit who was living in the retirement home outside the city. I set off from my house in the car and took a wrong turn along the highway, arriving 45 minutes late. I called Jim on the intercom and said, ‘Jim, I’m here, but you’ve probably given up hope in me by now’. He said, ‘I haven’t given up hope in you. God certainly hasn’t given up hope in you!’ So he came to the front door and said to me, ‘You must be frustrated. Let’s go to lunch.’

After lunch, we went to his room and I spent half an hour explaining to Jim everything that was wrong in my life at that point. He listened

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⁸ Thanks to Patrick Goujon for this insight. See, for example, *Autobiography*, n.92: ‘In Venice at that time he occupied himself in giving the Exercises and in other spiritual conversations’.

silently. And then he said, 'Is there anywhere in your experience at the moment where God might be present?' To my surprise, I was able to name two places where I was experiencing real consolation and had not fully noticed. One was in my grieving for my grandmother's death and the other was in my daily experience of eucharist. Once again, this was a turn, but not a coercive or manipulative one: a simple shift of attention that allows the grace latent in experience to emerge and unfold.

What is true in spiritual direction is true in other forms of spiritual conversation, albeit with more latitude for both parties to share something from their own experience. There is a moment in such a conversation when things take a different turn, when we tune into what the good spirit is doing in someone's life. We go in through that person's door and go out by our own door—meaning by that the door, not of our own agenda, but of our alliance with the good spirit, who draws a person forward in freedom.

We recognise this turn when it happens. It is like digging for treasure in a field and hitting a chest with the shovel. Thud. We know that this is where to stay and dig; this is where the gold is.

The Early Jesuits and Spiritual Conversation

Before attempting to define spiritual conversation more fully, it will help to get a feel for its character and centrality for the early Jesuits. Ignatius himself had a lifelong love of spiritual conversation. As so often, however, what began in him as enthusiasm without discretion became more discerning and circumspect as time went on. We learn through his *Autobiography* that, from the early days of his conversion, he loved talking about spiritual things with spiritual persons, and did so with great fervour.⁹ Gradually, however, he began to learn that he could help others; he could 'help souls' by spiritual conversation (n.26).¹⁰ He began to spend significant amounts of time in this ministry, often combining it with giving the Spiritual Exercises (nn.77, 92).

⁹ *Autobiography*, n. 21: 'At this time he still used to talk sometimes with spiritual people, who thought he was genuine and wanted to talk to him, because, although he had no knowledge of spiritual things, still in his speaking he showed much fervour and a great will to go forward in the service of God'. See also nn. 26, 34, 88, 92.

¹⁰ *Autobiography*, n. 26.

Ignatius therefore became quite intentional, not just about doing spiritual conversation, but doing it in a particular way. Instead of just talking about spiritual things as one might talk about any of one's passions—as he did early on his spiritual journey—he became more of a listener. In his famous instructions to the fathers going to the Council of Trent, Ignatius says:

Anyone of ours should be slow to speak and show consideration and sympathy, especially when dealing with doctrinal definitions that will or may be discussed in the Council. Along with his reticence, he should rely on a readiness to listen, keeping quiet so as to sense and appreciate the positions, emotions and desires of those speaking. Then he will be better able to speak or to keep silent.¹¹

The principle of being slow to speak in order to listen carefully allows for a more discerning and fruitful approach to conversation.

Elaborating on this guidance, Nadal accents the general principle of Ignatian adaptation to times, places and persons.¹² Spiritual conversation is a more bespoke ministry than lecturing or preaching. One should not merely act out of love and zeal, but do so with discretion, in a way that is genuinely suited to the particularity of the persons and situations one encounters. Nadal explains that, for Ignatius,

It is very useful indeed to apply privately to individuals what preachers and lecturers do publicly from on high for the multitude. And, indeed, there is a greater liberty and greater power in this, since the Word can be fitted [to the person] from the varying response or affect.¹³

The identification of the 'greater liberty' that characterizes spiritual conversation, when compared to lecturing or preaching, highlights the way the former has to be adjusted in 'real time', to suit the shifting reality of the other's dispositions and responses here and now. No matter how much one rehearses such a conversation, this kind of ad-libbing can only be exercised on the fly.

¹¹ Ignatius to members of the Society of Jesus at Trent, early 1546, in *Personal Writings*, 248.

¹² This adaptability is also emphasized in Pedro de Ribadeneira's account of Ignatius' approach to spiritual conversation: book 5, chapter 11 in Pedro de Ribadeneira, *The Life of Ignatius of Loyola*, translated by Claude Pavur (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2014), 414–419.

¹³ MHSJ MN 5, 833.

A sign of the importance of spiritual conversation to the first Jesuits is the fact that it was crucially present at the inception of the Society of Jesus. Nadal observes that it was by spiritual conversation that Ignatius ‘gathered to himself those first nine companions’.¹⁴ Later, discerning spiritual conversation helped Ignatius and the first companions to elect to stay together as an apostolic body.¹⁵ Without spiritual conversation, the Society of Jesus would not have come into being.

The first companions learn spiritual conversation from Ignatius. Pierre Favre and Francis Xavier were thought to be especially gifted by God in this art by which their own lives had been profoundly changed. Favre was convinced that Christ is pleased if we leave behind us ‘a trail of good and holy conversation’ wherever we happen to travel.¹⁶ Writing from India, Xavier asked for Jesuits ‘who knew how to deal with others in tender fashion’ and who were not ‘rigid, wanting to control others by instilling a servile fear’.¹⁷ Thus the gentle art of Ignatian spiritual conversation became a recognised characteristic of the Society of Jesus, a contrast with some more severe pastoral approaches.

In Salamanca, when suspected by the authorities of spreading unorthodox teachings, Ignatius was asked, ‘What do you preach?’ “We”, said the pilgrim, “don’t preach, but speak about things of God with certain people in an informal way, such as after a meal with some people who invite us.”¹⁸

Defining Spiritual Conversation

The practice of spiritual conversation becomes codified in the Jesuit *Constitutions*.¹⁹ In this text, spiritual conversation is one item in a list of ministries in which Jesuits are to engage, alongside preaching, teaching, hearing confessions, giving the Spiritual Exercises and doing the works of mercy. Jesuits are encouraged to ‘endeavour to benefit individual

¹⁴ MHSJ MN 5, 833–834.

¹⁵ Jules J. Toner, ‘The Deliberation That Started the Jesuits: A Commentary on the *Deliberatio primorum patrum*, Newly Translated, with a Historical Introduction’, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 6/4 (1974). For a helpful corrective to the idealised account of Toner, see Philip Endean, ‘The Draughthorse’s Bloodlines: Discerning Together in the Ignatian Constitutions’, *The Way Supplement*, 85 (1996), 73–83.

¹⁶ Beatus Petrus Canisius, *Epistolae et acta*, edited by Otto Braunsberger (Freiburg: Herder, 1896), volume 8, 125.

¹⁷ O’Malley, *First Jesuits*, 81.

¹⁸ *Autobiography*, nn. 64–65.

¹⁹ *Constitutions*, Examen. 6. 4 [115], III. 1. 3 [247], VII. 4. 8 [648].

persons in spiritual conversations, giving counsel and exhorting to good works'.²⁰ How, though, might we define Ignatian spiritual conversation?

It is important not to restrict 'spiritual conversation' to one or other specific method or situation. Nadal offers a wide variety of contexts in which it is appropriate. He says that spiritual conversations are especially helpful after sermons, when people are more spiritually receptive: hence the early Jesuit practice of combining two apostles, one who preaches and the other who converses with individuals. It is also an important ministry for teachers in schools with their



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students. Even meeting people in the street or other public places can be an occasion for spiritual conversation. (Pierre Favre saw such 'chance' encounters as works of providence.)²¹ Nadal gives examples of spiritual conversation in groups, for example, a gathering of students interested in the spiritual life. The ministry itself is not restricted to Jesuits. Nadal says we should urge those we minister to and our friends to learn the art of spiritual conversation, women as well as men.²²

Whatever the context, 'spiritual conversation' in the *Constitutions* and Nadal's letter refers to conversation about spiritual things which helps our neighbour to make progress, and which is conducted in a way open to the guidance of the Spirit. Let us look at these three elements in turn.

Spiritual Things

Spiritual conversation, first, has a *subject matter*: spiritual things. Given the importance of listening and adapting to an individual, it is clear that

²⁰ *Constitutions*, VII.4.8 [648].

²¹ Clancy, *Conversational Word of God*, 65.

²² MHSJ MN 5, 836.

Ignatian spiritual conversation is not a theological discourse about spiritual things in the abstract, but a more personal conversation about those that touch on a certain individual's heart and life. Moreover, the 'spiritual' subject matter should not be read too narrowly.

Since Ignatian spirituality emphasizes the way all created things and life situations can potentially mediate God's presence, the subject matter of a spiritual conversation can include more than what *explicitly* concerns Christ as the way, the truth and the life. Nadal helpfully says that the turn in spiritual conversation is towards *salus* or things concerning *salus animae*, the health or salvation of the soul. The ambiguity of *salus* here is helpful: sometimes the subject will overtly be about the spiritual life, but at others what concerns a person's welfare, the 'health of the soul'. Today, we might say spiritual conversations are about any topic that connects, in a personal way, with someone's journey towards *true life*.²³ There can be no conflict between what brings us closer to the fullness of life and the one who is life.

Helping Souls

Spiritual conversation also has a *goal*: to help souls. Spiritual conversation, that is, edifies: it builds people up in the spiritual life—hence Nadal's continual emphasis on the charity or love of neighbour that motivates this practice.²⁴ For example, he praises Ignatius for exercising a 'sweet fervour of love' (*amoris fervor suavis*) towards the soul he is helping.²⁵ Even if someone were leading a sinful life, Ignatius would single out for praise some good work, natural gift, faith or virtue, if he or she had ever displayed any whatsoever. From this beginning in goodness, Ignatius would build the person up.

The Guidance of the Spirit

However, just as important as the subject matter and the goal of the conversation is the manner in which it is conducted: not only prudently but even discerningly—following the guidance of the Spirit. As Nadal puts it:

²³ Ignatius uses the phrase 'true life' in the meditation on the Two Standards. It refers to the genuine life Christ proposes, as contrasted with the counterfeit promise of life proposed by the enemy of human nature (Exx 139).

²⁴ *Constitutions*, III. 1.3 [247].

²⁵ MHSJ MN 5, 834.

The speaker should use holy and devout prudence to steer [each conversation]; but the Lord by his providence will himself navigate for us by granting us certain lines to follow, if we are open to his grace and our vocation.²⁶

'Prudence', here, refers not to anxious caution but to a practical wisdom sensitive to the contingencies of human relationship. Building on this good sense in relating to others, the art of spiritual conversation, Nadal is saying, requires being alert to the leading of the Spirit.

For Nadal, then, there is no recipe for spiritual conversation; rather, we need tact and discernment to judge when and how to make the turn to spiritual things.²⁷ Thus, when Nadal describes how Francis Xavier was so gifted in spiritual conversation, he singles out not only his charity, his moral prudence and the sweetness (*suavitas*) of his words, but also his discernment of spirits.²⁸ The crucial thing in this art is not to go ahead of grace, but to follow God's lead. Nadal is convinced that the Lord will guide us if we are attentive.

The word 'spiritual' in 'spiritual conversation' therefore works overtime: it does at least three jobs. Spiritual conversation is not merely conversation about a spiritual subject matter, nor even that with a spiritual goal, but dialogue that is conducted in a spiritual manner. I therefore suggest the following definition of Ignatian spiritual conversation: *discerning conversation about spiritual things for spiritual progress*.

Spiritual conversation can be conducted by the Ignatian apostle in a wide variety of contexts, from chance encounters between two individuals to intentional groups formed for the purpose of spiritual benefit. Those who exercise this ministry are not restricted to clerics, but are recognised, at least since Nadal in the sixteenth century, to include priests and laypeople, women as well as men. It is a practice, an art, that requires something more than a mere method or a technique: it presupposes personal qualities and virtues such as prudence, discernment, attentiveness, inner freedom, reverence, gentleness and, above all, love.

²⁶ MHSJ MN 5, 835.

²⁷ A helpful point of comparison here is the 'third quality' that the *Constitutions* say the Superior General ought to have, which includes 'prudence along with experience in spiritual and interior matters, so that he may be able to discern the various spirits and give counsel' and the gift 'of conversing with such various persons' (IX.2.6 [729]).

²⁸ MHSJ MN 5, 833.

Spiritual Conversation as the Ignatian Way

Spiritual conversation was seen by the early Jesuits as especially characteristic of the Society of Jesus and its way of doing ministry. St Peter Canisius testifies to this in a letter to the Superior General Claudio Acquaviva on the subject, at his request. Like Nadal, Canisius was a second-generation Jesuit who was deeply impressed by the accent placed on spiritual conversation by Ignatius and his first companions. He is especially keen to praise his old mentor, St Pierre Favre, as a skilled practitioner of this art. Canisius makes the extraordinary claim that, among the works of mercy and charity, spiritual conversation is the one ‘with the highest praise in the Society, and the one most especially helpful to others’.²⁹ This is a rhetorical exaggeration, perhaps, but one that underlines the importance of this practice to the early Jesuits.

However, I do not think we do spiritual conversation justice if we restrict it to being one particular ministry of the Word of God among others, even the one with the highest praise. It has a more important place in Ignatian spirituality even than that. George E. Ganss makes the insightful point that spiritual conversation was what ‘penetrated and undergirded all the other more visible activities’ of the first Jesuits.³⁰ For the Ignatian missionary disciple, then, spiritual conversation is not just one ministry among others, no matter how important; rather, it is the Ignatian way of doing any ministry.

Spiritual conversation ... is the Ignatian way of doing any ministry

All Ignatian ministry is done in the key of spiritual conversation. Whether an Ignatian apostle is preaching, teaching, hearing confessions, giving the Spiritual Exercises, performing the works of mercy or making decisions, he or she is doing so in the mode of a conversation, leading to life, open to the Spirit.

If spiritual conversation is indeed the mode of all Ignatian ministry and practice, this is a fact calling for explanation. There must be something at the heart of Ignatian spirituality that explains why all the activities that flow from it are done in a discerning and conversational mode. Later in this issue of *The Way*, Patrick Goujon will explore the Spiritual Exercises as a form of spiritual conversation, highlighting not only the

²⁹ Canisius, *Epistulae et acta*, volume 8, 118. There is a translation of this letter in Clancy, *Conversational Word of God*, 57–67.

³⁰ George E. Ganss, foreword, in Clancy, *Conversational Word of God*, ix.

conversation between the one handing on the *Exercises* and the one receiving them, but also the ‘colloquy’ or conversation with God and the saints with which each conversation culminates. It is not just that the Spiritual Exercises are a basis for spiritual conversation, then, but that they *are* a spiritual conversation: a twofold one, in which a person’s conversation with God is aided by conversation with a companion. The deep reason why Ignatian ministry is done in a conversational mode is because the Ignatian apostle is formed especially in the conversational encounter with the Lord, accompanied in a conversational manner.

Thomas H. Clancy ends his book on spiritual conversation by reflecting on the interplay between authentic conversations with each other, and those with God:

We can hardly hope to learn to talk to God until we rediscover how to talk to one another. Of course, that effort itself demands prayer. We should pursue conversation on both levels. God will teach us better how to listen to and talk with our friends. And our friends will teach us better how to listen to God and to open our heart to him without self-consciousness or self-seeking.³¹

Spiritual conversation is a discerning, conversational mode of interaction that flows out of a discerning, conversational relationship with the Lord—and vice versa.

Spiritual Conversation Today

Nadal humbly concedes at the very beginning of his letter that he cannot fully explain what is involved in the art of spiritual conversation: as a ministry of the Word of God, ‘it is sensed only in the Spirit, in Christ’.³² To become adept in this art is less a matter of mastering a set of instructions than getting a ‘feel’ for it. While it cannot be fully explained, then, it can be experienced, it can be caught.

I mentioned to an academic recently that I had attended a conference at the Jesuit retreat centre St Beuno’s on spiritual conversation.³³ He responded by explaining how the experience of receiving Ignatian spiritual direction had transformed the way he led tutorials. He was more

³¹ Clancy, *Conversational Word of God*, 50.

³² MHSJ MN 5, 832.

³³ Thanks to William Ghosh, who has given his permission for me to record my recollection.

sensitive to the interior energy behind a student's interests or insights, and more adept and helping the student to follow the 'movement'. It is not that his tutorials in literature suddenly became pious conversation about spiritual matters, but that, as someone who had received Ignatian spiritual direction, he now found a new way of accompanying students discerningly.

What started with Ignatius' simple practice of talking about spiritual things to help souls has unfolded in multiple contexts down to our own day. The Society of Jesus is today rediscovering spiritual conversation as an important aspect of its way of proceeding, bringing the practice more consciously and intentionally into community life, apostolic planning and governance. This renewal of spiritual conversation in the Jesuit way of proceeding was called for in the 36th General Congregation, where the Jesuits gathered found themselves resonating with the experience of the first companions at Venice:

Spiritual conversation involves an exchange marked by active and receptive listening and a desire to speak of that which touches us most deeply. It tries to take account of spiritual movements, individual and communal, with the objective of choosing the path of consolation that fortifies our faith, hope and love. Spiritual conversation creates an atmosphere of trust and welcome for ourselves and others. We ought not to deprive ourselves of such conversation in the community and in all other occasions for decision-making in the Society.³⁴

A sign that this recovery increasingly marks Jesuit life today is the way the 71st Congregation of Procurators, at Loyola, Spain (15–21 May 2023) was preceded by an eight-day retreat for all participants, praying and then meeting in small groups for spiritual conversation. Participants felt that the prayerful, discerning manner of conversation cultivated in the retreat flowed into the style of dialogue in the congregation proper. Interventions were marked less by opinionated argument and more by a common search for where the Spirit is leading the Society.

It is also surely no accident that, at the centre of the first Jesuit Pope's reforming agenda is synodality. For, as Pope Francis explains, synodality involves gathering to speak with freedom (with *parrhesia*), to listen humbly to each other, in order to listen to the voice of the Spirit.³⁵

³⁴ GC 36, decree 1, 'Companions in a Mission of Reconciliation and Justice', n. 12.

³⁵ Nicholas Austin, 'Discernment as a Work of the Church', *The Way*, 58/4 (October 2019), 7–16.

What, then, is synodality, if not an ongoing spiritual conversation involving all members of the Church?

Ignatian apostles continually find new ways to embody the art of discerning conversation that Ignatius, Favre, Xavier and the early Jesuits exemplified in their own context. Ignatius is one of the great conversation-starters in history. It is not so much that he advocated talking about pious things but that he inspired by his example and teaching a mode of praying and serving marked by listening, discernment and dialogue. If it is true that spiritual conversation is less a specific kind of apostolic ministry than a style of interacting and relating that can infuse any activity, the invitation to us today may be to ask how we can bring this style, this manner, this art into more and more of what we do.

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