



Synod  
2021  
2024

For a synodal Church  
communion | participation | mission  
Pour une Église synodale



CANADIAN CONFERENCE  
OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF  
CATHOLIC BISHOPS

# Spiritual Conversation

Diocesan Synod Leaders session

March 14, 2023



Service for Discernment in Common  
Service pour le Discernement en Commun



# The Service for Discernment in Common



- Established in March 2019
- A service of the Province of the Jesuits of Canada
- Assisting religious communities and apostolates with communal discernment processes
- Trainings, workshops, facilitation of communal discernment processes...



*Sr. Laurence Loubières, xmcj*

*Examples of missions  
Exemples de missions*

Jesuit Province  
Congregation de Notre-Dame  
Ignatian Spirituality Project  
Christian Life Community  
Conférence Religieuse Canadienne



# Agenda

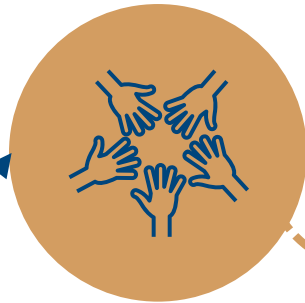


1. Foundations and theology of Spiritual conversation



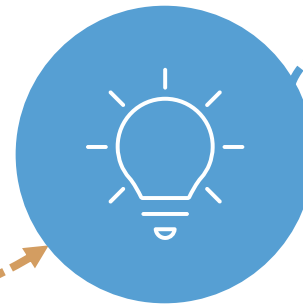
Moment of personal reflection

2. Spiritual conversation and communal discernment



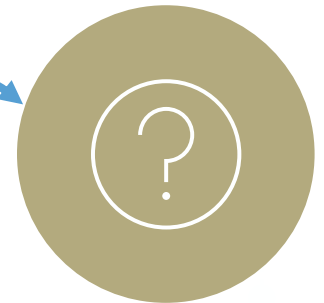
Moment of personal reflection

3. Concrete applications



Moment of personal reflection

4. Q&A





**1.**  
**Foundations and  
theology of Spiritual  
conversation**



# Spiritual Conversation



- Structured conversation
  - one by one,
  - equal speech time,
  - no response
- Active listening and Intentional speaking
- Paying attention to inner movements within oneself and within the group
- 3 rounds of sharing



# Spiritual conversation: moving from “me” to “we”



From my prayer...

...to what emerges from what we shared



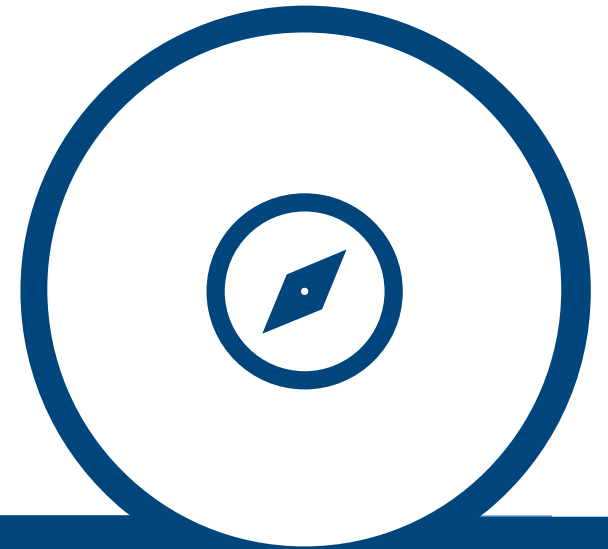
**1<sup>st</sup> round**

Fruits of my prayer



**2<sup>nd</sup> round**

What touches me the most



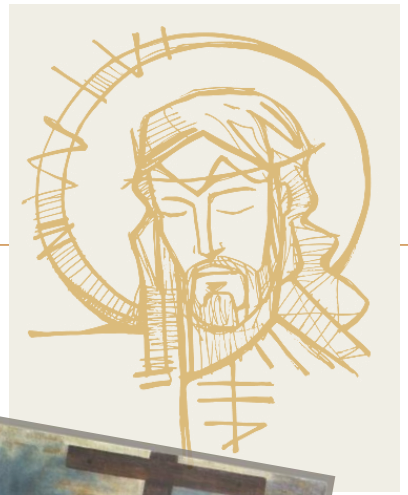
**3<sup>rd</sup> round**

What converges



# St Ignatius Loyola's conversion experience

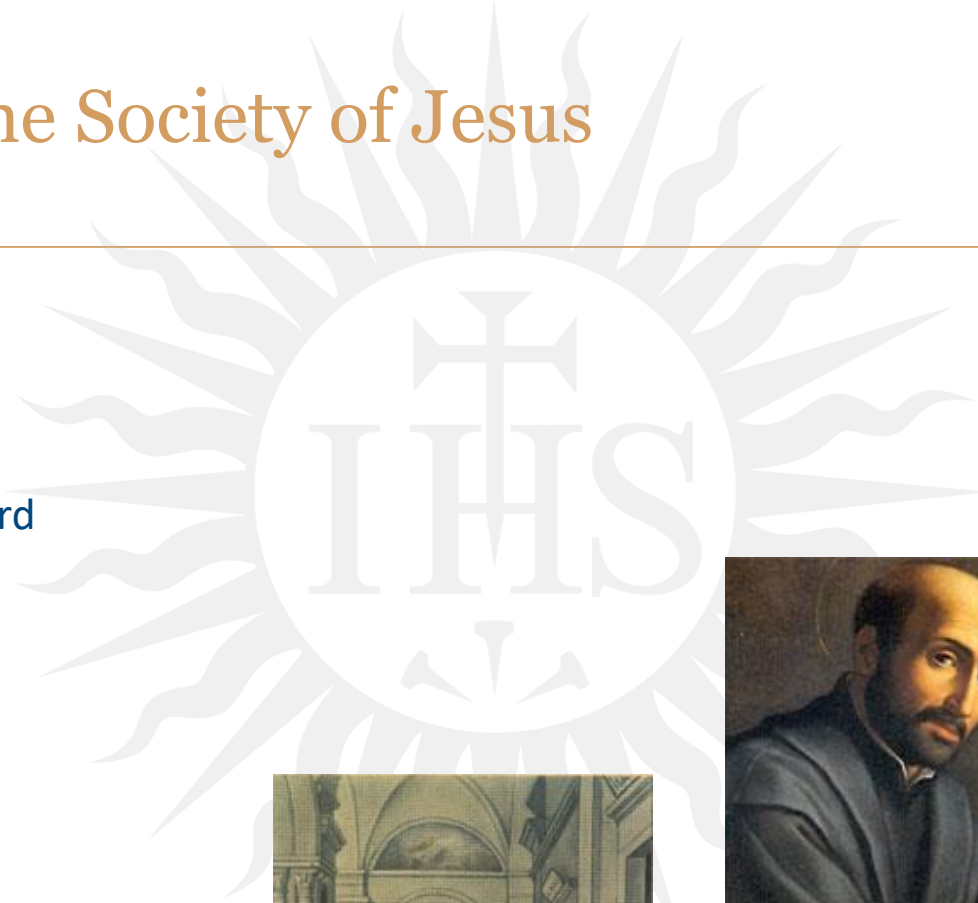
- A thwarted life project
- Touched in his heart by the love of God
- A special grace of discernment of spiritual movements within him
- Sharing this joy with those in his home, who were surprised to see "a change in his soul"
- He noticed how conversations with them were "doing their souls a great deal of good"
- A subsequent great desire to "help souls"
- Confirmed in this vocation in his subsequent pilgrim itinerary
- Conversation = etymological connection with conversion
- God enters in conversation with us and we respond with our lives





# Conversation at the heart of the Society of Jesus

- Purpose of Society of Jesus: *to help souls*
- Constitutions state that apostolic work of the Jesuits was to be done through preaching the Word of God and holy conversations : preaching, catechism, confessions, the Spiritual Exercises, spiritual accompaniment...
- Conversation also at the heart of the life of the Society of Jesus,
  - notably through lively correspondence, even if letters sometimes took several years to arrive!
- A wide range of possible styles of spiritual conversations !
- Common denominator being a radical orientation towards God and the desire to order one's life to God's service and praise



Ignatius and Francis Xavier





# A letter of instruction on appropriate behavior to Jesuits attending the council of Trent in 1546



“Learn the surpassing worth of conversation; be slow of speech, be considerate and kind especially when deciding on matters under discussion, pay attention to the whole person, understand the meaning, learnings and wishes of those who speak, be free of prejudice, argue from authority cautiously, quote important persons only if arranged beforehand, consider the reasons on both sides without showing attachment to your own opinion, avoid bringing dissatisfaction to anyone, be modest when you are certain, choose to speak at the other’s convenience even when certain, give conversation the time that it needs.

[...]

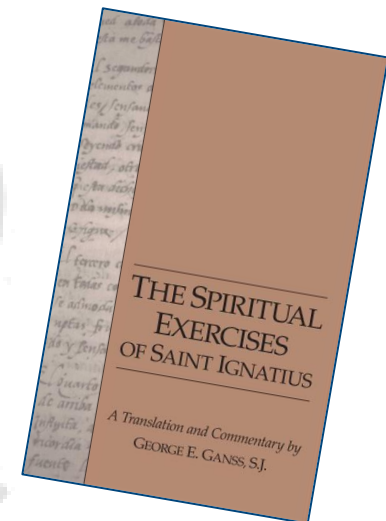
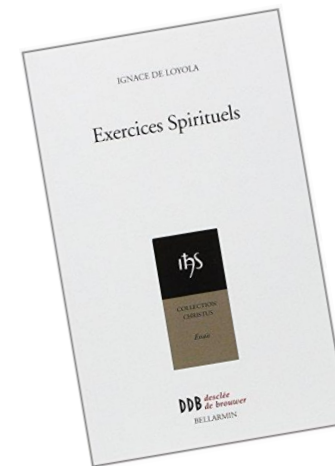
Spend an hour at night when each of you can share with the others what you have done that day and discuss your plans for the following day. Agree on past and future matters by vote, or in some other way. ”

[Counsels for Jesuits, 9-12, specifically, 10-11.]



# The Spiritual Exercises

- Fruits of Ignatius' experience
- 30-day retreat to discern one's fundamental call
- Orienting and ordering one's life accordingly
- "Becoming who we are"
- A series of structured conversations
  - between the retreatant and the Lord in prayer
  - between the retreatant and the person who guides him or her from step to step in the accompaniment meetings
- Through these words exchanged about what touches his/her heart in prayer and in events, the retreatant gradually opens to God's call and to the means of orienting his life to respond to it.
- Requires setting up the conditions for listening to the Holy Spirit



M. D. XLVIII.

# To discern : a response to God



- God is at work! In all creatures, in all persons, in all circumstances, in all events, in all groups!
- Our task is to become mindful of God's presence and activity in our midst and respond faithfully
- The Spirit continually draws us to God by calling forth an ever more authentic version of ourselves = a work of incarnation
- Experience is the starting point of discernment, where we can become aware of the movement of the Spirit in our life
- Aligning our desires and decisions with the promptings of the Spirit
  - Collaborating with God
  - Becoming who we are in truth
  - Bearing fruit for the good of all
- "Discernment is a deepening, vibrant relationship of attention and response to God who is always on the move."
- A dynamic way of life, open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit



# Spiritual Conversation

## to open up as a group to the promptings of the Spirit



- Sets up the conditions for a group to listen to the Spirit
- *“In individual discernment, the main activity is the private prayer of the person, while in communal discernment, the main activity is the public inter-relationship” John English, sj*
- Importance of the small and large group conversations
- Sharing at the level of one’s experience, fruits received in prayer
- Experience of Christ’s presence in the midst of the community, in the weaknesses, sufferings and energy experienced and expressed in a community context
- Holy Spirit frees persons, fosters trust, builds the group into a community
- Trust and communion grow when participants share the fruit of their prayer and feel accepted



# A description of what is going on



“ In spiritual conversation, we assume that God is speaking through the other person, so we accept that person and allow the conversation to affect us, regardless of what we think of the message or the person speaking. In other words, we listen in the way spiritual directors are supposed to listen, noting the movements of the spirit in the other person, while also noting the movements of the spirit in ourselves. ”

Luz Marina Diaz - Spiritual conversation as the practice of revelation –  
The Way 55/2 - April 2016



# First pause



- What struck you during this first part?
- Have you had a concrete experience of a conversation during which you felt the Holy Spirit at work in you?
- How did it feel?





## 2. Spiritual conversation and communal discernment



# The importance of discernment for communities of faith



“ Making decisions is the single most important act or action that an individual or group ever does. It is more important than prayer. Love is a decision, not an emotion. Prayer is very important in our life with each other and with God. But it is not as important as charity. Charity, love, is more important than prayer. We love by our decisions. ”  
ISECP team

“ If we are not consistently trying to understand God’s vision for us, then what *are* we doing? ”  
Ruth Haley Barton,  
*Pursuing God’s Will Together*

# Love is shown in deeds

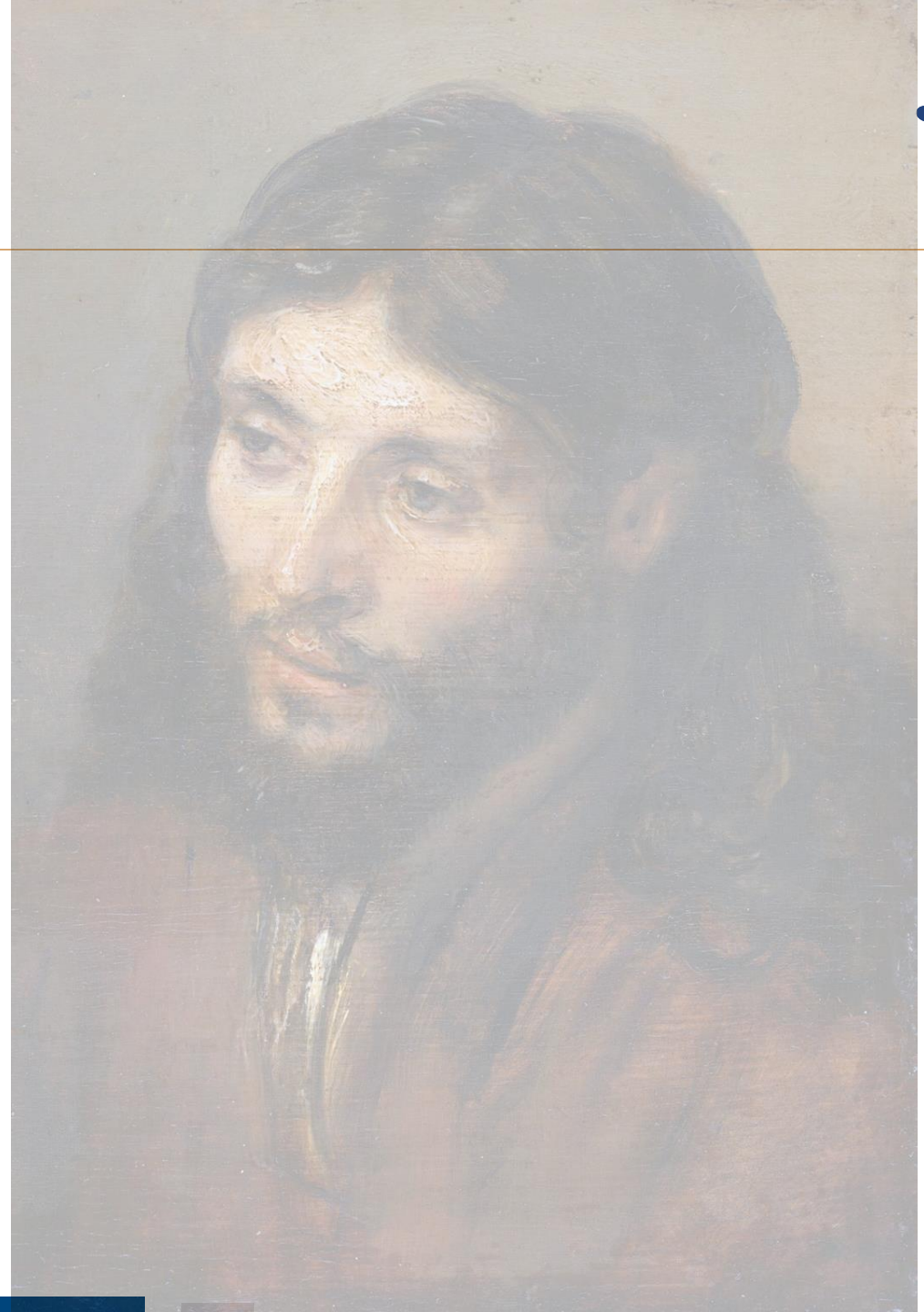


- Discernment: placing our decisions in the context of a path of actualisation, incarnation of a deep calling
- Acting in this way requires being grounded in our calling, vocation
- It requires also the correctness of our perceiving, our understanding, our judging, our deciding and acting
- Through our actions and decisions, we become a true and authentic version of whom we are called to be
- Our actions reflect our values, our life embodies God's love, gives witness to God, becomes Word of God

# Striving for consistency

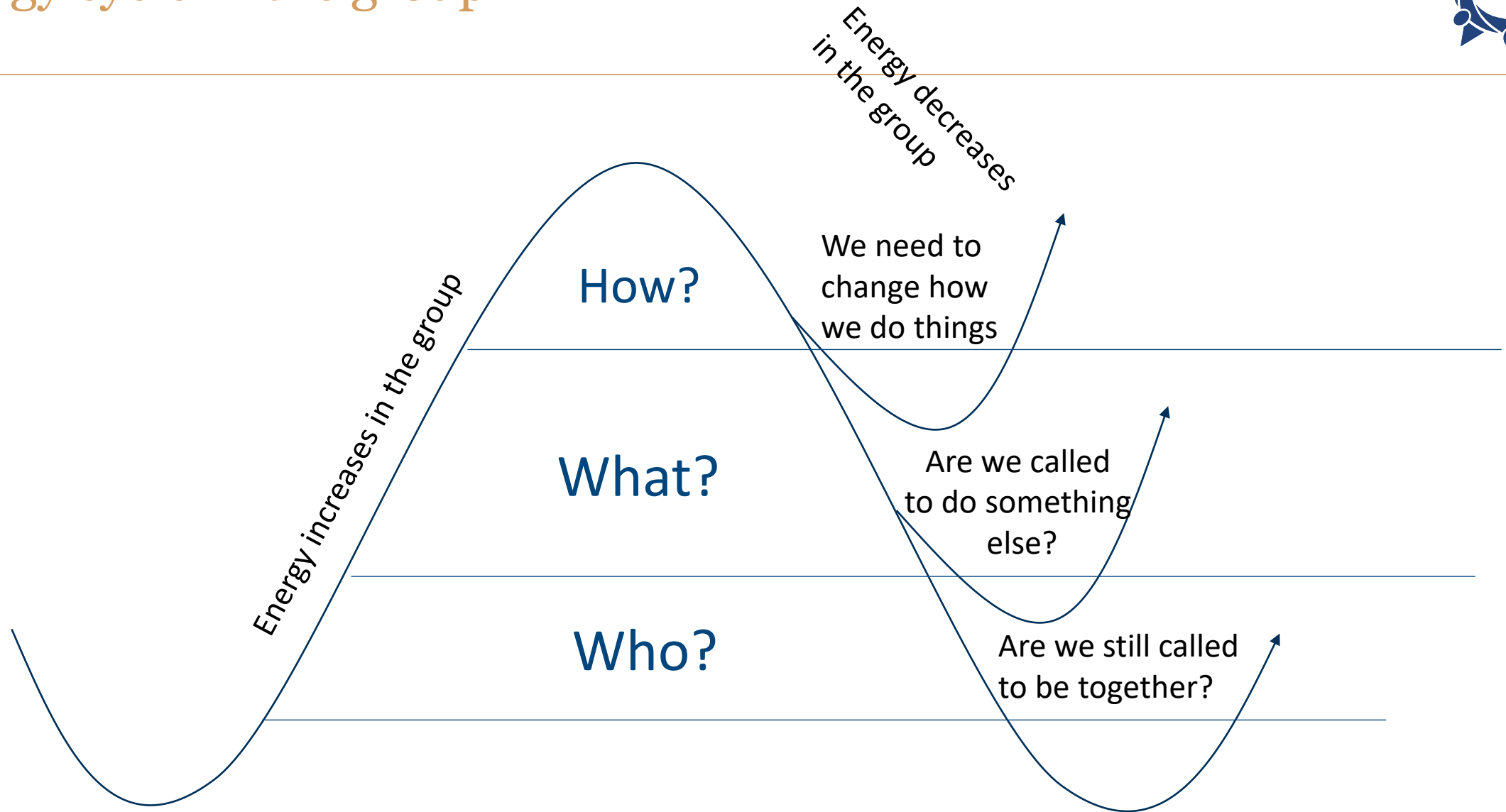


- Searching for consistency
  - who we are (Who?),
  - what we do (What?)
  - the way we do it (How?)
- Christ is the one who lives this consistency perfectly
- His identity as Son of God is manifested in his whole life
- He is truly the incarnate Word of God





# Energy cycle in the group



# Going beyond ordinary perceptiveness



“ Discernment involves going beyond ordinary perceptiveness. Discernment means keen perception or judgment and derives from the Latin *discernere* – to separate.  
Discernment is the process of identifying something of value by separating it from other phenomena that obscure it and compete with it for our attention. ”

Patrick Byrne, *The Ethics of Discernment*



# The opposite Spirits in our hearts

- The Spirit of God
  - brings us closer to God,
  - to our true identity, True life in Jesus Christ!
  - brings ‘courage and strength, consolations and quiet’,
- The spirit of Evil
  - turns us away from God and from ourselves,
  - traps us in deception
  - arrives ‘to harass, sadden and obstruct, and to disturb with false reasoning’
- Recognise and distinguish accept / refuse the underlying orientation of our heart and mind
- Growing - or not – the truth **of** our life, through the truth **in** our life
- Rules for the Discernment of Spirits





# Their respective manifestations

## Desolation

- Decreased dynamism, discouragement, doubts, inner darkness, apathy, dullness
- Withdrawal into oneself
- Feeling separated from God
- Moments when we are no longer in alignment, turning away from God
- Closing of the heart
- Sin
- Testing of our resolutions
- Dependence on God



## Consolation

- Dynamism, gratitude, energy
- Increased desire, hope, faith in God, love for neighbour
- Moments of suffering because of sin, evil
- Alignment, consistency with the Spirit's invitation,
- Opening of the heart
- Sign that we are on the right track!

# Inner freedom



- Importance of cultivating an attitude of inner freedom, openness and receptivity
- Willingness to be open to God's lead
- Indifference towards the possible outcomes
- Wanting what God wants
- Not imposing our agenda
- Check if inner freedom is present at beginning, otherwise possibility of steering the process, even unconsciously
- Praying for spiritual inner freedom
  - Noticing tensions, agendas, anxieties, priorities, concerns, attachments
  - Asking for the grace to be free





# Prayer



- The Spirit teaches us all things!
- The Spirit of truth [...] will guide you into all the truth  
John 16:13
- No discernment without prayer
- Place ourselves before God,  
with the desire to love and serve God, opening up to the  
leading of the Holy Spirit
- Preparatory prayer:  
*May all my intentions, actions, operations be purely directed to  
the praise and service of God*
- Indifference : inner freedom, letting the Spirit move us freely
- Ask for the specific grace for each step of the process



# A process embedded in prayer



A basic 3-step sequence



# Importance of structure

- What is not structured... is unjustly structured!
- The Spirit speaks through each person :  
importance of making sure the voice of each participant is heard
- Importance of facilitation -Keeping the direction, Steps, Timings, moments of silence
- Similarity with spiritual exercises done individually
  - importance of adequate conditions, time set aside, structure in the day, silence....
- At the service of the freedom of the Holy Spirit
- Spiritual conversation is a structured process of conversation
  - Preparation : Prayer and written contribution
  - One by one, equal speech time, no response
  - Active listening and Intentional speaking
  - Paying attention to consolation and desolation within oneself and group



# Being mindful of the quality of our being together

- Nurturing freedom in our relationships
- Finding God in oneself - and in others !
- Temptation to assume what the other person thinks or will say
- Presence in listening: what is the person truly trying to say or voice?
- Seek clarification: ask open questions: When you say... what do you mean?
- Pay attention to inner movements: competition, resistance, acceptance?
- Take time to process
- Return to spiritual freedom: release or affirm, seeking first the will of God
- Create safe spaces where it is possible to be vulnerable and open in community
- Time and intention

- Group consolation
  - Group truly engaged in active listening and intentional speaking
  - Emergence of shared insight, truth, consensus which energises participants
  - Greater union, acceptance, inclusivity, appreciation
  
- Group desolation
  - Decrease in energy, withdrawal, disengagement from active listening and intentional speaking
  - Fear, avoidance, decrease in trust and openness, feeling of being stuck
  - Personal agendas, competition, resurfacing of old wounds...





# Second pause



- What struck you during this second part?
- Have you had an experience of consolation or of desolation in the midst of a group conversation or a meeting?
- Why was it the case? How did it feel?





### 3. Concrete applications





# A way of moving forward together

- Even in day-to-day tasks, the Spirit is “seeking to breathe through our programs and agendas to be the source of our life together”
- Spiritual conversation is very versatile and can be applied in several situations
- It can become an ordinary way of proceeding during meetings
  - Reflect / pray
  - Share in turns
  - Build on the consensus that emerges
  - Repeat!



# Lessening polarization through reverent communication



“ Reverent communication carries the awareness that one is addressing a sacred being. It is not the same as solemnity; it includes humor, playfulness, and ease as well. To maintain reverence means noticing habits of polarization and judgment that arise in the presence of difficult information or difficult emotions. Even a community conceived as a sanctuary will inevitably mirror the divisions and conflicts of the outside world. The answer is not to avoid them or to plow them over with positivity.

Rather, the community can hold them in a non-ordinary way.

Specifically, that means that we help each other

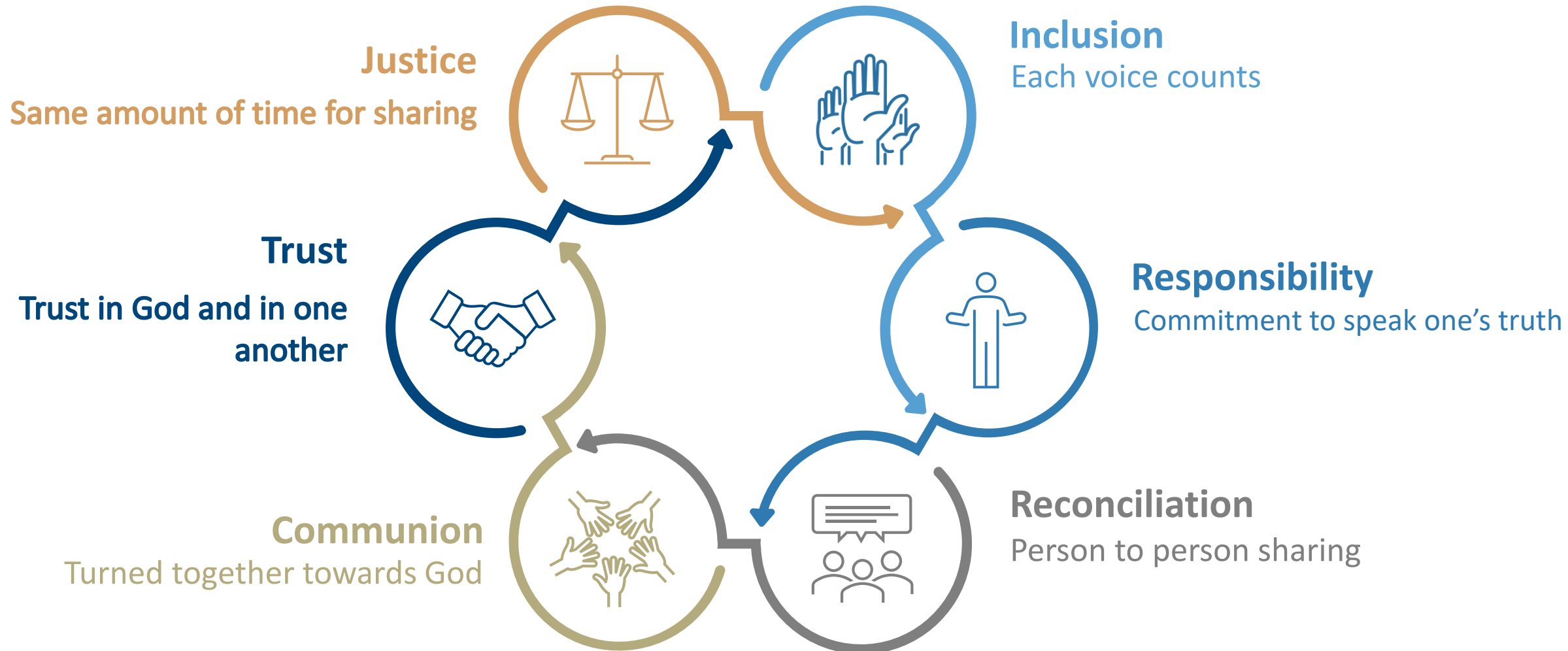
- to express anger without diverting it onto hate
- to hold grief without diverting it onto despair
- to share compassion without diverting it onto pity
- to interpret each other's words generously
- to let go of being right and seeming smart
- to value each person's unique window on the world
- to be willing to see each other fully, shadow and gold
- to be willing to be truly seen ourselves ”



Charles Eisenstein, Essay : We Can Do Better Than This, September 2020



# The values brought forth in the group



# Reconnecting with our purpose



- Sharing what energises us most in our spiritual identity as children of God, members of the Church
- Reclaiming the strength of our charism, vocation
- Strengthening the communion of group members
- Growing in a shared appropriation of our identity, purpose and mission
- Becoming aware of our specific God-given grace that our group is called to give to others
- The essence of Synodality!





“Church and synod are synonymous”

Saint John Chrysostom

“The path of synodality is precisely what God wishes for the Church of the third millennium”

Pope Francis

“Our “journeying together” is, in fact, what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God.”

Synod Preparatory Document

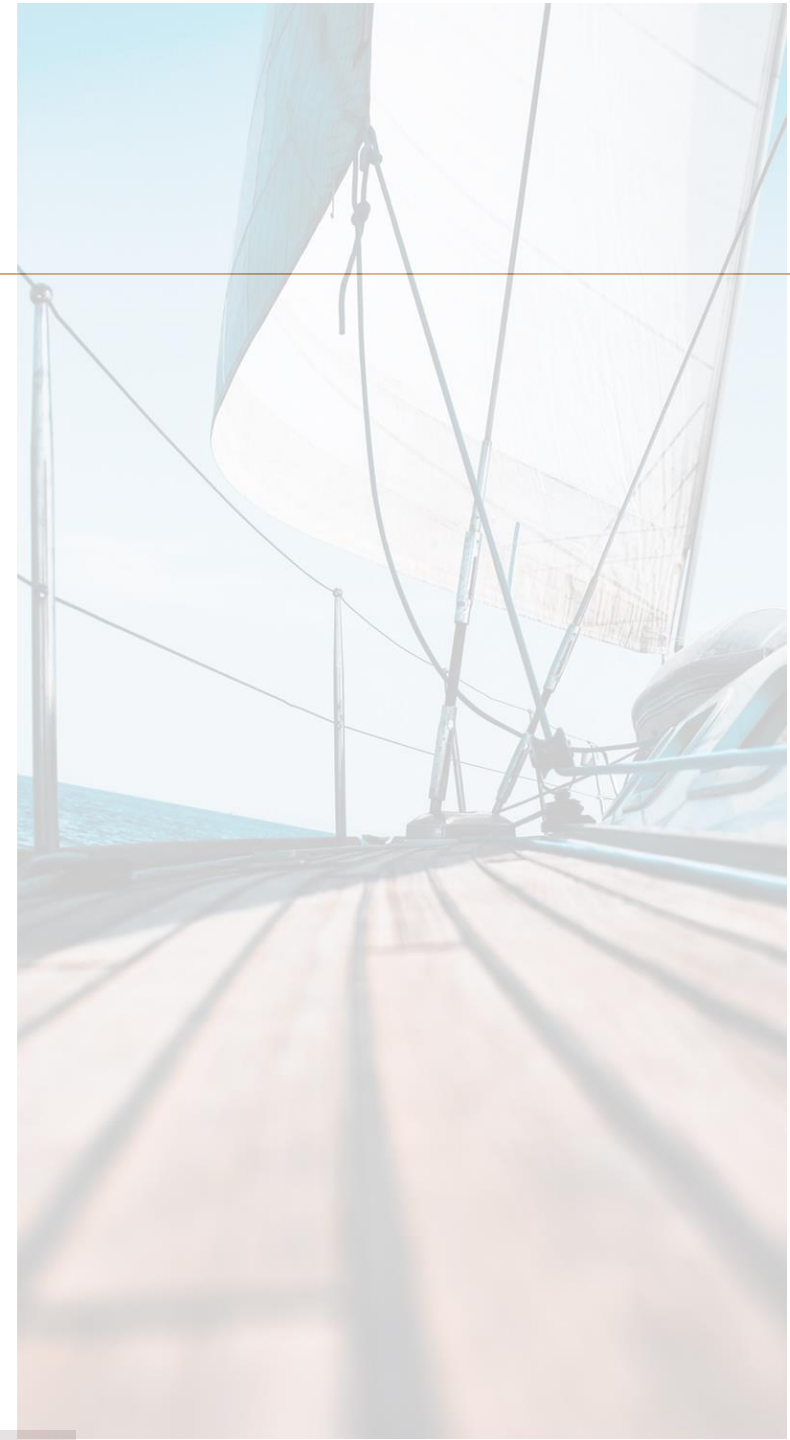




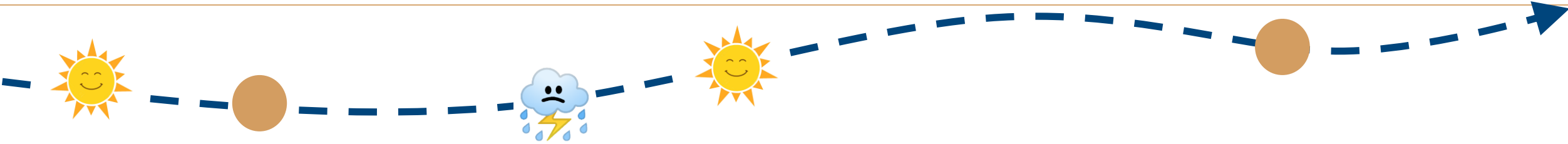
# Periodical review to stay the course



- What gives us the most energy, love, zeal?
- What drains our energy, turns us inward?
- What do we need to affirm and do more of?
- What do we need to stop or change?
- What can we try for a while and then reassess?

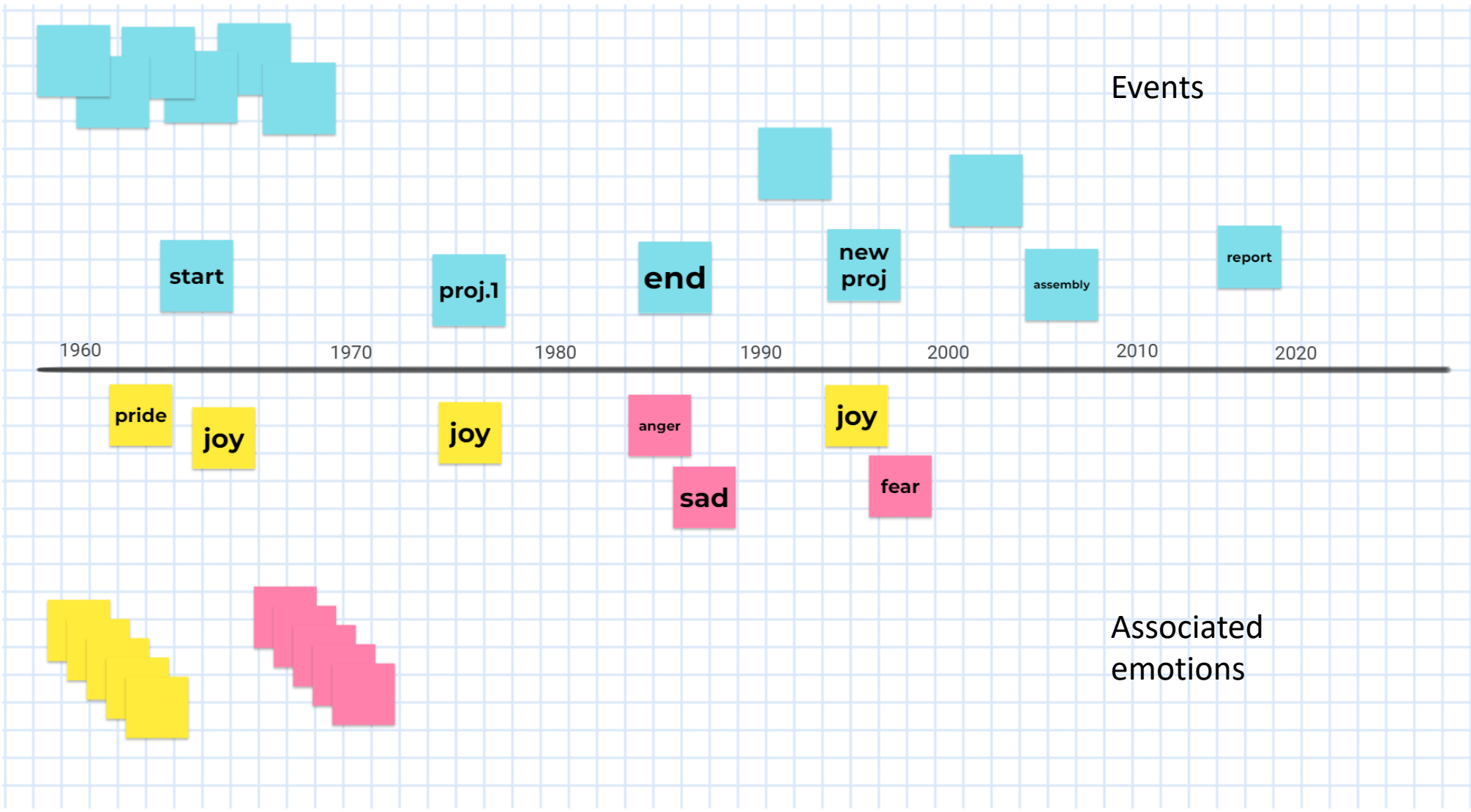


# Reviewing our Communal Graced History



- The group's story of grace
- To discern “what was going on” beneath “what was happening”
- Consolations, desolations, moments of self-transcendence  
→ appropriation into narrative
- Discovery of patterns
  - In which instances are we giving our best?
  - What recurring ruts are preventing us from giving our best?
- Strengthened sense of group's identity and purpose
- Uncovering reconciliation needs as well as possible new calls

# Building a history line



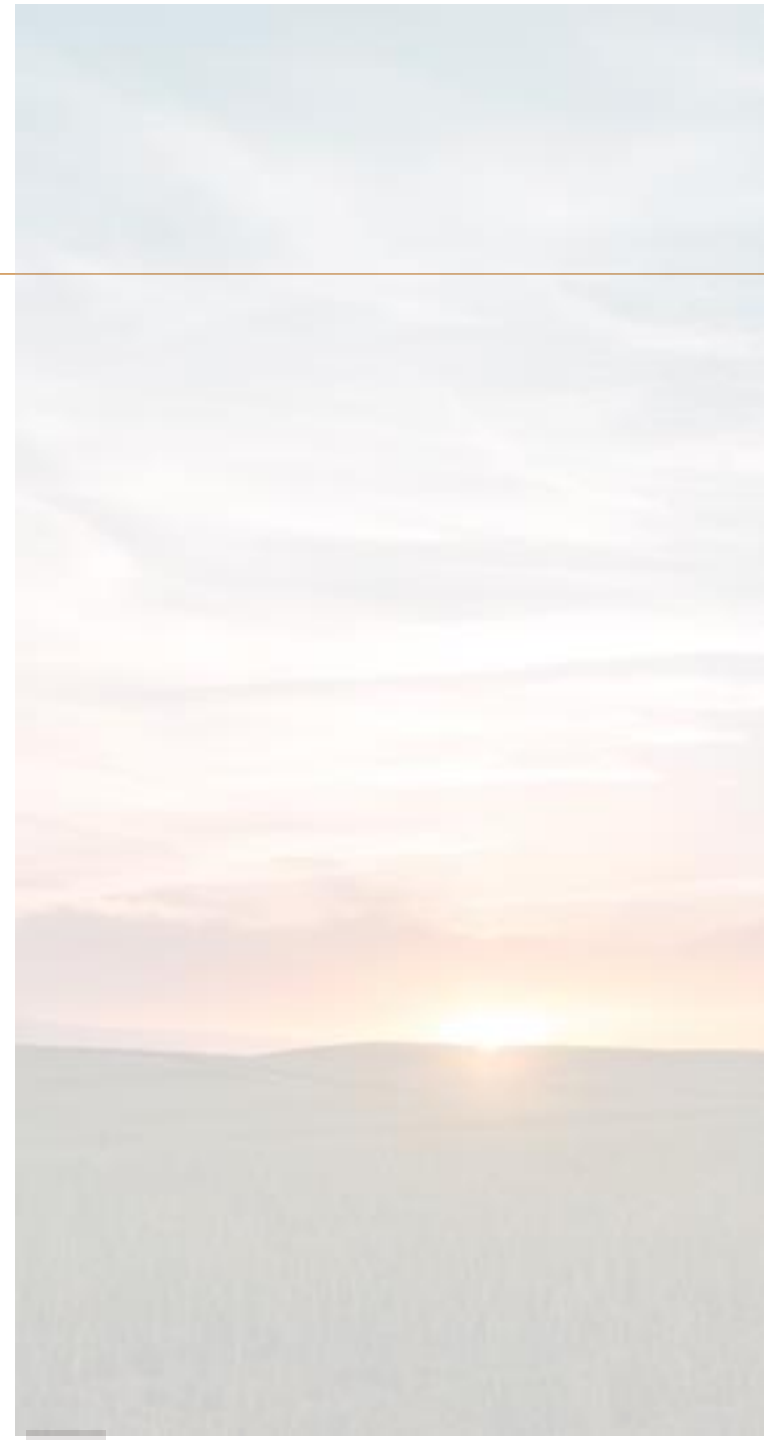
Events

Associated emotions

# Discerning the signs of the times



- How to engage our current contexts and realities?
- How to respond to certain situations?
- What are the pressing needs and calls around us ?
- Where does the Spirit invite us to risk our steps?
- Articulating a question, gathering data, listening to calls, weighing options



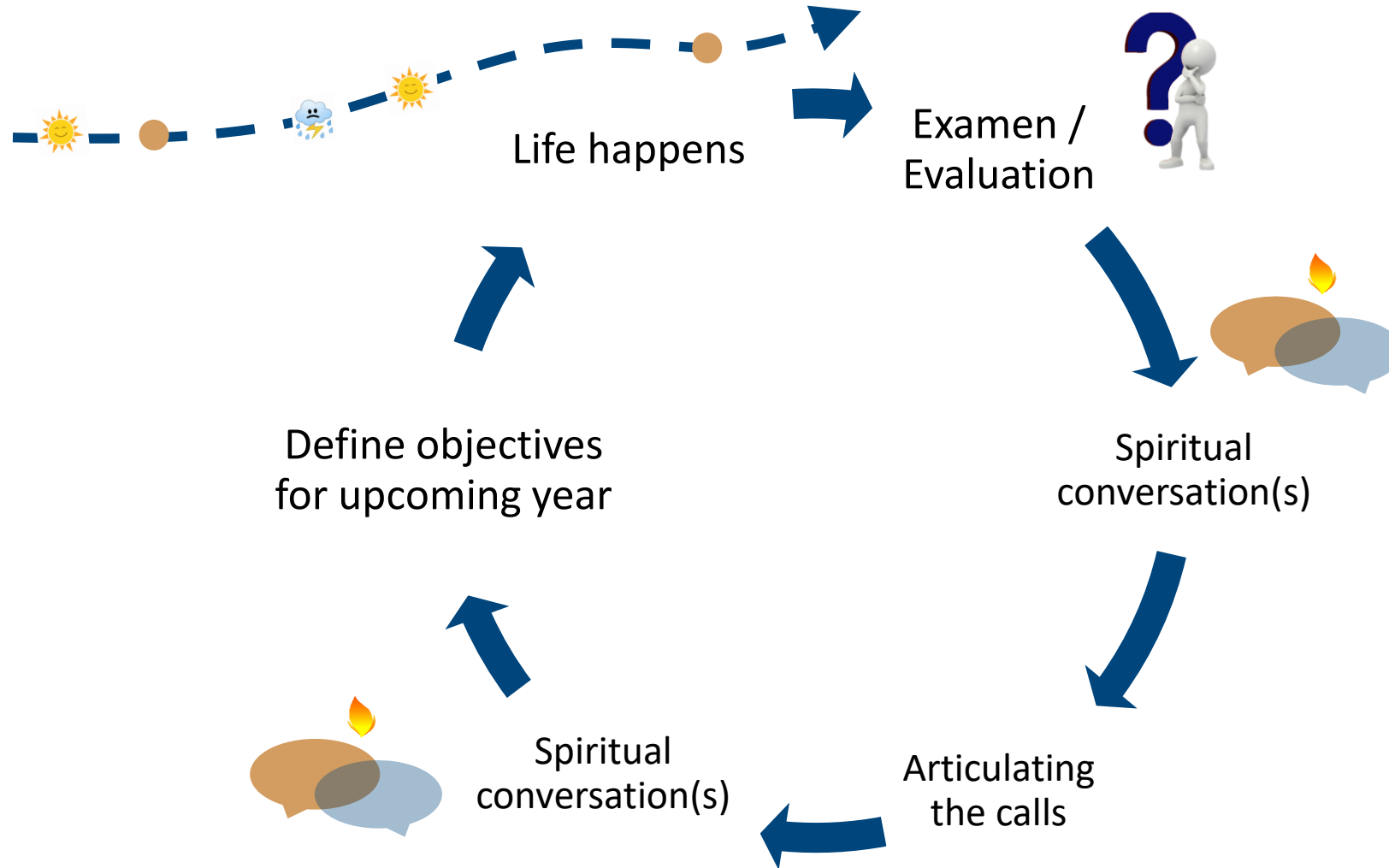
# Communal Decision making



- Communal discernment with specific communal (and relevant!) question to discern
- 5 steps
  - Formulation of question
  - Gathering relevant data
  - Praying with data
  - Seeking consensus and making decision
  - Seeking confirmation
  - Implementing decision
- Might require several conversations combined into a process



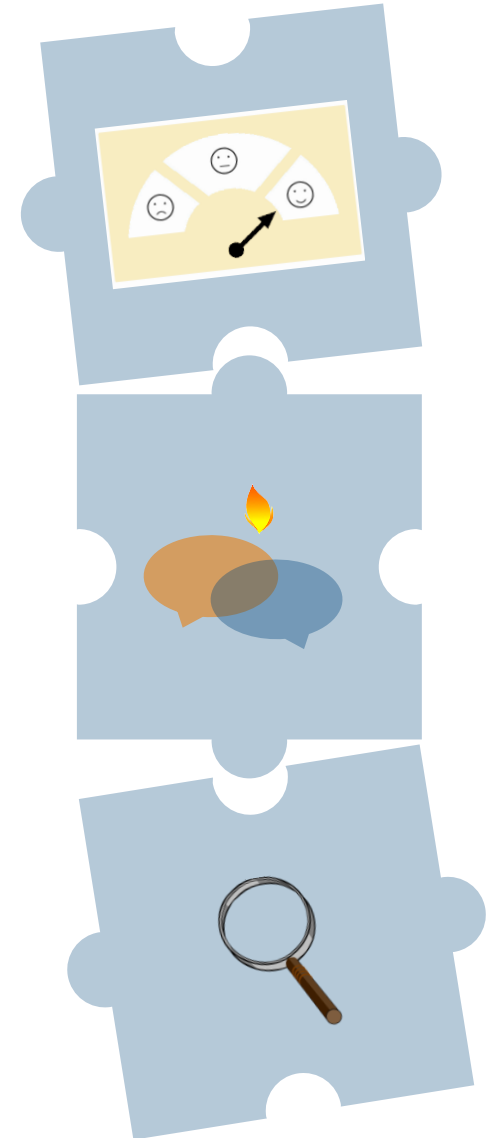
# Example of apostolic planning and review



# Check-In and Review



- “Bookends” of a spiritual conversation
- Check-in
  - Short expression of inner state
  - Acknowledgement and welcome of each participant
  - Deepens quality of subsequent conversation
  - Prevents strong emotions from influencing conversation afterwards
- Review
  - Reflective act of awareness about the meeting
  - Evaluation / expression of gratitude / appropriation





# Third pause



- What struck you in this third part?
- Which elements could apply to some questions or concerns that you are holding currently?



# Conclusion



- Spiritual conversation is an essential tool to help groups and communities lead a discerning life, attuned to the promptings of the Holy Spirit
- Allows to promote and respect diversity while strengthening communion
- Allows the Spirit to build us into one body, the body of Christ
- Brings about and witnesses to the presence of the Kingdom in our midst



## 4. Questions?



# Blessings on your spiritual conversations!

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