

## Parish Meeting November 2024 –

### Conversations in the Spirit

#### **In October 2023 Pope Francis convened a Synod in Rome.**

Catholic bishops, priests, lay men and women from all over the world gathered in Rome to discuss “synodality”; the way in which ALL members of the church, can participate in the life of the church and its mission.

The Synod provided a space for mutual listening, where the various voices of the Church could be expressed and heard, traditional, liberal, those at the center and those at the margins, and those who have felt alienated, and so try to prayerfully discern the direction in which the church (us) is being led by the Holy Spirit.

The method that facilitated these potentially contentious discussions in Rome is Conversation In the Spirit. It’s not a new method of conversation and discernment. It has in fact been around since the beginnings of the Church and is being re-discovered as a useful way of exploring, discussing, discerning God’s will for us, and decision making at all levels of the Church, including parish life.

The thing that makes this method different to normal everyday discussions is that much greater emphasis is put on mutual listening, listening to one another; so when we are listening, we are asked to set aside our own agenda and respectfully listen to the other’s viewpoint, plus time is allocated for listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit, i.e. discernment.

So how does it work?

Conversations in the Spirit start by composing an open, specific question that we would like to discern about.

For example, how can our parish be more missionary? Or as a diocese, how do we create more unity among our parishes? We used this method in the Wednesday Bible Sharing Group and our question was – How is this group deepening your faith experience?

It is useful to let the group participants see the question beforehand to give individuals time to prayerfully reflect and consider what they feel God is saying to them about the question being discerned.

When the group come together the meeting begins with prayer, not just a quick prayer, but a time for quiet reflection on a piece of scripture using the ancient prayer practice of Lectio Divina. This helps us to move from the busyness of the day into stillness and a holy space. It gives us time to come into the presence of God, and it serves to remind us that we are gathered together as the Body of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to seek God’s guidance.

Then the first round of sharing begins. Each person has the opportunity to share their response to the question being discerned. (Usually two minutes each.) During this first round of sharing, each person has his or her own turn to speak without being interrupted by any other member of the group.

Once everyone has shared, there is a short time of silence so that what others have said can resonate with us.

Then the 2<sup>nd</sup> time of sharing begins. Each person has the opportunity to briefly respond to what struck him or her about what others shared in the first round. Again there is no discussion, interruptions or comments from others.

Then there is another time of silence; time to listen in our hearts to what has been shared in this second round.

Finally, the last stage of the Conversation in the Spirit begins. This is a freer exchange of what has emerged, in order to discern and gather together the fruits of the conversation. We recognize points of commonality as well as differences between us. We try to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to us as a group so that we can move forward in a common direction. We ask ourselves: *“What steps is the Holy Spirit calling us to take together?”*. And finally, we conclude with a prayer.

Conversation In the Spirit is a method of Spiritual Conversation that can be adapted to different contexts. It can be used in large and small groups. It can be extremely helpful where there is a decision to be made (practical as well as spiritual); when a group or parish is facing tension, conflict or disagreement; for evaluation purposes or when a group is unsure of its identity or how to move forward. Actually it can be used pretty much in any context; faith sharing groups, finance groups, youth groups, leadership groups, Social Action groups, even Parish Councils, are all contexts in which this method is already being used.

It is an excellent tool to ground any conversation in the Spirit, open us to new voices and possibilities, and move us to action when appropriate.

Jackie and I both attended online training in this method this year. So if anyone feels that their group might benefit from using this method please don't hesitate to talk to us. If anyone is interested in learning more about the method, or perhaps would like to train in its use, information can be found on the School for Synodality website.

<https://www.schoolforsynodality.org.uk>