

SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION AS THE PRACTICE OF REVELATION

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Spiritual Conversation

A SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION is not a debate, a competition or a discussion about intellectual matters. Nor is it the practice of some Christian denominations and sects, whose members go out on the street or from door to door to speak to people about Jesus, salvation, hell and so on. What we share in spiritual conversation are personal experiences. Spiritual conversation is the practice of finding God in those experiences while paying attention to our emotions, desires and dreams. Deep listening and storytelling are particular features of a spiritual conversation.

The speaker is talking primarily about the experience of God in his or her life. The listener must listen attentively without criticizing or making moral judgments about the value and experiences of the speaker. The listener welcomes the speaker's words as an expression of the Holy Spirit, regardless of who is speaking. Simply listening requires humility. In order to hear what is being said, those who listen should avoid dwelling on their own thoughts.

Spiritual conversation implies an ongoing conversion towards God's love, towards love of neighbour and towards the demands of peace and justice. It is a teaching and learning activity, about how to live and how to die. Its aim is to analyze our present way of life and to change whatever is necessary in order for ourselves and others to live a better life. In spiritual conversation, it is important to pay attention both to what is said and what is omitted, and to verbal and nonverbal (for example, bodily) cues. Moments of silence are important; however, the two major activities of spiritual conversation are deep listening and storytelling.

Deep Listening

Deep listening is being aware of and in tune with the presence of God in our midst. It requires the flexibility to break out of any preselected structure in order to follow the inner voice of the soul (the Holy Spirit) within the conversation. It is important to cultivate and use this skill not only when conversing spiritually but in every moment of one's life. Life itself can then evolve into a spiritual conversation.

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In an essay on spiritual conversation and social justice, Peter Bisson explores spiritual conversation as a basic practice of Ignatian mission, as a constituent of communal discernment and as an instrument of social justice.¹ Bisson explains that the central element in spiritual conversation is listening actively, which means not only listening to the words but also to what people mean, listening to the person. In spiritual conversation, moreover, 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.

'Movements of the spirit' is an Ignatian expression that refers to the data that inform us how God works in each of us.² Movements are the deep desires of the soul. God speaks to us through these desires, opening the path to which God invites us. Hans Zollner explains that, according to Ignatius (Exx 313), the movements are inner sensations, of a very diverse character, that 'arise quite spontaneously, i.e. feelings and thoughts, likes and dislikes towards intentions, things, persons, institutions'.³ Perceiving these movements is a skill that must be developed and nurtured. This corresponds to the faculty of self-observation and reflection, not with an analytical or evaluative look, but with a serene and discreet perception of what happens.

¹ Peter Bisson, 'Conversación espiritual y justicia social', *Revista de Espiritualidad Ignaciana*, 123 (2010), 66–74.

² Bisson, 'Conversación espiritual y justicia social', 66, 68.

³ Hans Zollner, 'Making Life-Decisions according to the Ignatian Method of Discernment (Criteria)', *Review of Ignatian Spirituality (CIS)*, 110 (8 November 2005), available at <http://www.sjweb.info/documents/cis/pdfenglish/200511008en.pdf>, accessed 16 February 2016.

In order to share in spiritual conversation, it is helpful to be able to articulate sufficiently what happens in the inner self. What is important is not a powerful intellect and brilliant language, but a simple and immediate perception of what is happening and the ability to express it. The movements experienced are the material of the conversation; based on them, the spirits can be discerned. Why is the perception of these movements so important for Ignatius? Because God cannot be found except through those things and in those things that people feel and live.

The movements that arise from the good spirit, or movements of the Holy Spirit, are accompanied by spiritual consolation (Exx 316). Some signs of consolation are: love of God and neighbour; tranquility and peace; inner joy; increased desire to live a life dedicated to the common good; and feeling close to God even in difficult times, such as amid sadness and loss. There are also, according to Ignatius, motions of the evil spirit. These are called temptations, or deception. Sometimes they are accompanied by what Ignatius calls false comfort, a kind of fraudulent excitement, overstress, overenthusiasm or obsession. At other times, the movement of the evil spirit causes desolation, lack of inspiration, anxiety, egoism, individualism, restlessness, agitations and temptations. Being in desolation is feeling hopeless, unloved, lazy, tepid and sad—feeling as if separated from God (Exx 317).

The good spirit brings ‘courage and strength, consolations and quiet’, while the evil spirit arrives ‘to harass, sadden and obstruct, and to disturb with false reasoning’ (Exx 315). In spiritual conversation, it is important to pay attention to outward signs from the participants in order to discern in which state they are—consolation or desolation—at the moment of the conversation. Ignatius urges us to struggle against desolation. A person in consolation is a person qualified to make wise decisions in the light of God’s love and not because of selfish desires. Paying attention to external signs and the emotions of the participants is an important characteristic of deep listening.

We have the tendency to speak at moments when we should listen. Listening patiently is difficult. It is much easier to pretend to be an expert and give advice—which, unfortunately, is what most ‘leaders’ do, using their lack of time or patience as an excuse. When we listen deeply, we open our hearts to one another. Listening with the heart is the apex of learning. We assume the role of teacher and learner at the same time.

Storytelling

In addition to deep listening, storytelling is an inherent part of spiritual conversation. We form our lives and give them meaning by sharing our different cultural, personal, communal, familial and faith stories. At the same time, we are formed by the stories that we have heard from our parents, at school, in our faith communities and from our friends. These stories offer us insights into the world and into individual civilisations, because they have formed the meaning of civilisation and the world for us. Stephen Crites, in 'The Narrative Quality of Experience', refers to such stories as 'religious'—not because their content is overtly religious in subject matter, but because the underlying truths expressed in them are profound enough that the stories are perceived as more than just stories. The worlds created in them can be so fundamentally true that not only do their characters live in them, but readers or hearers can also see their own lives there, even to the point of being influenced in real life by the imaginative experiences expressed in the stories.⁴

For William Bausch there are four types of personal stories that can be considered religious, even when the content is not explicitly so: stories that signify self-discovery, stories that reveal life's mystery, stories that signify mystical experience and stories that signify a conversion experience.⁵ Bausch identifies the following characteristics of story: uniting us with nature, linking us with our roots and culture, binding us to all of humankind ('every story is our story'),⁶ helping us remember, using a special language, restoring the power of words, providing escape, evoking 'right-brain' imagination, promoting healing, providing a basis for hope and morality, and serving as the basis for ministry. He writes: 'Stories, even the biblical stories, are mythological and inherently imaginative in that they point to much more than meets the eye; they are out to elicit a response from both the head and the heart'.⁷ They are especially important for children; since children cannot always express themselves in abstract ways, stories are the perfect means for them to express emotions and feelings, and cope with the world around them.⁸

⁴ See Stephen Crites, 'The Narrative Quality of Experience', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39 (1971), 295.

⁵ William J. Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton: Clear Faith, 2015), 193.

⁶ Bausch, *Storytelling*, 58.

⁷ Bausch, *Storytelling*, 124.

⁸ Bausch, *Storytelling*, 47.



In *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*, John Dominic Crossan examines how stories play an integral role in defining our lives. Story defines our relation to the world around us: ‘so that we live as human beings in, and only in, layers upon layers of interwoven story’.⁹ It presents a text of our lives that can be told, listened to and retold. Different moments of experience are connected in our stories. Diverse classes of stories function in different ways, but all stories work to form or transform how people perceive the world.

In spiritual conversation, personal stories are shared and personal narrative is analyzed within a social and religious context. The fact that the narrative may be personal does not mean that the result is restricted to the individual, however. The effect is positive on several levels—individual, communal and social. Through spiritual conversation, we enter into an intimate relationship with God. In this connection the need to serve others arises. The stories shared and analyzed in a spiritual conversation may be personal and individual, or they may be the stories of a group or community. However, whatever kind of story is shared, the goal is always the same: to find God in the story, to identify what God is saying and to respond in a responsible manner. This last denotes the apostolic dimension of spiritual conversation.

⁹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles: Argus Communications, 1975), 9.

Thus, spiritual conversation helps us to find God in both personal and communal stories. God speaks to us in our stories and we recognise God's voice when sharing and listen contemplatively to them. From this arise the following assertions: (1) God is revealed consistently in everyday life; (2) it is possible to find God in life experiences; (3) spiritual conversation makes it possible to detect the presence and action of God in the stories shared; and (4) this, in turn, helps us to discern and take responsible actions in accordance with the divine-human encounter that takes place within the conversation. This raises the key religious question at the centre of the Abrahamic traditions, namely, revelation. I would like to propose here that spiritual conversation is the practice of revelation. For this insight, we turn to the work of the theologian Gabriel Moran.

The Meaning of Revelation

Gabriel Moran

According to Moran, there are two ways to understand revelation. The first sees it as a set of truths from the past that are the exclusive possession of a group. In the second it is the participation of present-day people in revelatory experience. Moran advocates the latter understanding.¹⁰ He explains revelation as a relational process, a mutual contact, a genuine reciprocal encounter between one active existence and another. He writes that revelation is 'a standing open to all knowledge and to silences beyond knowledge a process that is from and for a community of persons'. He adds, '*experience* is the best available noun ... to follow the words *revelational* and *revelatory*'.¹¹ 'Revelation', for Moran, 'can be a knowing experience; it can also be a loving experience, a feeling experience, a suffering experience, and many other kinds of experience'. Since God is present in every life experience, participants in spiritual conversation share and analyze these experiences in order to find God in them. Revelatory experiences, Moran asserts, orientate the life of those who participate in them.¹²

This understanding of revelation does not deny the uniqueness of any religion or sacred tradition. Although truths are articulated in different

¹⁰ Gabriel Moran, *Uniqueness: Problem or Paradox in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 46.

¹¹ Moran, *Uniqueness*, 51.

¹² Moran, *Uniqueness*, 52.

ways by different religions and traditions, understanding revelation as a human universal lessens the competitive spirit to which the first way of understanding revelation can give rise. Moran writes:

Other people's experience is not viewed as a threat, although realistically there can be some feeling of competitiveness. One can learn something from other people, even though their particular articulations of truth may seem foreign and sometimes bizarre.¹³

In *Believing in a Revealing God*, Moran analyzes the meaning of revelation in the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church by examining the Bible, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and documents from different ecclesial councils as well as essays and works by theologians such as Joseph Ratzinger (now pontiff emeritus Benedict XVI). He explains that the meaning of revelation must be understood along with the meaning of 'believing in'. Belief and revelation cannot be understood separately, but only as a relationship composed of two actions. Moran asserts that "believing in" only makes sense in its relation to "a revealing God".¹⁴

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Moran observes,

God addresses, invites, and receives human beings: their response is faith. The addressing is called 'revelation' and the human act of responding is 'faith'. Unfortunately, there are many other passages that subvert this clear, compact statement of humans believing in a God who reveals. Revelation is regularly referred to as a thing from the past that is preserved in documents and handed on by church officials, and 'faith' is often used interchangeably with that meaning of revelation.¹⁵

The 'great mystics' of the Christian and Jewish religions, he notes elsewhere, shared the understanding of revelation as a relational process of listening–speaking, as 'a daily act, the experience of the presence of God'. This understanding does not deny in any way the importance of the sacred texts.¹⁶ After all, believers may find revelation in the life experiences detailed within scriptural narratives. However, revelation is not limited to

¹³ Moran, *Uniqueness*, 46.

¹⁴ Gabriel Moran, *Believing in a Revealing God: The Basis of the Christian Life* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2009), 15.

¹⁵ Moran, *Believing in a Revealing God*, 16.

¹⁶ Moran, *Uniqueness*, 54.

sacred texts. Revelation does not have a historical end; it is a continuous process. In the same way, revelation is not limited to a particular place, community or individual.¹⁷ It can be experienced in different contexts, whether behind the walls of our own religious tradition or beyond those walls.

Revelation and faith form the relationship between God's call and the human response to that call. They are the teaching-learning activity between the divine and the human. Potentially, this activity takes place everywhere. However, it is not an automatic activity. We must develop the ability to listen to God speaking through our life experiences and then respond responsibly to God's call. All human beings are born with the capacity to listen to God in life experiences. Whether they use or ignore that capacity depends on the attitude they have towards the world, and this attitude in turn determines the relationship they have with the world.

Martin Buber

In *I and Thou*, Martin Buber explains that, for humans, the world has two aspects in accordance with two different attitudes they may adopt towards it. These attitudes are explained by Buber using two 'primary words': *I-Thou* and *I-It* (in which *He* or *She* may replace *It*). Hence, Buber notes, 'I' is twofold. The *I* in *I-Thou* is different from *I* in *I-It*.¹⁸ The primary words indicate relationships. When we say 'Thou', we are also saying *I* from the pair *I-Thou*. When we say 'It', we are saying *I* from the pair *I-It*. *I* does not exist in isolation; it only exists in a relationship. We are relational beings. I am *I* from *I-Thou* or *I* from *I-It*. Moreover, pronouncing the primary words indicates existence: being *I* and saying *I* are the same thing.¹⁹

Perceiving, experiencing, imagining and desiring (among other processes) do not constitute human life. They give substance to the realm of *It*. 'But the realm of *Thou* has a different basis': the primary word *I-Thou* establishes the world of relationship.²⁰ There are three spheres where this relational world arises. The first one is our life in relation to nature. This relationship is below the verbal level. One can say *Thou* to the creatures, but they cannot say *Thou* in return. The second sphere is our life with other people. Relationship in this sphere manifests itself in language;

¹⁷ Moran, *Uniqueness*, 56.

¹⁸ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner, 2004 [1937]), 19.

¹⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 19–20.

²⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 20.

‘we can give and accept the *Thou*’. The third sphere is communication with spiritual beings. This communication is shrouded in clouds, but revealed little by little. It is muted, but still has a voice: ‘We perceive no *Thou*, but none the less we feel we are addressed and we answer—forming, thinking, acting. We speak the primary word with our being, though we cannot utter *Thou* with our lips.’²¹ The *Thou* in each of the three spheres invokes ‘the eternal *Thou*’.²² In other words, in all three spheres there is an *I-Thou* relationship that fosters revelation.

To understand the two attitudes of humans towards the world, Buber presents two different ways we can relate to a tree. First, we can consider it as an object. In this case the relation we have with the tree is a subject–object relationship, that is, *I-It*. But it can also happen that, by choice or by the inspiration of grace, we enter into relationship with the tree. Then the tree ceases to be an *It*. We have been ‘seized by the power of exclusiveness’, by the unique singularity of this particular tree, and the tree becomes a *Thou*. In the same way, it is possible to treat humans as objects. Buber’s explanation of love clarifies the difference between treating a person as an *It* and treating a person as a *Thou*.²³



²¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 21–22.

²² Buber, *I and Thou*, 22.

²³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 22–23.

Love, according to Buber, is between *I* and *Thou*. Love is a cosmic action. For those who dwell in love and contemplate love, all human beings, good and bad, wise and foolish, beautiful and ugly, become real before their eyes. All human beings become *Thou*—in other words, liberated beings, determinate, unique—‘set free they step forth in their singleness, and confront [us] as *Thou*’. The kind of love in an *I-Thou* relationship allows us to help, heal, educate, uplift, liberate. ‘Love is responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*.’ Herein lies the equality between those who love, and the meaning of loving one’s neighbour.²⁴ *I-Thou* relationships manifest the eternal *Thou*, the Divine. We can say, then, that an *I-Thou* relationship between a person and the world is revelatory because in such relationships the eternal *Thou* is made manifest.

The Practice of Revelation

Is the practice of spiritual conversation a way of developing the ability to listen and respond to God speaking in everyday life experiences? In Gabriel Moran’s terms, if faith-revelation involves listening and responding to a self-revealing God through human experience, can we say that spiritual conversation is an activity of faith-revelation? Is spiritual conversation an activity that allows us to believe in a revealing God? Does it help us to form what Buber would call an *I-Thou* relationship with the world and, through it, with God?

If revelation is a process of relationship, as both theologians affirm in different ways, then spiritual conversation is indeed a practice of revelation. Conversely, what determines a conversation as spiritual is the revelatory activity within that conversation. The meaning of revelation as a human universal is at the core of this proposal. The connection seems clear. Faith, understood as the human response to a self-revealing God in all life experience, is precisely the intent of spiritual conversation.

God can be found in all things. God is revealed in our experiences, which take their meaning from the stories we create. In spiritual conversation, we share and analyze these stories in order to find God in them (revelation) and to respond to God’s presence, love and work in our lives (faith). In other words, by means of spiritual conversation, we practise believing in a self-revealing God. Revelation produces a closer intimacy

²⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 28–29.



with God, which transforms the way we live in relation to others (humans, other creatures and the natural environment).

This understanding of revelation implies that God offers revelatory opportunities to all in the same measure. However, whether or not these opportunities actually turn out to be revelatory depends on the human response. Hence we have to live with ‘revelatory eyes’ and ‘revelatory ears’, which means living a contemplative and spiritual life. Spiritual conversation draws us into religious experience. Gabriel Moran describes this as the process of ‘going beyond’ or ‘going deep within’ our everyday experiences. The ordinary (the mundane) and the non-ordinary (the sacred) are not in competition. The non-ordinary is found in the ordinary. We find God in the process of ‘going deeper within’ the ordinary. Spiritual conversation helps ‘to plumb the depths of the ordinary’.²⁵

Spiritual conversation is intended to listen to the movements of the spirit in everyday life. This is done, not out of curiosity but in order to respond, in a responsible manner, to God’s call, presence and action. Spiritual conversation helps us discern who we are and what place God has in our lives; it enables us to experience affective conversion through increased attentiveness to feelings, emotions, desires and resistances within its narrative; and it assists us to cultivate the ability to make

²⁵ Gabriel Moran, *Education toward Adulthood* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 58–59, 79.

good decisions for individual, familial, communal and social well-being. For spiritual conversation, in strengthening the divine-human relationship, frees us to live a life of peace and love in the service of others. The apostolic dimension of spiritual conversation is our response to the God being revealed our stories. This response is faith, and implies a gradual conversion towards God shown in acts of compassion, kindness and solidarity with ourselves and others.

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