

Take THE Way OF THE Gospel

RE-IMAGINING OUR LOCAL CHURCH
AS MISSION COMMUNITIES

**USING SPIRITUAL
CONVERSATIONS FOR
PARISH DISCERNMENT**



CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE
OF MELBOURNE



USING SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS FOR PARISH DISCERNMENT

The practice of spiritual conversation integrates active listening, intentional speaking, moments of silence and respect for each participant's input. It can transform the way we listen to the Spirit moving in and through our parish as we pray and discern together.

This resource aims to assist you to facilitate spiritual conversations and discernment in your parish community.

IT CONTAINS:

- background information about the origins and practice of imaginative contemplation and spiritual conversation
- a clear outline of the steps involved
- **Introduction to the Spiritual Conversation Process**, an explanatory video for facilitators from Fr Robin Koning SJ, which explains the steps of Spiritual Conversation
- scripts for leading others into prayer using imaginative contemplation and a **video contemplation** your group can use as needed
- website links for further exploration.

BACKGROUND

The 'Take the Way of the Gospel' journey that the Church in Melbourne is embarking on requires us to open our minds and hearts to the Spirit and to each other. When we undertake communal prayer, we enhance our receptiveness to God and our capacity for discernment.

You might like to begin by facilitating an initial spiritual conversation with a small group of people in your community, using these resources. This group could then serve as facilitators and timekeepers in future spiritual conversations among your people.

The process of spiritual conversation—used so effectively in the Plenary discernment sessions—may also be used for other significant discernment in your parish such as deciding upon a pastoral initiative. As we discern our way forward as the Catholic Church in Melbourne, may we attune ourselves to the movement of the Spirit—in each person and as the Body of Christ.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

The method outlined below may be used for both faith-sharing and for group decision-making. It begins with brief introduction to the discernment process. Then there is a time of prayer. A guided scriptural contemplation is suggested; though other forms of personal reflection can be used. Small groups of four or five people, each led by a facilitator/timekeeper, then engage in a brief period of silent reflection and three rounds of conversation. The process ends with the larger group coming together again to reflect on the experience and report on what they have heard or discerned.

Introduction to the Spiritual Conversation Process, a video featuring Fr Robin Koning SJ, has been produced to assist facilitators to understand and lead this process.

Step 1: Welcome and brief introduction to the process

5 MINS

During the welcome, the leader:

- welcomes the group and explains that we engage in imaginative contemplation and spiritual conversation to strengthen and deepen the bonds of community, and to share deeply with vulnerability and great respect for ourselves and each other
- briefly outlines the process for the group
- asks people to silently reflect on their own lives in this place at this time (if the process is being used for *prayer and faith-sharing*)
- briefly introduces any question or issue for discernment (if the process is being used for *group discernment*).

Step 2: Guided imaginative gospel contemplation

10–15 MINS

Spiritual conversation begins with a significant time for each participant to engage in personal prayer with scripture. One suggested option is to begin with imaginative contemplation, a form of prayer made popular through the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola. However, some groups may prefer to utilise other forms of praying with scripture – in front of the blessed sacrament, a time of quiet music, a walking prayer, or providing personal questions for prayer.

To assist you in the spiritual conversation method, you might like to use one of the following resources (which can be found at the end of this document):

- Script 1: **'Jesus washes the disciples' feet'** (John 13:4–15)
- Script 2: **'Pentecost'** (Acts 2:1–4)
- Video: **'Jesus walking on the water'** (Matthew 14:22–33), by Fr Robin Koning SJ.

Alternatively, you can choose your own passage—usually a gospel passage that includes Jesus speaking with others. The leader reads the passage once, allows a period of silence and then, as he or she begins to read the passage a second time, invites those present to 'enter into the scene'. For example: *'As you enter the story, picture the scene before you in your mind. Look around. What do you notice? What can you see? hear? smell?'*

The leader should tell the story slowly, with appropriate pauses, so that each person may experience the scene and hear the words of Jesus for him or herself.



THE SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION PROCESS

Step 3: Spiritual conversation in groups of four or five

25–30 MINS

The larger group then breaks into smaller groups of four or five people, each led by someone acting as facilitator and timekeeper, who can either participate in the conversation themselves or not.

During this stage, each group undertakes three rounds of spiritual conversation—a process of active listening, intentional speaking and being attentive to the movement of the Spirit. More information is provided below.

Round 1

2 MINS PER PARTICIPANT

The process begins with a round of personal sharing on ‘the fruit of my prayer’.

Begin with a time of quiet prayer (about 1–2 minutes) in which participants recollect their experience of the guided contemplation, asking themselves: **What were the main movements, modes, feelings and/or insights in my prayer time?**

After the time of quiet prayer, each person shares with the group, beginning with ‘**In my prayer, I ...**’

During this conversation, participants practise active listening and intentional speaking.

Active listening:

- involves a profound welcome of the other
- asks, ‘How is the Holy Spirit speaking to me and to us through the other person?’
- asks, ‘How am I affected by what is said?’

Intentional speaking:

- involves speaking from *my* prayer (not from someone else’s)
- avoids story-telling
- shares from the heart.

A few practical matters:

- Speak one after the other, moving clockwise around the group. For online groups, the facilitator can direct the order of speakers.
- Each speaker is timed and should not go for longer than 2 minutes.
- There are no comments or crosstalk, even in one’s own sharing. This is not an opportunity for discussion.

Round 2

2 MINS PER PARTICIPANT

This is where the communal movements of spirits start to emerge.

Before sharing, allow a minute or two to reflect quietly on the question: **‘How was I affected interiorly by what I heard in the first round?’**

After reflecting quietly, each person shares with the group, beginning with ‘**In the group, I heard ...**’ or ‘**I was moved by ...**’

Some prompts might include, for example:

- What did you hear in the first round?
- Were you struck by a common theme or one comment?
- Did you experience harmony or dissonance with the others as they shared?
- What are you feeling now?

Some practical matters:

- This is a short intervention—be disciplined and intentional in speaking.
- There is no particular order of speakers.
- Speak only once. No crosstalk.
- This is not a chance to say something you forgot to say in the first round.
- Each speaker is timed and should not speak for longer than 2 or 3 minutes.

Round 3

1 MIN PER PARTICIPANT

This is an opportunity to discern together the main themes and discernment of the conversation.

Again, allow a minute or two of quiet reflection before beginning the conversation.

Open the group to a time of discussion, asking them to:

- name the spiritual movements that were recognised in the second round of conversation
- keep the same attentiveness and sincerity of the previous rounds
- keep their contributions to about a minute each.

If there is a particular question to be considered or an opportunity to give feedback to the larger group, this is when a communal response may be formulated.

Conclude the time of small-group spiritual conversation with a ‘Glory be’.

Step 4: Large group reflection and reporting back

All participants return to the large group.

If this process has been used for *prayer and faith-sharing*, the leader invites those present to reflect on their prayer and conversation and what they have heard from the Holy Spirit and each other.

If this process has been used to discern about a particular decision or issue, the leader encourages participants to report on what they have heard and how they feel the Holy Spirit is leading the group to respond to the particular issue being discerned.



SCRIPTS AND RESOURCES FOR LEADING IMAGINATIVE CONTEMPLATION

Script 1: Jesus washes the disciples' feet

John 13:4–9, 12–15, RNJB

As we enter into this time of imaginative-contemplation prayer, you are invited to listen to the gospel story as I read it the first time. We will pause, and then you are invited to enter into the story personally as we listen to the gospel again.

We begin: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

We take a moment to become aware of our breath as it moves in and out of our body.

(15 secs)

As I breathe in, I breathe in the Spirit, the breath of God.

(15 secs)

As I breathe out, I breathe out any stress or worry. I place these into God's hands.

(15 secs)

I place my desire before God: that I may know Jesus more intimately; that I may love him more deeply and follow him more closely.

(15 secs)

Jesus got up from the table, removed his outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; he then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel wrapped round his waist.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?'

Jesus answered, 'At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.'

Peter said, 'You shall never wash my feet.'

Jesus replied, 'If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.'

Simon Peter said, 'Lord, not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well!'

When he had washed their feet he put on his outer garments and reclined again at the table. He said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly, for so I am. If I, then, the Teacher and Lord, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you an example so that as I have done to you, you also should do ...'

Our imagination is a gift from God. The Holy Spirit leads our prayer. You are invited to be a part of the story. In your mind's eye, I invite you now to place yourself physically in the scene.

(Read slowly and contemplatively.)

Imagine the room where the disciples are gathered with Jesus.

(Pause, 10 secs)

Who is here with you? What is in the room?

(Pause, 10 secs)

We are gathered to celebrate the Passover.

What can you hear? What can you smell?

(Pause, 10 secs)

What is the mood, the atmosphere?

(Pause, 30 secs)

Unexpectedly, Jesus ... gets up from the table, and removes his outer garments.

He takes a towel and wraps it round his waist.

He pours water into a basin

and begins to wash the disciples' feet

and to wipe them with the towel wrapped round his waist.

(Pause, 1 min)

Jesus moves around the room.

(Pause, 30 secs)

Where are you located? Who are you in the scene?

(Pause, 30 secs)

What are you doing, thinking, feeling?

(Pause, 30 secs)

Watch as Jesus comes to Simon Peter.

Simon Peter asks him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?'

(Pause, 30 secs)

Jesus answers, 'At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.'

Peter responds, 'You shall never wash my feet.'

Jesus replies, 'If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.'

Simon Peter says, 'Lord, not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well!'

How do you feel about this exchange between Simon Peter and Jesus?

(Pause, 30 secs)

When Jesus is finished washing all the feet, he puts on his outer garments and reclines again at the table.

He asks, 'Do you know what I have done to you?'

(Pause, 30 secs)

'You call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly, for so I am.

If I, then, the Teacher and Lord, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

I have given you an example so that as I have done to you, you also should do.'

(Pause, 30 secs)

What might you say to Jesus?

(Pause, 1 min)

When you are ready, return here, to this place.

We finish our prayer:

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Script 2: Pentecost—the coming of the Holy Spirit

Acts 2:1–4, RNJB

As we enter into this time of imaginative-contemplation prayer, you are invited to listen to the gospel story as I read it the first time. We will pause, and then you are invited to enter into the story personally as we listen to the gospel again.

We begin: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

We take a moment to become aware of our breath as it moves in and out of our body.

(15 secs)

As I breathe in, I breathe in the Spirit, the breath of God.

(15 secs)

As I breathe out, I breathe out any stress or worry. I place these into God's hands.

(15 secs)

I place my desire before God: that I may know Jesus more intimately; that I may love him more deeply and follow him more closely.

(15 secs)

When Pentecost day had come, they were all together, when suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of a rushing wind, filling the entire house in which they were sitting; and there appeared to them tongues as of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak different languages as the Spirit gave them power to express themselves.

Our imagination is a gift from God. The Holy Spirit leads our prayer. You are invited to be a part of the story. In your mind's eye, I invite you now to place yourself physically in the scene.

(Read slowly and contemplatively.)

Jesus has been taken from their sight on the Mount of Olives. A group of his disciples—both men and women—are gathered in the Upper Room, praying and waiting to know what to do now that they don't have Jesus present with them.

Imagine the room where they are gathered.

(Pause, 20 secs)

Who is here with you? What is in the room?

(Pause, 10 secs)

We are gathered to celebrate the Jewish feast of Pentecost. What can you hear? What can you smell?

(Pause, 10 secs)

What is the mood, the atmosphere?

(Pause, 10 secs)

When Pentecost day had come, they were all together, when suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of a rushing wind, filling the entire house in which they were sitting;

(Pause, 30 secs)

What does the wind feel like? Sound like?

How do you feel?

(Pause, 30 secs)

and there appeared to them tongues as of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them.

(Pause, 30 secs)

What do you see? What do you feel?

(Pause, 30 secs)

They were all filled with the Holy Spirit

(Pause, 30 secs)

and began to speak different languages as the Spirit gave them power to express themselves.

(Pause, 30 secs)

What do you hear? What do you say?
(Pause, 30 secs)

Would you like to speak to Jesus?
(Pause, 30 secs)

When you are ready, return here, to this place.

We finish our prayer:

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

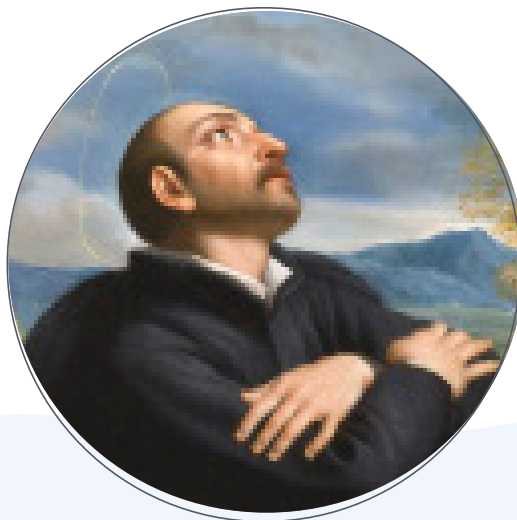
Video: 'Jesus walking on the water'
Matthew 14:22-33

This **video** features Fr Robin Koning SJ, as he guides viewers through a process of imaginative contemplation focusing on the story in the Gospel of Matthew of Jesus walking on the water. It can be used by groups during Step 2 of the spiritual conversation process, or as a model for those interested in guiding imaginative contemplation themselves. It runs for about 15 minutes.



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

For further exploration about the process and application of discernment and spiritual conversation the **Plenary Council website** contains a number of video and written resources.



Ignatius gave guidelines to those engaging in spiritual conversation. Don't take sides, he said. Be considerate and kind, listen so to understand well the other person, and then be slow to speak. And like anything else, our spiritual conversation should be about glorifying God. How often do we use this basic human tool in our faith lives? We've all heard of 'idle talk' (like gossip), that which does no benefit to anyone, let alone glorify God. Spiritual conversation, on the other hand, is about adding a new dimension of relationship and intimacy to our spiritual lives.

'SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION', IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY WEBSITE

Read more about Take the Way of the Gospel:
www.melbournecatholic.org/mission