



## Holy Conversation

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We all know the value of good communication but have we ever considered the development of communication skills as an exercise in virtue? Do we realize that engaging in sincere conversation can be a holy endeavor?

My eyes were opened to this spiritual truth during last summer's Quinquennial Congress. I was fully prepared for Rev. Eric Law to present some practical tools for good communication, but I was delighted when he placed his presentation within a Christian and Franciscan context. I should not have been surprised. Are we not called to "go from Gospel to life and from life to the Gospel?" In our conversations, as in all of life, we seek to grow in virtue. As we become aware of the spiritual nature of communication we can move from discussion or dialogue to what I call, "*Holy Conversation*."

Good conversation involves both listening and speaking. By contrast, Holy Conversation involves listening in love and speaking in truth (witnessing). Love and truth are key virtues in Holy Conversation, and both are necessary. There can be no real and lasting love without truth, for truth is the structure of love. By the same token, love gives one the courage to speak one's own truthfulness as well as to receive the other's truth. Jesus made mutual love for one another the highest imitation of himself. On the night before he died, Jesus told his followers: "Love one another, as I have loved you." (John 15:12) Shortly after this Jesus prayed to his Father for those same followers saying, "Father, dedicate them to yourself by means of the truth." (John 17:18)

Jesus made the sharing of truth the most profound dedication to the Father. This sharing in love and truth reflects the inner life of the Trinity – a Holy Unity of Persons. As we listen in love and witness in truth, we reflect this inner life of the Trinity. God's grace flows into our relationships. This is transformative. "If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow completely into Christ, who is the head." (Ephesians 4:15) Living the grace of Holy Conversation builds up our unity as believers and our unity in Christ.

How is this put into practice? As we engage in Holy Conversation, we let go of our own agenda, be-

come totally present to the other and listen with love. We listen to the whole person – the feelings, the expressions, sometimes even the silence – to the heart of the one who speaks. This kind of listening is redemptive and fosters growth. By listening we call the other into being. We satisfy the other's need to be heard and help them clarify their own perspectives. By listening we ourselves also experience growth. We learn and are encouraged. Can you see Christian love in action in this process?

In Holy Conversation we also speak. Dedicated to the truth, we speak this truth in love. As we witness to the truth we strengthen the faith of those listening. We share, too, our own personal feelings and experiences. We share courageously, knowing that in Holy Conversation what we say will be received in love. In this gentle and courteous exchange we find freedom, acceptance and joy in our common journey.

In many SFO fraternities, formation takes place within a context of conversation. Something is read or shared and then we talk about it. Have you experienced Holy Conversation in your fraternity gathering? Perhaps you can recall a time where everyone took turns listening and sharing, after which there was a wonderful sense of realizing the truth or seeing the truth in a new way. This is one of the fruits of Holy Conversation.

Times when the principles of Holy Conversation are not practiced, a discussion, which could be formative, can prove distressing. Imagine your fraternity members in a less than virtuous discussion. Even as the discussion begins there are those who are intent on making a point – they are not looking to be changed. They fortify their positions with facts and the debate goes back and forth, like a ping-pong ball. Sometimes the truth is sifted in an attempt to sway another to their side. Discussion like this can be competitive. It is motivated by concern for one's own view of the truth. Meanwhile some members are not even given the chance to speak. Many choose not to listen.

On the other hand, when we enter into Holy Conversation, we are open to learning something new. There is mutual respect between persons, as we acknowledge each other as equals. We stay curious about each other. We expect that, at times, our conversation might get messy or ambiguous. We slow down, so we have time to think and reflect. The goal is to share our thoughts, feelings, and experiences and to listen to those of others. We explore questions that matter. As we converse, we hold fast to the virtues of love and truth, and find opportunities

to exercise other virtues such as patience and forgiveness. The result is a Holy Conversation that is generative and transforming, as it develops a shared meaning that wasn't there before.

Good communication skills are vital to the work of formation within our fraternities. At our 2007 Quinquennial Congress, Rev. Eric Law presented to us some wonderful communication tools. I encourage all fraternities to investigate and utilize these tools, keeping in mind the Christian context in which they were presented.\* Franciscans are called to ongoing conversion. Holy Conversation will help us on that journey. Let us go forth together to listen in LOVE and witness in TRUTH.

All praise to Christ who is Truth! All honor and glory to God who is Love!

*\*Rev. Eric Law's "Respectful Communication Guidelines" and a description of "Mutual Invitation" can be found on the NAFRA website. Click on "Quinquennial Congress 2007" and then "Handouts from the Keynote talk on Wednesday."*