

SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION. A PRIVILEGED APOSTOLIC INSTRUMENT OF THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

1. Introduction

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Ignatian vocabulary is highly formalized. It obeys a peculiar expressive economy which tends to chisel its concepts with precision and sobriety. A review of the *Concordancia Ignaciana* of Ignacio Echarte, s.j.,¹ shows us that when a term appears very often it is because it is either one that is used commonly or because it obeys a particular expressive intentionality.

The terms “to converse” and “conversation” would be in this second group. They are used in the Ignatian literature with an unusual frequency: Altogether, the roots “converse” in its two forms (“conversa” and “conversa”) appear 39 times, and in his letters 316 times. No semantic coincidence would justify this repetition, especially considering that St. Ignatius rarely referred to conversation in generic terms or practiced it in an irreflexive or futile manner.

We are faced with a *typically Ignatian concept*, consciously chosen both in the foundational literature of the Society, as well as throughout the letters composed during the chronological period these cover. Besides, it represents a *technical term which implies an apostolic method essential to the Ignatian charism*.

2. Semantic Approximation: From Common Usage to the Technical Term

The present-day use of the infinitive “to converse” (*conversar* in Spanish) is more nonspecific than in the Castilian of the Golden Age. It is now synonymous with an encounter or a communication which is more or less direct between two or more persons.² Perhaps it could evoke

a thematic element, as it might imply a theme or an intention that gives meaning to the communication space co-created by those who are conversing: To converse *about...* Whereas, the synonym “to dialogue” highlights the back-and-forth nature of communication: To Dialogue *between...*

The dictionary of Sebastián De Covarrubias published in 1611 is the most useful instrument to get us close to the Castilian of the time of St. Ignatius. In it “converser” is defined as “to treat *urbanelly...* a *gentle* encounter... a communication between *friends...*” That is, it suggests a communication with a certain interpersonal quality. A close encounter, friendly, enjoying a certain level of intimacy.

The Diccionario De Autoridades of 1729 has it derived from the Latin *converser*. This etymology clarifies the convivial sense signaled by Covarrubias. Effectively, the medieval Latin word *conversor* had lost its original meaning of “to do business,” “to turn around” and has taken on a connotation of a deep relationship of sharing life itself (living together, having an intimate relationship or keeping company).³

To understand the Ignatian meaning of this term, both as a verb and as a noun, we can take as paradigmatic its use in the *Constitutions*. Ignatian terminology reaches its maximal level of formality in this work.

In conformity to its use at the time, *conversation* has without a doubt for Ignatius a connotation of depth of treatment, of a certainly familiarity and intimacy. It suggests an encounter among persons closely linked by family ties or affective affinities (*relatives* and *friends*),⁴ or the especially familiar way in which this type of relation takes place.⁵

In the process of admission of the candidate to the Society, Ignatius establishes a *first* probation which has an external character. It represents the first contact between the candidate and the Society, which takes place outside of community life as such. It is a brief transitional situation which lasts one or two weeks. In it the candidate has already left his former life and habitation, but has still not yet been incorporated completely into the life of the religious community. This admission, which signals the step to the long second probation beginning with the novitiate, Ignatius designates as the step “to live and associate with the others” (“conversar y cohabitar”).⁶ Conversation constitutes the essential core difference in the quality of the close and brotherly dealings of those who, besides living under the same roof, share life with a common purpose. Thus Ignatius refers to it when he desires to call attention to the invitation to a special closeness and authenticity within the community or with the formators. Or, on the contrary, when he recommends a pedagogical distancing from the affective universe which the candidate

is turning his back on, or with the necessity of not entering in confidences except with those who can most directly help him in the new road he is taking.

With all this, the frequency of the use of the term and its contextual homogeneity make it clear that it deserves to be seen as a specific technical term in the thought of Ignatius. He coins the expression *converser según nuestro instituto [to deal according to our Institute]*.⁷ This expression refers not only to a peculiar way of relating but also to a characteristic and essential dimension of the Society. In function of this Ignatius will establish particular requirements for the selection of candidates, for formation and for our way of proceeding, including the most external aspects *for the conversation that is required with neighbors in our Institute and way of life*.⁸

Already in the Spiritual Exercises, the author revealed traces of the anthropological and theological density of his knowledge of this so exquisitely human activity. In the second exercise of the first week, centered on the story of one's own sins, in order to help the retreatant

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verify his historical incoherence one is proposed a rule to help the memory which includes recalling *the locality or house where I lived, the associations [conversación] which I had with others, the occupation I was pursuing* [SpEx. 56]. The framework in which one's moral life is evaluated has a relational character. The theological life of the subject comes out in one's interpersonal relations. This is because the personality of the human subject or distinguishing element of his being is precisely this capacity for

relationships. Even more, of the three elements pointed out in this examination, the first and last are quite conventional, and point to the facts of the case. It is especially in the second, in the associations [conversación], where the relational quality of the subject is verified and where Christian maturity and morality are evidenced.

In the appendix of outlines for contemplating other mysteries of Christ which are proposed at the end of the Exercises, the 13th apparition

concludes with the broad summary of appearances described in 1 Cor 15:5-8. At the end, as a way of summarizing all the manifestations of the Risen One, he points out: *muchas vezes apareció a los discípulos, y conuersaua con ellos [he appeared to the disciples on many occasions, and discoursed with them]* [SpEx. 311]. After his resurrection Jesus returns to establish a cordial, intimate and direct relationship with his own. It is in precisely this immediate relational quality, which is universalized by the power of the Spirit that is the power *par excellence* of the salvific event, which will make the Lord Jesus the permanent companion of the disciples for all time.

3. The summaries of the Apostolic Action Proper to the Society of Jesus: The Pole of the Vis-à-Vis

When we say that *conuersación* is a technical Ignatian term, we are naturally referring to *spiritual* conversation. Writing to his brother Martín in 1532 he explains his complete dedication in Paris to study and to the apostolate with *estudios y muchas conuersaciones [with studies and many conversations]* quick to make clear the meaning of the latter: *mas no temporales [but not worldly]*.⁹ To clarify this he frequently uses the adjectives: pious, good, spiritual, edifying, proper... Except that, since for Ignatius any human association has an apostolic intentionality at its base, the term itself without an adjective comes to signify usually a type of relationship which will serve the growth of the interlocutors according to the Spirit of Christ.

It is well known that St. Ignatius uses a generic expression for the apostolic action of the members of the Society oriented at its subjects: *ayuda de las almas [help of souls]* or *ayuda de los prójimos [help of neighbors]*. According to the Formula of the Institute, the principal aim of the Society is “*the defense and propagation of the faith and for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine (...ad fidei defensionem et propagationem et profectum animarum in vita et doctrina Christiana, FI, 1.)* Following the typical Ignatian intellectual way of clarifying and establishing the respective pertinence of ends and means, he goes on to describe the repertory of apostolic activities proper to the Society. These are the specific apostolic

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*means which need to be privileged. These are, then, public preaching, lectures, and any other ministration whatsoever of the word of God, and further by means of the Spiritual Exercises, the education of children and unlettered persons in Christianity, and the spiritual consolation of Christ's faithful through hearing confessions and administering the other sacraments. Moreover, he should show himself ready to reconcile the estranged, compassionately assist and serve those who are in prisons or hospitals, and indeed to perform any other works of charity.*¹⁰

In the unfolding of these cited means one is able to perceive the integrating and complex character of St. Ignatius' interest in human flourishing. His goal is fundamentally spiritual, but not spiritualistic. It is the help of the entire person according to the spirit of the Lord who preached, cured and gave out food for people to eat.¹¹

A lot has been discussed on the interpretation of the apostolic end and of the ministries, characteristic of the Society according to the mentioned passage of the Formula, mainly about the weight that is given to the part introduced by the *nihilominus*. I maintain that Saint Ignatius doesn't formulate two ends, no matter how much the second one is considered co-substantial. The *forma mentis* of the author of the Principle and Foundation was given rather to the simple formulation of the end. It is in the width with which the apostolic means are described where the integrative and complete character of the apostolic end of the Society is apparent. It is an apostolic perspective that due to its radically evangelical character doesn't leave way to any reductionism: neither that of a spiritualist type nor that inclined to a mere social asistencialism. So much so that for Ignatius the selection of ministries more explicitly spiritual, carried out in function of other persons, must privilege the more disadvantaged.¹¹ And, in turn, the caring of the poor, touching directly the concrete form of their poverty (lack of goods, of health, of freedom...), should also see to it of offering them, when it is possible, spiritual help.¹²

Why doesn't Saint Ignatius mention in the Formula the help given to others through spiritual conversation? Wouldn't this be the logical thing to do according to his mentality on this apostolic means so many times attested by him? I dare give this reason: Since this was the first juridical document that synthetically defines, presents and approves the Institute of the Society, Ignatius consciously avoided the inclusion of an expression, extremely significant to him, but not very known in the descriptive canonical language of the diverse ministries.

Anyway it is clear that diverse elements of the "apostolic repertoire" of the Formula are in many passages linked to the exercise of conversation.

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Thus for example confession, the Exercises, direct relationships with persons asking for any of their needs, the ministry of reconciliation, etc...

With relative frequency we find in Ignatian literature what have come to be called "Summaries of the apostolic way of proceeding of the Society." They are summary indications of the ways characteristic of the Society in helping people. The Formula is the first of them. Later they appear in the Constitutions. For instance when they refer to scholastics saying that they should not take pastoral ministries which impede them their studies, in conversations, confessions and other activities with one's fellowmen (Const [362]).¹³

These allusions are plentiful in the Epistolario.¹⁴ Their purpose is multiple: to present the way of proceeding of the Society to externals, to exhort Jesuits to get engaged in ministries which are proper to them, to assure appropriate formation to exercise them, to give discernment rules for their application, to be attentive of the risks involved, etc... The following is mentioned:

- ~ Spiritual conversation;
- ~ The administration of the sacraments, especially confession and the Eucharist;
- ~ The practice of the Spiritual Exercises;
- ~ Preaching;
- ~ Theological teaching and catechesis;
- ~ Assisting the poor and needy, and mainly in prisons and hospitals.

That is to say, basically it is the same cast of apostolic means mentioned in the Formula, adding besides spiritual conversation. Surprisingly, this last means is the one most mentioned in these passages.

To get to know the Ignatian language it is of particular importance to follow those "doubles," that is, the binary groups of frequent synonyms. Spiritual conversation is frequently associated to confession and the spiritual exercises. In this way the summaries, in what concerns the method of the proposed means, can be divided into two poles: one more massive, social and public (preaching and lessons) and the other more directly personal (confessions, spiritual exercises and spiritual conversation).

The Ignatian vision of apostolic action of the Society would not allow any of these two big blocks exclusively. In continuity with the great late mediaeval founders and the ecclesiastic tradition, Ignatius insists on the importance of preaching. And this, mainly authenticated with one's own

life. He also insisted on the importance of doctrinal formation, in what concerns the apostle's own formation and in the quality of teaching when helping others. He himself was witness of the enormous ecclesiastic laceration error produces, and its devastating consequences for the same individual's health. From this perspective St. Ignatius was the cornet of an ecclesiastic reformation, holy and intelligent at the same time. Besides these considerations, the social dimension of the apostolic action of the Church, directly impact on the more diffusive and universal, this constituted a fundamental Ignatian approach regarding the selection of ministries.

From a historical perspective it could be affirmed that probably the biggest novelty in the Ignatian conception helping others, is to be found in the vis-à-vis thrust, in the pole of relationship of direct personal help.

In this pole the practice of conversation has a position of particular relevance for its more universal character and for its flexibility. Indeed it is the help that you have at hand and can give in all personal encounter. Besides it is the kind of relationship which adapts itself better to the effective capacity and disposition of the other. In this sense it contains a great variety of modalities. We could affirm that in the Ignatian perspective spiritual conversation summarizes the strengths of a personalized apostolic action.

4. The Apostolic Effectiveness of Spiritual Conversation

As proposed by Ignatius, conversation, in the perspective of a joint apostolic action, has both an introductory and a nuclear character. This double character though does not apply to the same persons at the same moment. It could be said that according to the ignatian charisma, conversation somehow is the door, but at the same time the culmination of apostolic action.

On one hand conversation is our first approach to the person to whom we desire all well. It is the indispensable way to get to the other's universe and thus reach a certain grade of personal knowledge. Starting from this knowledge one can give or suggest the best adequate help, or a relationship is installed which will result more profitable to the person. In the Ignatian perspective, apostolic means – ministries – are applied according to a general principle of adaptation that has as its starting point the personal and direct knowledge of the person.

This initial conversation also has an admonitory purpose: it tries to impel the subject to use the rest of the means that the apostle has available – through him or through others – offer among the most reliable

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spiritual pharmacopoeia.¹⁵ The best exercitants that Ignacio had, beginning with the group of the first companions, whose lives would be decisively marked by the experience of the Spiritual Exercises, began, a lot before going into that intense road of evangelization, to be treated by Ignacio in spiritual conversations. The most effective and durable apostolic actions, as the practice of the Spiritual Exercises, the search and selection of candidates for the Society, the search of students capable and available for the Schools of the Society, the orientation to the practice of the sacraments and other means that bring to a vigorous Christian life, etc. always had as their origin a spiritual conversation. They started with the stimulus of a personal encounter, where the same person felt drawn by the kindness of a proposal that touched the core of his freedom.

Conversation also has a nuclear or radical character. That is to say it constitutes the end of an apostolic itinerary carried out in depth. This form of conversation, integrated in the Spiritual Exercises or deeply rooted in them, points out to a specially qualified and dense time of interaction. During this, the person is helped to undertake a new life, to assume new decisions or to consolidate a process of evangelization that is passing through a phase of intense personal appropriation. In this sense, we may say that Ignatian pedagogy doesn't stop within the context of the apostolic agent's social interaction. It rather contemplates the culmination of the individual's particularly transforming process and the configuration of men's servant in the Church, a stage of personal help. In her the person looks for, defines, confirms and develops her own position in freedom before God and before her brethren. This more methodical and intensive practice of personal help which is practiced in the spiritual Exercises themselves can still be given before, later or instead of the exercises. It comes nearer to what we habitually call personal accompaniment or spiritual direction.

The apostolic strengths of conversation in Ignatian practice can be defined in a two way course: 1) on one hand it is the first instrument of approach to the message of the gospel; 2) a patient and loving act that makes us neighbors in an evangelical sense. It is the impulse of vicinity that dictates love. It constitutes an indispensable mediation so that the other person gets concerned by the Good News, in the context of a relationship, lacking any other interest except that which is for the good of the person.

The ulterior conversation, if it takes place, of a more methodical and disciplined character, is a mediation, here indispensable that looks towards

the intimate appropriation of Christ's invitation. At the same time this appropriation is authenticated and consolidated in a new position of the person's freedom. It is a mediation that will become unnecessary in the measure that the person is rooted in that which constitutes her vocational nucleus: Christ's call to love and to serve God and men.

The apostolic strengths of conversation is then at the service of the personalization process. This process constitutes a permanent and substantial dynamism of the Christian faith which consists in a personal encounter with Christ, which polarizes the person in a relationship of love whose value is much superior to her own life and to any other adhesion.

To affirm the importance of this apostolic instrument is particularly necessary today. The interior emptiness of individuals that have grown in a family and in a social atmosphere lacking substantial values, and an appropriate affective care, makes them more vulnerable. This explains the need of an evangelization that provides external security through a strong link within a group, and/or through a system of the type of ideological thought, simplistic in style pretending to have answers to all questions. These roads, more effective in the short term create more followers than true disciples. These are individuals that seek to be affirmed in an adolescent way against what is diverse, and that move through a scheme of thought and conduct that

is rigid. The more insecure their appropriation of the gospel the more rigid it is.

Social interaction and the facilitation of human and Christian atmospheres of better quality are certainly indispensable in the mission of the Church. Evangelization doesn't open up through slogans that lead to the nucleus of the individual's freedom. The personalized moment will continue to be mediated through the patient and loving encounter of somebody, that moved by my own good makes me feel such nearness that leads to its own source that is Christ.

The apostolic vigor of the Society from its very origins provokes astonishment: from the affirmation of the Catholic faith in countries threatened by the reformation, to the first evangelization embarked by Xavier up to the confines of the east; not to mention a substantial contribution to ecclesiastic reformation in the church's head and members. It all began with the quality of a friendly conversation among three partners in a small room of the College of Saint Barbara in Paris... Everything continued through infinite hours of personal conversation, before and after sermons and masterful lessons, in which Jesus' partners

distilled a patient and loving word that made them feel the same inexhaustible source of which they had drunk first.

**5. Two Levels of Application: The Most Universal and the
Most Specific.
A Way of Having a General and Selective Conversation at
the Same Time**

We find some seemingly contradictory statements concerning indiscriminate selection of conversation. On one hand Saint Ignatius points out a way to universal access: The conversation reaches many persons.¹⁶ Moreover he presents it as an apostolic instrument within reach of all.¹⁷

On the other hand, this range is not an absolute approach. In other places we find a more selective approach: *Spiritual Conversation cannot be extended to all* (Ep. VII, 269). This restriction is based on a double approach: Objectively on the part of the Jesuit, the limitations that imposes on him his condition (for example that of being a scholastic) or his ministry (if he is professor, his conversation will be limited primarily to the students); and subjectively, is based on the evaluation of the person he is dealing with, when he meets others with the disposition that bears fruit.¹⁸

If one keeps in mind the double apostolic function of conversation which we have previously referred to, it resolves the apparent dilemma. It has to do with the universal way of the Jesuit's personal relationship which under certain conditions attains a greater methodical intensity.

In fact, first of all we encounter in this description a permanent and general way for a Jesuit to relate to others. It designates something that has a greater scope than an apostolic activity. It indicates a way of being that shapes substantially one's identity.

To be a person is above all to be in a relationship and for a relationship. In Christian terms, the person is formed in community (fraternity) and called to communion. An ability to relate is the essential note of personhood. So, a Jesuit is a person in a permanent and general apostolic relationship. That is to say that he tends always and with everyone, towards establishing a way of relating that assists in the growth of the divine vocation of the other.

The apostolic end of the Society of Jesus, and in general the apostolic character of the Ignatian charism reaches at this point its deepest root. Precisely on account of the permanent and universal character that a conversation involves. The Jesuit lives for the apostolic mission not only by one's intense dedication to the historical concrete by means of

obedience, not only by the methodical use of certain pastoral instruments, but also and mainly by one's way of relating to all. For one's way of becoming neighbor in the short spaces of a face-to-face encounter, episodic or continuous, that should be where takes place a requirement of the immeasurable element of respectful authenticity.

In a permanent and general way the apostle sees in every man and woman a person called to the fullness of Christ, and is in relationship to them, in the interpersonal density that every encounter grants, possessed by the desire for the greater good.

Is it not precisely this, among other things, that we find in the life of the saints? Lives that everywhere had left in every encounter a drop of light, welcome, hope, dignity, in the grateful memory of a traveling companion, of someone in the hospital, a person in need, a superior or subordinate, student or professor, laity or clergy. It is in that direct and personal encounter, beyond of all artificial communication, where each one is moved concerned only in the proportion of altruism of the other, revealed especially in one's way of conversing.

However the spiritual conversation contemplated as a methodical form of helping others to perceive and respond to their divine vocation has a selective character. I say methodical form as far as its intensity and repetitive or sequential character. Some recommendations of St. Ignatius have this methodically intensive character, for example when he writes to a person who feels tempted urging him to "sometimes during the week to converse with some of Ours."¹⁹ We said at the beginning that this more specific form of conversing approximates a great deal, even overlaps, with that which is called in traditional terms spiritual direction, or more recently one refers to as a personal spiritual accompaniment.

The selection, as in the rest of the activities, is carried out by means of an apostolic discernment that keeps in mind the following approaches: 1) the limitations imposed by one's own mission. As when Ignatius recommends the professors of the schools to converse preferably with the students.²⁰

2) The condition or capacity of the subject to whom one must help systematically with the conversation. At this level St. Ignatius manages as principal criterion the dedication to those from whom much fruit is expected.²¹ Precisely it concerns the same criterion proposed in the directives for the selection of a candidate for the entire Exercises according to annotation 20. And it is connected directly to the "Ignatian apostolic economy" with the criterion of the more universal good proposed in the Constitutions. A selection paradoxically carried out in

function of its universality, for the multiplying character that one's own gifts in their most transferable individualities have.

The *analogous principle* of this specific way of conversing is the practice of the Spiritual Exercises, that is to say a way of substantial and methodical relationship through which is provided a way and order for the one making the retreat. Not in vain it is repeated with emphasized frequency the combination of "conversations and/or spiritual exercises" and vice versa, in such a way that is at least indicated in some contexts their respective synonymy. Indeed between the Exercises and Conversation, understood in a specific sense, we have something more than a mere domestication of apostolic intentions: The selection of the candidate is similar, both include a certain apostolic maximalism (that which helps more), starting from a common principle of adaptation to other's peculiarities, they suppose the application of the rules of discernment, and proceed with a methodical "way and order".

So much so that frequently the spiritual conversation inscribes itself in a process of helping that contemplates that particularly intense phase of the Spiritual Exercises as far as their preparatory prelude, or of corollary of further Christian maturation, or as a vicarious form (with regard to the Exercises) of encouraging and proceeding to discernment and vocational election.²²

6. Saint Ignatius' Instructions About Conversing

The importance St. Ignatius attributes to conversation manifested through constant allusions to it, is also expressed in his instructions imparted for this purpose. They constitute a practical *vadecum* regarding the way of proceeding in relating to others. They are rules about conversation. Understanding the meaning of rules here as those expressed in the Exercises, they comprise a *corpus* of discernment criteria and paradigm orientations.

In 1553 Fr. Mirón requests St. Ignatius some rules when conversing with others [*algunas reglas para conuerser con los prójimos*].²³ This petition in itself reveals the importance this subject had in the Society of Jesus. Commissioned to give a response to this by St. Ignatius, Polanco links these rules to discernment rather than to some new theory: "since they consist rather in discretion rather than in doctrine, they cannot be given but in general terms."²⁴ With this we are given the hermeneutic guidelines of the Ignatian instructions. They must be taken like rules of discernment, and not as an ordered construct of detailed dispositions.

Apart from brief indications disseminated profusely in Ignatius' writings, we find there three specific instructions on this topic: The first

one is of 1541, communicated to Broët and Salmerón recently sent to Ireland by Paul III.²⁵ The second letter is of 1546. Here we have an organic collection of apostolic instructions directed to the Fathers sent to the Council of Trent.²⁶ The last one is a late document that contains a series of warnings to the Jesuits of Portugal.²⁷ There is a permanent reference to the subject in a wide lapse of time.

Each document has a specific orientation and purpose. The first one and oldest tends to be more general. It flows directly from St. Ignatius' apostolic experience as incipient legislator and mentor of the Society; it extracts from it, beautifully as if from a stream, guidelines for apostolic government. The second document includes some more precise and concrete rules dictated in an atmosphere crossed by hot doctrinal controversies. The last letter points out to some rules of prudence and modesty that religious men must observe in relating with others.

In the following synopsis I have regrouped per *modum unius* the different aspects of these rules "about conversation" as if it were an archetypal presentation of a conversation exercise. Some texts repeat themselves under diverse headings. I have included the text of 1556 in the thematic sections.

| | Text of 1541 | Text of 1546 |
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| Preambles. <i>Risks and possibilities:</i> | | * As associating and dealing with many people for the salvation and spiritual progress of souls can be very profitable with God's help, so on the other hand, if we are not on our guard and helped by God's grace, such association can be the occasion of great loss to ourselves and sometimes to all concerned. |
| <i>Essential character:</i> | | * In keeping with our profession we cannot withdraw from such conversation |
| <i>Objective</i> | * Whenever we wish to win someone over and engage him in the greater service of <i>God our Lord.</i> | * For the salvation and spiritual progress of souls |

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| <i>Theological Presuppositions</i> | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Can be very profitable with God's help * if we are not on guard and helped by God's grace, such association can be the occasion of great loss to ourselves and sometimes to all concerned. |
| <i>Interlocutor</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * In your dealings with all ...especially with your equals and those lower in dignity and authority than yourselves. * in dealing with men of position or influence, if you are to win their affection for the greater glory of God our Lord | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * with many people |
| <i>Internal disposition</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Do not forget that, if one is of a lively disposition and deals with another who is like him, there is very great danger of their failing to come to an agreement if they are not of one spirit. And therefore, if one knows that one is of such a lively disposition, he ought to approach another of similar traits well prepared by self-examination and determined to be patient and not to get out of sorts with him, especially if he knows him to be in poor health. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * the more prepared we are to proceed according to a common plan the more we are likely to succeed in our Lord. * without showing attachment to my opinion * without taking sides with any * with the greatest possible calmness and humility * so that they would get the idea that I was a lowly and humble person and not one full of obstinate conceit (1556) |

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| <p><i>Method: Empathy rules:</i></p> | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Be slow to speak. Be considerate and kind * Be slow to speak, and only after having first listened quietly, so that you may understand the meanings, leanings and desires of those who speak. You will thus know better when to speak and when to be silent. * try to avoid causing dissatisfaction to anyone * and I would deal on an equal basis with all, without taking sides with any * Finally, if some point of human or divine science is under discussion and I have something to say, it will be of great help to be unmindful of my own leisure or lack of time, that is, my own convenience. Rather I should accommodate myself to the convenience of him with whom I am to deal, in order to influence him to God * I should make it a point to satisfy all, of both sexes, with whom I dealt or talked (1556) |
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| <p><i>Rules for discernment</i></p> | <p>* Whenever we wish to win someone over and engage him in the greater service of God our Lord, we should use the same strategy for good which the enemy employs to draw a good soul to evil. He enters through the other's door and comes out his own. He enters with the other by not opposing his ways but by praising them. He acts familiarly with the soul, suggesting good and holy thoughts which bring peace to the good soul. Later he tries, little by little, to come out his own door, always suggesting some error or illusion under the appearance of good, but which will always be evil. So we with good purpose can praise and agree with another concerning some particular good thing, dissembling whatever else may be wrong. After thus gaining his confidence, we shall have better success. In this sense we go in with him his way but come out our own. We should ingratiate ourselves with those who are sad or tempted, speak at length and show great satisfaction and cheerfulness, both interior and exterior, so as to draw them to the opposite of what they feel, for their greater edification and consolation.</p> | |
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| <i>Rules for sober assertiveness</i> : | *Answer the questions put to you, come to an end, and take your leave. If a rejoinder is offered, let your reply be as brief as possible... | *Be slow to speak. Be considerate and kindly, especially when it comes to defining matters that are being discussed or likely to be discussed in the Council. * When such matters are being discussed, I should rather consider the reasons on both sides without showing any attachment to my own opinion, and try to avoid causing dissatisfaction to anyone. * I should not cite anyone as supporting my opinion, especially if they are persons of importance, unless the matter has been well considered. And I would deal on an equal basis with all, without taking sides with any. * If the matters discussed are of such a nature that you cannot or ought not to be silent, give your opinion with the greatest possible calmness and humility, and always end with the words: "salvo meliori iudicio." |
| <i>Rhythm</i> | Take leave promptly and politely | |
| <i>Rules for Transparency</i> | *In everything you say, especially when you are trying to restore peace and in spiritual exhortations, be much on your guard and remember that everything you say may or will become public. | |

Text of 1556

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| <p>Rules of Prudence</p> | <p>I would not have any dealing with young women of the common people, except in church or in an open place. On the one hand, they are lightheaded, and whether there be foundation for it or not, it frequently happens that such dealings give rise to evil talk. Such females are in general more inclined to be giddy and inconstant in God's service. After their devotions are over, they not infrequently turn, sometimes to the flesh, sometimes to fatigue. For this reason many allowances have to be made as to their corporal needs.</p> <p>If I had to deal with women in matters spiritual, it would be with women of birth against whom no breath of evil rumor could arise. Above all, I would not talk with any woman behind closed doors or in remote places. In this way I would avoid all criticism and suspicion. In all spiritual associations I should try to make one step of progress safely, and prefer this to making a hundred by putting myself in danger, or to advance another at the cost of a serious difference of opinion with him, although I might have been right. A scandal, whether it has foundation or not, does us more harm and neutralizes more than half the progress which God our Lord accomplishes through us, especially in times and places such as these.</p> | |
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| Fruit: <i>Confrontation or Communion:</i> | | <p>*I would deal on an equal basis with all, without taking sides with any.</p> <p>* without showing any attachment to my opinion and try to avoid causing dissatisfaction to anyone.</p> <p>* I should make it a point to satisfy all, of both sexes, with whom I dealt or talked, so that they would get the idea that I was a lowly and humble person and not one full of obstinate conceit, especially in matters that are of little or no importance. (1556)</p> |
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Leaving aside questions already discussed, I will make a brief comment on some main elements. In the first place, this is a typical case of Ignatian congruence between end and means. The intent of adhering the heart strongly and perseveringly to the “end,” is the principle of order of the will and action; it guides the search of the most adequate concrete means to reach that purpose. The Ignatian “conversationist” seeks passionately the other person’s good, helps her in the perspective of her last end, and commits himself boldly in her growth and in all that has to do with it. This passion for true help, universally dispensed in personal contacts helps us understand the strategy of Ignatian Conversation. This has nothing to do with Machiavellian type sagacity. The only intention is that of transforming all human encounters, at all levels, in an event of grace.

It is worth reminding the importance of theological reality here, the indispensable condition of God’s help so that an event of salvation takes place. We are mediators of a love that transcends us that is passed on in the interpersonal encounter, each time we touch the mystery inherent in the other person lovingly. Through prayer and intention the apostle lives thematically referred to the Divine Third present in the bipolar encounter,

who is definitively the author of this salvific event.

The habit of fruitful conversations requires an appropriate disposition. It is a disciplined and methodical exercise that has nothing to do with spontaneous mechanisms of immediate longings. It is a discipline similar to that of sport training: It requires effort, and even suffering [acuerdo de sufrir], to be able to carry out a way of conversing innately positive. It is not an oppressive discipline though but bearable. Here as in the Exercises discipline tends to a certain connatural habit [desansadamente] (SpEx. 28).

Self control [por algún concierto enderecados] is the fruit of interior freedom, passionately adhered to the other's good. As in the Exercises, Ignatius uses the word "indifference" to describe the maturity of freedom, grown out of and for love. He particularly insists on affective and intellectual indifference. The great passion for the other's good makes us live sufficiently free as to seek the truth that transcends us. According to the Ignatian perspective, a man trapped in his disordered loves and fears or too much attached to his intellectual representations will never become a good conversationalist. That is to say, a man that helps another with his way of relating. Precisely because he never ends up of leaving his interior cloister. He usually lives in permanent defense of his ego, feeding his affective self-centeredness, or defending his weak internal position, too much closed in "his" feelings and ideas.

*the training for
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The training for conversation implies a process of psychological and spiritual conversion to the other. In this process a certain grade of freedom is reached when one is able to assume what we may define as the auto-forgetfulness of the ego. This is to say to become able to focus all his interest on the other, putting aside his interests for the other's good. Evidently we are not referring here to an all-embracing "relativisation," that weakens convictions and fundamental feelings to the point of losing one's identity (which implies permanent and stable self-reference through time). The interior patrimony becomes relative to the other's good, in the measure of his definitive vocation towards the configuration with Christ. This tends to make me live radically centered on the other person, helped with affective and intellectual means. And

since “my” own definitive vocation is to love and serve, in living so that others may have life, I am called to give up generously auto complacency in my achievements and not to consume my energy in defending the ego, troublesomely self-constructed. The same salvific truth that has reached me is authenticated in its capacity to create communion and to transcend the relative position of the “self”, connecting me with the other, loved and respected for what he is, in the only mystery — Christ's mystery — that constitutes both of us. We are saying something as simple as this: True love begins and is witnessed mainly in our relational thrust, in our way of conversing. In Christian anthropology, this way of edifying conversion that tends to be constructive, implies a deep sense of self-denial that has to do with the other's growth. More than other rigors of the apostolic life, what I have called auto-forgetfulness of the ego becomes the core of the Jesuit's true mortification. In a permanent and general way, this makes us live focused towards what most suits the other. This will be true in the whole registration of our daily conversations, these being casual or more methodical.

But, how does one converse? Let us attentively even if briefly at the fundamental aspects of the Ignatian instructions. Possibly the most original and at the same time practical attitude is what I have called the rules of empathy. Long before psychology applauded empathy as a fundamental attitude in human communion, even if this was done amidst the sickness of individualism, St. Ignatius shares with us these wonderful rules in whose simplicity they prove to be a sure guide that reaches our speaker's heart.

These are not the fruit of an applied theory with more or less dexterity. They are the fruit of St. Ignatius' relational experience, one that acts as a model in relating with others. Luis Gonçalves da Câmara's Memorial is an eloquent witness of this.²⁹ It seemed as if in these rules, St. Ignatius, accomplished and experienced conversationalist, depicted himself. As with so many other teachings he shares with others the fruit of experiences that had proven useful to him.

These rules are in no way some sort of cagey strategy to sell one's own product, artful maneuvers to subdue minds and hearts. Less still do they represent the not prepared apostle's weary and imprudent reiteration contenting himself with a Pyrrhic victory and surrendering, thus avoiding uncomfortable situations. Rather these rules respond to an anthropological principle of enormous reach: only the loving relationship redeems the other. Only a relationship of love that is centered on the other's good, facilitates convictions and feelings that makes the other person grow. Besides this, St. Ignatius presupposes to this principle a

psychological preamble. Only when the person is touched by altruism manifested in relating, is she prepared to open her interior secrets; a way of communicating centered on the other's unique universe through communion of feelings. The deep understanding of the other's interior representation of his unique and constitutive identity is the door that opens towards an experience of communion with the other's mystery as a person, and which goes beyond his

contingent representations. It prepares him to transcend towards his divine vocation.

"Be slow to speak, and only after having first listened quietly, so that you may understand the meanings, leanings and desires of those who speak. You will thus know better when to speak and when to be silent."

Here is the golden rule of Ignatian Conversation. It is the rule of loving attention, empathic, patient that facilitates understanding the other's internal knowledge. To love the person more, to help her in the way of relating (through the word and silence) that really seeks the other's major good ...listening quietly and truly...This is not "to tolerate" strategically the other's monologue, nor to dispense stereotyped forms of a studied commercial sympathy; neither is it the reaction of the debater that hides meditating an overwhelming answer, or a paid for listening of a professional. Libenter: With pleasure, gracefully, heartily, gratuitously, generous in time giving and interest... It is a listening which engenders love; it is a hopeful listening in helping the other pay attention through his internal representations to his unique core reality. It is here in the interior secret of each person where God's promise for more life, more love and more freedom is reached to be felt.

As in all our way of proceeding, conversation in Ignatius is embedded in discernment. In fact, the rules for conversation consist of the general rules of discernment found in the Spiritual Exercises applied to this matter. They are in a condensed form the rules of the first and second week. Basically they imply two things : 1) a description of the general strategy of conversation which curiously enough consists in the enemy's strategy (as described in the second week of the SpEx.) with the "end" inverted. 2) The proper pedagogic behavior to be observed in situations of consolation or desolation. This conduct is the result of the spiritual hermeneutics of interior movements as described in the rules of the 1st week, and which already are succinctly proposed in annotation seven of the SpEx.

*We go in with him his way but come out our own...*In another moment he presents this citing Paul: *omnia omnibus factus sum...* (Cfr. 1 Cor

9,22b). The purpose is clear: empathy at the service of a helping relationship according to the gospel's criteria. It is not the kind of empathy though that rests closed amidst the universe of representations of the person. It is orientated towards its good. This ultimate good may imply a strong reorientation of feelings, convictions and projects. Still, this process according to the need, won't be carried out if the person is not touched by the other as messenger of wellbeing and by the previous understanding of her own interior universe. Is not this pedagogy the psychological translation of the salvific way of the Incarnation of the Word? *Nihil salvus nisi assumptus*. On the other hand it is not a question of manipulating the other to induce him to one's disordered and interested purpose. This sort of manipulation can also happen under the appearance of good or of the apostolate. Spiritual conversation is at the service of the search of the will of God, which only becomes transparent as an act of freedom; it orientates the individual towards existential fullness to which he is called. It is to the service of the search of the will of God that you desvela only as an act of freedom and it implies the reorientation from the individual to the existential fullness to which is called.

The rules for discernment of conversation also underline the thrust in communication depending on the other's consolation or desolation. We are invited to be much more cordial, smiling and affectively committed in desolation; more circumspect and more succinct in consolation. It is worth noting that this way of proceeding implies a deep conversion of one's own affectivity. It requires a more gratuitous and more generous affectivity which gives the adequate attention, and is not dominated by self gratification resulting from the "natural" resonance of the other's displeasures and consolations. Empathy during desolation, that sort of affective opacity of mystery, supposes the sharing of annoyance in that atony of faith, as a time of grace; and therefore to always accompany in hope, without letting oneself be drawn by the affective darkness in fundamental references the other suffers. On the other hand conversation with the consoled person whose experience tends directly to the Lord's love and the practice of the gospel, will be carried on in more modest way. Here the other doesn't need more, and a too euphoric resonance could even distract the mysterious spring of which it emanates and to which it is ultimately orientated.

Another "secret" of Ignatian conversation is what I call "rules of sober assertiveness". They have nothing to do with the stereotyped Ignatius, overpowering and impositive. Gonçalves da Câmara depicts a kind and discreet conversationalist that abhors a way of conversing intellectually

heavy or taxative, loaded with rigid sentences. It is interesting to note that a man like him, so little accustomed to accuse, to use irony in his speech or to critical allusions, called “decretistas” [giving decrees] those who used to give assertive opinions on everything.³⁰ These indications are a great help to avoid imposing on others gratuitous preconceptions of things.

Ignatius attributes this way of proceeding to a disordered attachment to one’s own judgment tending to be limited and partial. It is not constructive in that it stirs servile convictions and polemics. It is rather a sign of one’s “self importance,” a bad habit very frequent both in public gatherings and in private meetings.

This Ignatian “sober assertiveness” has a double foundation: In the first place it is very effective for an anthropological reason. Truly fruitful convictions are born in one’s own interiority in an experience of deep freedom. The conversationalist that wants to guide the other, that is, to serve him patiently in what he is seeking, will have to be satisfied, giving time, to only transmit the contents that the other can assume at a given moment and accompany him parting from what he really is experiencing.

The other reason is more linked to the theory of knowledge and to the conception of the Christian faith: The space of substantive truths tends to be reduced in number. It comes out within the interpersonal dynamics of a common search, and it is verified in a communion experience, based on the only foundation that constitutes us all, at the same time that it transcends us in our singular perspective.

The almost unavoidable polemics that result from this expositive authoritarianism is practically always useless and distractive. The Ignatian conversation including daily relationships tends to a kind of essential conversation. That means that it tends to be a way of relating that helps the other to focus on what is truly fundamental. Dialectical skirmishes distract this objective. They wear down, and to make us lose a lot of energy uselessly. They don’t flow from an uncontaminated purpose of serving the truth, but rather seek to affirm a disordered ego.

The Ignatian conversant is a man of criteria steady in his doctrinal convictions. In his following of the Lord Jesus Christ he has firmly cemented his convictions on those of the substantive forms of the ecclesiastical community. That explains that when he has to manifest his convictions he does this without any blush and with deep humility. This he does as one who has received the gift that doesn’t pertain to him, and which points to the revelation in Jesus Christ of the “Deus semper maior”: An universal patrimony of which the Church is guarantor.

Finally in a later document Saint Ignatius stresses in some rules the importance of “prudence.”. He puts limitations to conversation with certain people, in certain times and places. Leaving aside the more archaic expressions we cannot throw away these rules overboard. Many good apostles have been lost due to imprudence in their way of relating and conversing.

The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus contemplate in the Jesuit the profile of a man with natural charm to relate, even in his more external behavior. They contemplate a man with such a formation that has trained him unselfishly to be flexible and generous able to relate with all in a constructive and fruitful way; from a youth to a brilliant intellectual, from a jetty loader to a lady of high crest. But its way of making it will be so much wiser The more open and flexible in his apostolic action field the more prudent he will be. This will be so in the most secret environment as much as in the most public. As if all could come to be known without any tarnish.

This interior prudence springs not solely from the consecrated man's perfectly assumed identity, but also as a consequence of social witness his acts are called to cause. The first motivation will help him avoid to be allured by gratifying affections in relationships that distract him from the good intentioned purpose of helping others. Being a social witness will save him giving gratuitously reasons for scandal even if without foundation on his part. Such a scandal destroys our social credit so much necessary as individuals and as a man apostolic body to exercise our ministry without doubt shade.

Conclusion: Conversion in Order to Converse

“To get converted “and “To converse”, etymologically have the same roots. In its more radical and deeper sense, to converse is to get converted to the mystery of the other one; it is to get converted to alterity. It is to leave the fence of one's own interior cloister and of its defense mechanisms; to become a servant of the other person, with what will be a more human, more subtle, more immediate and more universal, more illuminated and stronger weapon; a more witnessing weapon of its own maturity, and a more suffering in taking possession of itself: *the word*.

To know how “to converse” supposes a deep and permanent self-denial. For the Jesuit it is something consubstantial with our way of proceeding. Therefore it should be object of constant conversion. It is a permanent turn towards the good of all those with whom we are daily related. The thickness of our personality and the balm of our charity are

mostly verified in short distances. The true apostle doesn't serve an abstract faceless entity. He moves near his brothers taken by the interest in their lives and their people, depositing in their heart a word that makes grow.

May these ignatian rules shine in our casual encounters, in our more reserved dialogues, and even in the opportune and humble way of presenting us in public, in such a way that each member of the auditory can immediately feel touched with a stimulating word said for himself.

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NOTES

1. Ignacio Echarte, S.J., "Concordancia Ignaciana". With the collaboration of The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St, Louis, Missouri, USA. (Ed. Mensajero, Bilbao España, 1996; Ed. Sal Terrae, Maliaño, Cantabria, España, 1996).

2. Last edition of DRAE, first meaning: *Hablar con otra u otras personas*.

3. Charlton T. LEWIS - Charles SHORT, *A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1879.

4. *Cons*[60].

5. *Cons*[649].

6. *Cons*[18], [21].

7. *Cons*[186].

8. MI, *Ep* III,501. Cfr. Similar expressions in *Ep*. V,13-14; X,571; XI,11.

9. *Ep*. I, 80.

10. *per publicas praedicationes, lectiones et aliud quodcunque verbi Dei ministerium, ac spiritualia exercitia, puerorum ac rudium in Christianismo institutionem, Christifidelium in confessionibus audiendis ac caeteris Sacramentis administrandis spiritualem consolationem, praecipue intendat; et nihilominus ad dissidentium reconciliationem et eorum qui in carceribus vel in hospitalibus inveniuntur piam subventionem et ministerium, ac reliqua charitatis opera, (FI,1)*

11. *Ep.* XII, 252.
12. *Ep.* IV, 411.
13. Cons [437][461][496][814].
14. *Ep.* I,389.544; II,490; III,510.549; IV,59; VIII,66.687; IX,515.596.601.708; X,507.571; XI,548; XII,252.
15. *Ep.* I, 389.
16. *Ep.* I, 387.
17. *Con la conversatione spirituale tutti possono aggiutare quelli che si trattano* (*Ep.* IV,411). Cfr. *Ep.* III, 546.9
18. *...maxime trouando in loro dispositione per sperar frutto* (*Ep.* VII,269).
19. *Ep.* I, 295.
20. *Ep.* VII, 269-270.
21. *Ep.* IV, 411.
22. For St. Ignatius, Spiritual Conversation is a necessary instrument to help candidates before joining the Society and to get to know them adequately: *Ep.* IX,601.
23. *Ep.* V, 380.
24. *Loc. cit.*
25. *Ep.* I, 179-180.
26. *Ep.* I, 386-9.
27. *Ep.* XII, 676-678.
28. SpEx [18].
28. Ns. 153, 192, 199, 202-4, 221-2, 227, 238, 250-1, 256b, 280, 289, 297, 362, 379. Cfr. the excellent edition of the Memorial, Published by *Colección Manresa*: BENIGNO

HERNÁNDEZ MONTES, *Recuerdos Ignacianos*, Santander-Bilbao, 1991.

30. “*había una cosa en el modo de hablar que no podía aguantar, no solamente en los de casa, pero ni siquiera en los de fuera y era el hablar rotunda y autoritativamente, como quien promulga leyes y decretos; por ejemplo: “es necesario que se haga tal o cual cosa; esto no tiene otro remedio más que éste; la verdad es ésta”;* y otros modos de hablar semejantes. *Y a los que empleaban tales expresiones los llamaba Nuestro Padre “decretistas” y, como digo, las corregía*”
GONÇALVES DA CÂMARA, *Memorial*[204], op. cit. pag 152-3.