Conversations with a Purpose

Too often we talk about young people without allowing ourselves to be challenged by them... Some might think it would be easier to keep you at ‘a safe distance’, so as not to be provoked by you. But it is not enough to exchange the odd message, or share nice photographs. Young people must be taken seriously!... In the Church — I am convinced — it should not be this way... We are in need of this: to hear of your journey in life. What do you seek? ... In order to tune in to the same wavelength as the younger generations, intense dialogue is of great help.

- Address of Pope Francis at the Pre-Synodal Meeting with Young People, March 19, 2018

Heeding the call of Pope Francis for taking young people seriously, the Church in the United States engaging in a National Dialogue with young Catholics. The vision of the National Dialogue is an energized and unified Catholic Church committed to forming and engaging youth and young adults as missionary disciples. This effort includes conversations with those who are, and those who are not, practicing the Catholic faith. We need to hear their stories, share the love of Christ with them, and learn what we can do as a church, both on the local and national level, to accompany them in their journey and more effectively share with them the beauty, truth, and freedom that only Christ offers.

The purpose of the conversations taking place within the National Dialogue is to more deeply understand the lived experience of youth and young adults so that as a church, we can transform our ministry practice to more effectively encounter and accompany the young church.

The intent is that these conversations will be a holy experience of dialogue, listening, encounter, and accompaniment. The hope is that these conversations will build upon what we are learning from the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment and the Fifth National Encuentro.

Four groups will participate in conversations: youth, young adults, parents, and ministry leaders. The young people who will participate will include youth and young adults who are actively engaged in their Catholic faith as well as non-Catholics and those who are no longer Catholic or are participating in a marginal way. Many of these conversations will be with groups that will bring together a variety of perspectives. Some of conversations will be with individual young adults, ministry leaders, or parents. These voices will join in conversations with a purpose, where the experience of young people can be shared.

Conversations can have a lasting and powerful impact. A conversation can broaden the way we look at things. Listening and dialoguing lead us to break out of our limited vision and see things in new ways. Sometimes, a conversation changes us.
That’s what we’re hoping for. We’re hoping that these conversations will lead to the transformation of our ministries with youth and young adults. We know that many young people walk away from faith. Many young people feel far away from God’s saving love. We love young people and we love the Church. **What do we need to change to really engage this generation and help youth and young adults grow in faith and join actively in the mission of the Catholic Church?**

The National Dialogue hopes that these conversations will lead to transformation on a variety of levels.

- **Person** – Those who are involved in the conversations, those who are facilitating, and those who reflect on the results of the conversations will grow in the ways that they relate to and minister with youth and young adults.
- **Ministry** – The organized ministries aimed at youth and young adults will grow in their responses to young people. This will include growing some efforts of the ministry, eliminating some, and creating new ways of engaging young people.
- **Parishes, Catholic Schools, and Organizations that Serve Youth and Young Adults** – Communities will reflect on the reality of the experience of young people and transform the ways that youth and young adults are engaged, included, and empowered for leadership.
- **Dioceeses** – The local Church will bring together the voices of youth, young adults, ministry leaders, and parents to discern with their bishop a direction for renewed ministries with youth and young adults.
- **Nation** – The Catholic Church in the United States will heed the call of the Holy Father to reflect on the experience of young people and plan for an energized response to fully engage this generation of youth and young adults.

**The Role of the Organizer**

As an organizer for the conversations, you will decide where, when, how and with whom conversations will be conducted. You might also be responsible for identifying and inviting people to facilitate the conversations as well as someone to help and be a listener and record highlights of the sharing that takes place. Here a 10 tasks and a few tips to assist you in organizing the conversations.

1. **Identify which of the four main audiences for the conversations you want to invite to a conversation.** There are four potential categories of people to invite: high school youth, young adults (18-29), parents, and ministry leaders. Some organizers will want to have conversations with all four categories. Others, because of their setting, might only have conversations with one or two categories. Determine what will be appropriate for your role and setting.

2. **Determine your potential numbers to be involved in each category.** What is your target number? Do you want to have as many people as possible participate in your conversations, or would you rather seek out a representative group from your ministry setting? Estimate the potential numbers in each audience for your conversations.

3. **Decide how you will hold these conversations.** Will your conversations be incorporated into the regular gatherings of your target audiences? *(For example, the conversation with your high school or college students will be during one of your scheduled youth nights or campus ministry gatherings; the parent conversation will be conducted during a parent meetings for Confirmation prep.)* Will some of your conversations be special gatherings specifically planned for this purpose?

4. **Decide who will specifically be part of or invited to participate in your conversation(s).** With which already established groups will you have these conversations? What specific individuals
do you want to invite? Do you want to put out a blanket invitation to participate in a conversation?

5. **Set the date(s) and location(s) for your conversation(s).** See the “Facilitating Conversations with a Purpose” handout for what to consider in determining a location for your conversations.

6. **Determine how you will inform and/or invite folks to the conversation(s).** If your conversation(s) will be part of a regular gathering of your target audience(s), will you prep them ahead of time or just announce the conversation at that gathering? If you will issue personal invitations, will you do that through a personal conversation, a letter, an email, etc.? If you will issue a blanket invitation to anyone in the target audiences to attend, how will you do that?

7. **Decide how many facilitators and listeners you will need, and begin recruiting them.** The recommended size for a conversation is six participants, so each group needs a facilitator and, if possible, a listener/recorder. See the facilitator resources for the qualities and abilities to look for in potential facilitators and listeners/recorders. Have your facilitators sign up on the National Dialogue website and review the facilitator resources.

8. **Issue your invitations and/or inform your groups.**

9. **Consider forming a Hospitality Team.** Creating a warm, welcoming atmosphere for folks immediately when they arrive is crucial to the effective conversations, especially in settings where people do not necessarily know each other at all or very well. A couple of people solely focused on greeting and helping people feel at home is highly recommended. They could be facilitators of conversations or listeners or others who serve only in this role.

10. **Conduct your conversation(s).** Enjoy the fruits of your hard work.

**Recruiting Facilitators and Listeners**

The role of the facilitator is crucial to the conversations. We want youth and young adults to feel cared for and listened to. We also want to gather their experiences to help transform our ministries. Not all catechists, teachers, or ministry leaders are well suited to the role of facilitating and listening. Identify people who have the gifts for this role and choose carefully. If the facilitator will be working with youth, be sure to follow all safe environment processes.

We recommend that you recruit a listener for each conversation. This person will record key insights, experiences, and ideas that are shared in the conversation and will collaborate with the facilitator to reflect on the gathering and complete the recording and reflection forms. Ideally, the listener should not be a participant in the conversation.

**Formats for Conversations**

Conversations will be happening in a myriad of settings: parishes, Catholic schools, college campuses, conferences, organizational gatherings, kindred groups, homes, etc. Each ministry, organization, or group will need to make adaptations to the conversation structure to fit its specific needs. There is a basic flow and structure of the conversations, and that is explored further in the facilitator resources. But the basic structure and flow of the conversation is as follows:
1. The **Introduction**, welcoming and orienting the participants to the National Dialogue, the conversation, and guidelines for respectful dialogue.
2. The **Conversation**, engaging participants in responding to the questions for dialogue.
3. The **Conclusion**, wrapping up the conversation and thanking participants for their sharing.

This structure and flow has been designed with two important parameters:

1. **A conversation with six participants.** More than six makes it challenging for participants to enter into the conversation, and less than six can often diminish the richness of the sharing. (The facilitator and the listener/recorder are not included in this number.)
2. **A 75-minute time frame.** This time frame allows enough time for an in-depth conversation without feeling rushed and without dragging out the conversation. Depending on the participants and their level of sharing, less or more time might be more appropriate. But this basic time frame represents the benchmark for an effective conversation.

The rest of what follows in this section provides you, the organizer of the conversations, with a few formats to consider along with a sense of what preparation is needed for conversations in gatherings with 10 up to several hundred participants.

➢ **A 75-minute Conversation**

1. **Preparation Needed:**
   - If the conversations will be part of a regular gathering of the group, simply inform your group members a few weeks before about the conversations.
   - If the conversation will be a special one-time event for this specific purpose... ▪ publicize date, time, and location of the conversation for a few weeks prior; ▪ extend personal invitations to as many of the desired participants as possible.
   - Anticipate how many groups of 6 will be needed.
   - Identify an MC for the gathering who will conduct the **introduction** in large group, move participants into small groups for the **conversation**, serve as time-keeper for the conversation time, and regather everyone and conduct the **conclusion**.
   - Recruit and prepare one facilitator and one listener/recorder per group.
   - Form a special hospitality team for this gathering that will assist with welcoming and greeting participants as they arrive, refreshments, helping to connect participants with each other, and thanking participants as they leave.

2. **Conversation Outline**
   - i. **Introduction** (10 min)
      a. Welcome
      b. National Dialogue overview and purpose
      c. Overview of the conversation
      d. Guidelines for respectful dialogue
      e. Prayer
   - ii. Break into groups (3 min)
   - iii. **Conversation** begin (57 min)
   - iv. **Conclusion** in large group (5 min)
      a. Closing Comments
      b. Prayer
   - v. Refreshments to follow (optional)
➢ A 60-minute Conversation

1. Preparation Needed:
   i. Same as above

2. Conversation Outline
   i. Introduction (7 min)
   ii. Break into groups (3 min)
   iii. Conversation begin (47 min)
   iv. Conclusion in large group (3 min)

➢ Conversation over Two Sessions
   • Instead of a one-time conversation with groups, particularly the conversation can be conducted over two sessions. Examples where this might be appropriate:
     i. In parishes when the conversation is conducted during religious education or Confirmation preparation programs.
     ii. Catholic schools when conducted during class time.
     iii. During a conference or organizational gathering conducted during breakout or workshop times.
   • Issue: Continuity of Participants. Consider the following:
     i. Same participants for both sessions: Utilize the same small groups for each session.
     ii. Different participants attend both sessions: For each session, devote some time for participants to introduce each other when they first form their small group.

1. Preparation Needed:
   i. Same as above.

2. Sessions Outline A: Same participants for both sessions.
   Each Session is 50 minutes; if more time is available, extend the Conversation or Conclusion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session 1</th>
<th>Session 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Introduction| 10   | • Welcome  
• National Dialogue overview and purpose  
• Overview of the conversation  
• Guidelines for respectful dialogue  
• Prayer  | • Welcome  
• Recap of National Dialogue overview and purpose  
• Recap of Session 1 themes/highlights  
• Reminder of Guidelines for Respectful Dialogue  
• Prayer  |
| Form Groups | 6    | • Break into Groups of 6 participants, Facilitator and Listener/Recorder  
• Group member introductions  | • Regather into groups from previous Session  |
| Conversation | 27   | • Conversation  | • Conclude Conversation  |
| Conclusion  | 4    | • Closing Comments  
• Prayer  | |

3. Sessions Outline B: Different participants for both sessions.
   Each Session is 50 minutes; if more time is available, extend the Conversation or Conclusion.
The Role of the Facilitator

As a facilitator, you will guide these conversations by asking questions, inviting participation, and listening to the participants. During the conversation you will need to record key things that you hear. Take some notes while you are facilitating and budget some time immediately after the conversation to record what you heard and the insights that were shared. You might consider asking someone to help and be a “listener” to assist you record the sharing. After the conversation, you will share what you heard with the National Dialogue and with leaders in your local ministry setting.

**Before** the Conversation, Facilitators will:
- Learn and understand the purpose of the National Dialogue.
- Prepare for their role.
- Prepare for asking questions and listening.
- Know the audience.
- Choose questions.
- Adapt questions and be ready to follow up with questions and prompts.

**On the day of** the Conversation, Facilitators will:
- Arrive early and ready for the conversation.
- Create an environment of hospitality and safety for sharing.
- Guide the conversation and invite participation.
- Record the key insights from conversation.
- Complete the recording form and the reflection sheet from the conversations

**After** the Conversation, Facilitators will:
- Follow through with sharing the conversation content with the National Dialogue.
- Follow up with participants.
- Reflect on the implications of the conversation personally and for their ministry.
Tips for Facilitating

...listening is the truest and boldest kind of language that young people are vehemently seeking from the Church. We should also acknowledge how hard it is for the Church to really listen to all the young, without exception. Many of them feel that their voice is not considered interesting or useful by the adult world, either in the social or ecclesial domain.

- Instrumentum Laboris for the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, #65, 2018.

Here are three tips for facilitating in a way that will provide experiences of encounter with Christ’s love and provide a rich sharing that can help mold and transform our ministries with young people.

**Tip #1: Stay Focused on Accompaniment.**
We want to know youth and young adults better and walk with them in faith. Knowing the WHY for these conversations will keep us centered in love. If we want to be Good News to young people, we need to know the headlines on their hearts. We can accompany young people through our words, behaviors, non-verbal communication, and openness. We can communicate that the participants in the conversations are collaborators with us in the process. We can empower them to tell their story. Through our presence, youth will feel accompanied. They will encounter the listening Jesus who walks with them in their questions.

**Tip #2: Be Empathetic**
Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. It’s about working to try to really understand their perspective.

“Empathy is the ability to mutually experience the thoughts, emotions, and direct experience of others. It goes beyond sympathy, which is a feeling of care and understanding for the suffering of others. Both words have similar usage but differ in their emotional meaning.”

- PassNowNow.com – The Real Difference Between Empathy and Sympathy
  [https://passnownow.com/grammar-clinic-the-real-difference-between-empathy-and-sympathy/]

The author Brené Brown explains that empathy is a skill that strengthens with practice and encourages people to both give and receive it often. By receiving empathy, not only do we understand how good it feels to be heard and accepted, we also come to better understand the strength and courage it takes to be vulnerable and share that need for empathy in the first place.

She shares nursing scholar Theresa Wiseman’s four attributes of empathy:

- **To be able to see the world as others see it**—This requires putting your own "stuff" aside to see the situation through your loved one's eyes.
- **To be nonjudgmental**—Judgement of another person’s situation discounts the experience and is an attempt to protect ourselves from the pain of the situation.
- **To understand another person’s feelings**—We must be in touch with our own feelings in order to understand someone else's. Again, this requires putting your own "stuff" aside to focus on your loved one.
- **To communicate your understanding of that person’s feelings**—Rather than saying, "At least you..." or "It could be worse..." try saying, "I've been there, and that really hurts," or (to quote an example from Brown) "It sounds like you are in a hard place now. Tell me more about it."

Brené Brown, Psychology Today
[https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/partnering-in-mental-health/201408/bren-brown-empathy-vs-sympathy]
To empathize, we listen more than we talk. We explore feelings and pay attention to what they say, what they don’t say, and what their non-verbal communication tells us. One of the most important things about being empathetic is to avoid judgment. Judgment shuts down the conversation and cuts us off from the stories and experience we need to understand. Sometimes, the most difficult part is controlling facial expressions. It’s easy to show concern about something that is said or be worried about something that is misunderstood; this often shows on your face and in your non-verbal cues. Facilitators should be aware of this and work to avoid the grimace or scowl. If you become aware that you frowned, own it and move on. A facilitator could say, “I’m sorry, I furrowed my brow at that comment. It made me think of something I am concerned about. I’ll watch for that - I really want us to keep sharing openly.”

We need to be sure to stay in the role of an empathetic listener. We should not switch hats to become the teacher, catechist, or correcting authority figure. This is difficult to do because we get comfortable in our role. Let’s say a young person shares a big feeling and challenges something that the Church does. Our temptation is to defend the Church or to correct the young person’s understanding. What we need to do is explore that great big feeling and find out more about why they felt that way. Make a note to follow up later. Jumping into their story with the right answers could feel satisfying, but it might shut off the conversation and we may miss the insight that is being shared.

To stay empathetic, facilitators should avoid correcting participants responses. We also need to avoid affirming or agreeing with some participants but not with others.

**Tip #3: Stay Curious**

We can show how much we want to know and understand their experience by our posture of listening, the energy in our voice, and our stance of openness. The questions and follow-ups show our interest and help us understand their experience and their perspective.

An important way to stay curious is to follow up. We can ask participants to share more details. “What was happening when you experienced that? How did that make you feel?” We can ask them to elaborate. Tell me more about that... What happened next... We can clarify. It sounds like you would recommend…”

**Preparing for Your Role**

Get ready by reviewing the facilitator guide and viewing the videos, which will provide you with tips and tools for leading the conversations. The guide will also help you choose the questions that match with the individual or group you will be listening to. The National Dialogue website will provide videos and resources that can help you in your role. Visit the website at [www.nationaldialogue.info](http://www.nationaldialogue.info) for more information.

Another way to get ready will be to work with ministry leaders in your setting to learn as much as you can about the group you will be facilitating. You will really want to know your audience. You also want to know the questions well and be ready to adapt them as needed to keep the conversation going. You might consider practicing the questions by having a conversation with someone you know well just to be comfortable with the flow.
Prepare yourself by:

- Reviewing this guide and other resources available on the National Dialogue website.
- Viewing the video resources.
- Practicing leading the discussion and recording insights.
- Being ready to listen and record the conversation insights.
- Praying for strength, guidance, and openness for your role.

Creating an Environment for Sharing

“Accompanying young people requires going beyond a preconceived framework, encountering young people where they are, adapting to their times and pace of life and taking them seriously.”

Preparatory Document for the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment

These conversations will be a place of encounter. Youth and young adults will encounter Christ through the sharing, each other, and a listening representative of Church. The environment for sharing is crucial to this experience. As the facilitator, you will create a place for sharing that is characterized by hospitality, respect, and safety.

The environment for conversations will vary. Some will occur in a meeting room in the parish, while others could take place in a neighborhood coffee shop. Most conversations will be in groups of five to seven participants. Some conversations with young adults may be one-on-one.

Keep these ideas in mind as you choose and prepare the environment.

Create a space for sharing where:

- Participants can easily see and hear you and each other. A circle of chairs in an open space or sitting around a table can work well.
- Everyone in the conversation is at the same level. Avoid having some members standing or sitting on the ground while others are sitting in chairs.
- The chairs are appropriate for youth and adults. Avoid sitting in children’s desks or in rows in a classroom.
- The temperature and lighting in the room can be adjusted as needed for comfort.
- There are few distractions such as excessive noise or people coming in and out of the room.
- Participants are called by name. Be sure to provide nametags if a member or members of the group are not known by you or each other.

Assume a posture of openness by:

- Sitting squarely in the chair, leaning slightly forward. Don’t slouch.
- Making eye contact.
- Relaxing.

Safe Environment

All conversations should be guided by the safe environment policies of your diocese. Be sure to consult with leaders in your ministry setting as needed while you are planning and implementing the conversations. One important guideline for conversations involving minors is that there would also be more than one adult present in the ministry setting. It is also crucial that you remind participants that nothing that is shared for the National Dialogue will be identified with an individual person. Participants
should be assured that conversations will be kept confidential unless they share something that
indicates that they would harm themselves or someone else.

Facilitating the Conversation

As a facilitator, you will guide the conversation with the questions and invite participants to share. You
will model and encourage good listening so that each person feels heard and respected. Some
Good discussions give people the chance to think about a question and decide how he or she feels
about the topic. A facilitator keeps the discussion going like a volleyball player keeps the ball in the air.

Use the following ideas to help you lead the conversation.

- **Invite participation.** Give each person a chance to speak. Develop some fun ways to get each person
  contributing to the subject and to redirect persons who are sharing too much. Always respect a
  participant who chooses to pass on a specific question.
- **Be sure to address everyone in the group by name.** If the participants are not already familiar with
  one another, be sure they have name tags.
- **Be comfortable with silence.** Give participants a chance to think and reflect on the topic and the
  question.
- **Be ready to make the topic more real by rephrasing the question or relating the topic to a
  common experience.**
- **Provide verbal cues and non-verbal cues** that demonstrate that you are listening. This could include
  a simple encouragement such as “un huh” or a nod.
- **Summarize the discussion.** Repeat back main ideas and check your understanding. As a way of
  closing the topic or checking for new ideas, you can summarize the sharing you have heard so far.

Recording the Conversation

The conversations that are taking place around the United States will help guide the transformation of
ministries and the renewed engagement of youth and young adults. Each gathering should have one or
more person who is dedicated to recording the key insights, ideas, and feelings shared in the
conversation. As a facilitator, you can take notes during the conversation, but it is also highly
recommended that you invite someone to be a Listener, to record key ideas. For youth conversations
this would be an additional adult leader. For young adult conversations, this might be one of the young
adults who is participating, who could also record the sharing.

It can be awkward to stop the facilitation to take notes and sometimes, participants can feel “studied.”
It is important to set this up by acknowledging that you are taking some notes so that you can share
their ideas, but that nothing which is shared will be identified with a specific person.

Prepare to record the conversation by reviewing the conversation recording guide. This guide has the
question sets available with space for your notes. This section should be completed during the
conversation. Immediately after the conversation, review this section and write additional notes that
clarify or summarize the ideas that were shared. Then, complete the second section of the guide which
asks you to provide some prioritizing and analysis of what you heard. If you had someone assist you as a
listener, discuss the responses in the first section and identify key ideas that were shared. Complete the
second section together.
Sharing the Content of the Conversation

After the conversation, you will be asked to share the information that you heard with the National Dialogue through an online survey. You will also be asked to reflect on the implications of the conversation for yourself and for the ministry you are part of.

Go online to submit the results for the National Dialogue. You will be completing a survey that will give you the opportunity to choose from some responses and enter comments. Your earlier reflections from the conversation recording guide will be helpful to you in completing the online survey.

Share the results from your dialogue with your ministry, parish, Catholic school, and/or organization. This may be part of a meeting where all the conversations that took place in one setting can be shared. Similarly, you can share the results with your diocese, who may use online tools, and/or gather all the facilitators for sharing results.

Take some time to prayerfully consider the implications of the conversation for yourself. Heart to heart sharing is something that changes the way we look at things. Consider how this conversation has impacted you:

- How does this change or grow the way I feel about youth and young adults?
- What do I feel called to do or to do differently in the way I interact?
- What can I do in my ministry to respond to youth and young adults?
- What am I called to pray about?

Follow-Through with Participants

Begin by thanking participants for being part of the process. Remind them of the purpose of the conversation and invite them to further ministry opportunities within your community. Follow up on any pastoral issues that may have surfaced in your conversations. For example, a young person may have shared challenging experiences or may have indicated in interest or a need to know more about the faith. Connect with local ministry leaders to plan for ways to follow up with participants in a way that matches their needs but also respects the confidentiality of their sharing.

Conclusion: You are Part of an Important Mission of Listening.

Pope Francis asks us to listen to young people. The National Dialogue is important, and your leadership is crucial to the listening that needs to happen. You are part of something that is essential for our Church. Your sharing in this process will help connect young people with the love and mercy of Christ. You will help young disciples to share their gifts and their insights as they join in Christ’s mission of love.

There’s one more thing that you are asked you to do, before, during, and after these conversations: pray. Pray for the leadership of the Catholic Church. Pray for all of those involved in the National Dialogue. Most of all, pray for young people and their families, that they might allow themselves to experience the unfathomable love of Christ that is offered to them through the Catholic Church.