



Archdiocese of St. Louis
Office of Sacred Worship
Prayer Divina
Prayer
Prayer is Conversation

What is conversation, any conversation with anyone? Or from another viewpoint: What do we do when we engage someone in conversation? We do several things.

First. We begin to converse with somebody when we become aware of that person. Awareness, then, is the first condition for conversation. Suppose I am just talking out loud to myself without realizing that I am being overheard. Is that conversation? Well, no. Why not? Because I was not aware of the other person's presence. If I was doing anything I was in conversation with myself. In fact, I think most people spend most of their waking hours in self-conversation, which is called, to give it a kind term, soliloquy. Whereas, true conversation is always colloquy. It is not only awareness, but awareness of someone else's presence besides my own. And so many people go through life, I'm afraid, only dimly aware of anyone else's presence except their own. That is why self-centered people, even when they are apparently in conversation out loud with someone else, are most often really talking to themselves. Ever watch it? It is a spectacle. Real conversation begins when I become aware of another, with stress on the other, and not only of myself.

Second. Besides being aware of someone, and it has to be someone else, conversation means that I wish to share with that other person something of what I have. I wish to give of myself, of what is inside of me, or a part of me to that other person. There are thoughts in my mind that I also want them to have. There are sentiments in my heart, desires in my will and feelings in my soul, that I do not wish to possess alone. So I enter into conversation in order to share. So true is this, that logically and psychologically I should not begin a conversation unless I have something that I wish to give someone else, which presumably that person does not yet have. That is why the highest act of charity among human beings is conversation, provided it is genuine and not spurious conversation.

We seldom reflect on the fact that the words convert, conversion and conversation all have the same fundamental meaning of redirection; a turning away from one thing, in this case self, and toward something else, in this case another person. True, sincere, deep, genuine, total conversation is more rare than we think.

Third. There is still more to conversation, as the very word implies. When I begin to converse, I literally turn toward the one with whom I wish to speak. The movement of my body facing that person is only the external symbol of what I should be doing inside of me. I am turning my spirit toward the one with whom I wish to talk. But as we know, it is quite possible to be physically facing someone without really conversing. There is no conversation worthy of the name, unless I have thus inwardly, turned aside from self and directed myself to another. We seldom reflect on the fact that the words convert, conversion and conversation all have the same fundamental meaning of redirection; a turning away from one thing, in this case self, and toward something else, in this case another person. True, sincere, deep, genuine, total conversation is more rare than we think. So often, I believe, we use other people, as we say, as sounding boards to listen to our own voice. They are just convenient to help us in what is still a continuous soliloquy. All real conversation, therefore, has this element of self-denial, or from another viewpoint, self-sacrifice where I turn from preoccupation with my own thoughts and desires and direct them toward someone else.

Fourth. What is my purpose when I hold a conversation? My purpose is, or should be to communicate. My intention is to bridge the gap that separates me from another person to unite myself with that other person, in a word, to communicate by transferring something of what is me to become part of what is he



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or she. We become united mainly by what we share of our own spirit with another person. Our Savior expressed for all time the deep meaning of conversation as communication when He told the Apostles how they were no longer strangers to Him but His friends (cf. Jn.15:15). Why? Because "I have shared with you what is in Me. I've told you what, before I spoke, was only on My mind. Now it's also on your minds. We have become united because part of Me is now part of you. You and I are united because I have communicated to you what before I spoke to you was only Mine." And then to emphasize the gravity of what He was doing He said it was the Father, who first in conversation with the Son, had shared the plenitude of the divine nature so that the Son in turn might share of that fullness with others who would mainly become His children because they would now receive what before belonged only to the Trinity. "You belong to Me," still Christ in paraphrase, "and I belong to you because we now have in common the secrets that were hidden with God from all eternity." We might, with reverence, re-describe the Trinity as the eternal, infinite conversation among the three persons who constitute the Deity.

Fifth and finally. Every conversation in some way or other employs a response from the one to whom I am speaking. Conversation is not merely talking to someone, it is talking with someone. Unless that person also says something to me I may be giving a speech or making an announcement, but I am hardly conversing. The way that person responds to me is immaterial. It may be just a smile, or depending on what I said, a frown. It may be only an occasional word or two; it may be only a yes with different inflections. You know, of course, there are at least fifty ways of saying yes. No matter what I say to that person, it must evoke something that he says to me or we are not, in the deepest sense of the word, in conversation. It takes two, at least, to converse, even when one may do most of the talking and the other, or others, do most of the listening. I should add, just for the record, that when I speak publicly, besides looking at the script I mainly watch the eyes and faces of my audience. I want to make sure that we are in conversation.