

Apart from me you can do nothing

Parish Pastoral Session

Introduction

This is a session to offer information (insofar as this is possible) — to invite questions (aware of the limitations) – and to have time to share reflections.

Emotions could run high so good facilitation would be crucial. Aim for an atmosphere of welcome and hospitality with, for example, tables with flowers, water, paper and pencils, etc and refreshments on arrival.

It would be useful to brief the facilitators in advance so that they know the flow of the meeting. It might also be useful to prime “listeners” – people who are on hand if someone finds part of the meeting difficult and who would value some time, space and listening ear.

It is designed to be adaptable and could be one or two sessions of a couple of hours or a short day to allow time and space for the process to unfold.

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Outline

Welcome

(Slide 1)

Thank people for coming.

Introduce those who are leading the session — parish priest/ dean/ bishop/ safeguarding lead.

Highlight the fact that there can be no quick answers or solutions and that this session is a time for the community to reflect together after the revelations that have emerged/ conviction has occurred. There will be a chance to repeat this in more detail after the opening prayer.

If appropriate, invite people to have a few moments of quiet — to “arrive” — and to be aware that everyone has come with strong feelings. Calm music can be useful here.

Opening Prayer

(Slide 2)

God of tenderness and compassion,
You call your people to witness to the power of your love,
to your desire for the truth and justice,
and to your gifts of hope and transparency.

Send your Spirit upon us as we meet in a time of confusion and pain.

Guide our reflections and conversations;
give us a spirit of mutual trust and humility,
so that those of us who are gathered speak in solidarity
with each other —
with those making allegations –
and those against whom allegations have been made.

We ask this in the name of our Teacher and Healer,
your Son, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Or

(Slide 3)

Reader We gather in the name of the Father.
All **Who creates each person
unique and irreplaceable
from love and for love.**

Reader We gather in the name of the Son. (Slide 4)
All **Who calls us to root our lives in his
and to bear with him,
fruits of love and compassion for the most vulnerable and in pain.**

Reader We gather in the name of the Holy Spirit. (Slide 5)
All **Who offers gifts in abundance to all who are open to receive them —
and through them, to bear the fruits that bring healing and peace to God’s people.**

Reader We gather +in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
All **Amen.**

What is happening?

(Slide 6 – add appropriate information)

Explain what has happened and what the parameters of the meeting are.

Alert people to the fact that, although there will be no quick answers, those leading the meeting will be as honest and open as they can.

Emphasise that this session is to help all those gathered – those leading as well as those attending – to deal with what is happening as a community of faith.

Allow questions but inform people that there are legal/ insurance implications that will limit what can be shared at this stage. Perhaps even more importantly, remind them that there has to be confidentiality for the survivor, their family and friends and the person against whom the allegations have been made.

If this session is post-conviction, there could be more opportunity to explain what has happened and why.

Possible ritual- “Laying things down”.

(Slide 7 – add information)

As emotions are likely to be running high, invite people to write a word or short phrase to describe how they feel about what is happening and their community on a post-it or piece of paper and put it into a basket at the foot of a cross. Alternatively, people could be invited to place a stone to represent the negativity and/ or light a small candle from a Christ-candle as a sign of hope.

Invite people to acknowledge these real and powerful feelings but, for now, to place them into the hand of God – knowing that God is big enough to hold them. You could refer to words from the psalms – about the feelings of God abandoning his people (that even Jesus shared) – anger (how long, how long, O Lord – despair (out of the depths do I cry to you, O Lord).

Group Conversations

Offer simple guidelines for listening to each other.

(Slide 8)

We are on the holy ground of the other – this could be useful – especially the part about taking off our sandals on the sacred ground of the other... it is their space not ours.

Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

In a culture paradoxically suffering from anonymity and at the same time obsessed with the details of other people’s lives, shamelessly given over to morbid curiosity, the Church must look more closely and sympathetically at others whenever necessary. In our world, ordained ministers and other pastoral workers can make present the fragrance of Christ’s closeness and his personal gaze. (Slide 9)

The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this “art of accompaniment” which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* #169)

Our conversations are therefore to be in the spirit of accompaniment:

(Slide 10)

- Confidential
- Compassionate
- Non-judgmental
- Respectful
- “make present the fragrance of Christ”
- And....?

Emphasise that these table and other conversations are confidential. Any feedback or comments can only be shared if the group or other participant agrees.

Group conversations

(Slide 11)

- Introduce themselves: names/ name of parish/ any roles/ etc.
- What are our initial reactions to what we have heard?
- What do we hope will happen during the course of the session/ day? How can we help to make that happen? (Assuming it's positive!)

(It can be useful for each table to have a 2-minute timer so that people can speak uninterrupted within a limit. They do not have to speak for the whole 2 minutes; if they want to stop, they can but everyone waits for their time to end before moving on.)

Scripture Reading John 15: 1-8

(Slide 12)

Jesus said,

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

The Fruits of the Spirit

(Slide 13)

(With references to Galatians 5: 22-23)

- Love
- Joy
- Peace
- Patience
- Kindness
- Generosity
- Faithfulness
- Gentleness
- Self-control.

Short reflection on passage

Use these or your own words:

This passage reminds us of Jesus' call to be like branches of a vine – drawing from his inexhaustible love and compassion – especially at times when our own resources feel stretched and worn out. It is important that we root our conversations today in Christ. We are Christ's branches, called to bear fruit. We may well feel very negatively, but for now, our role is not to bear the fruit of rage or dissension, etc but, as far as can, to bear the fruits of the Spirit – searching for ways to peace – to love – to generosity – and so on. This will not be easy but is a gift each of us can give to the community gathered here which will, hopefully, bear fruit in our wider community.

Depending on those gathered, you might refer to some of the “fruits of the flesh” – it could be helpful, for example, to explore the difference between the righteous anger some will be feeling and the anger or, perhaps, rage that Paul is talking about in Galatians. Also, some thoughts on dissension – we are allowed to disagree but not to be hostile or undermine others.

Look to fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5: 22-23) – fruits of the Vine that is Christ: the fruit of the Spirit in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Time for personal reflection

(Slide 14)

- How are we called to bear these fruits in a situation of such pain, confusion and anger?
- What difference does it make to us and to our community if we make this our goal – even if it is hard?

A walk outside, a quiet place or before Blessed Sacrament

Timing depends on whether this is a day or shorter session.

Coffee break

Emmaus Walk

(Slide 15)

(if time permits - takes about 20 minutes. People could take drinks with them).

Invite people to go into pairs (suggest spouses don't go together – they can do this later!) and share the experience of the first part of the session.

The process is simple –

- one person speaks uninterrupted –
- both share a few moments of silence for reflection on what has been shared
- second person speaks –
- another few moments of silence
- then a “holy conversation” about what they shared – what was common ground - what were the differences – how does it help (or not) with dealing with what is happening in the community?)

Lunch

Session 2

(Slide 16)

focusing on 1 John 3: 18-24

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

Input on passage

John was writing for an early Christian community facing its own difficulties. Just as that community needed a love that was not confined to mere words – ours does too.

In the current situation, who needs this kind of love? Explore briefly:

- Survivor (is our response to the allegations loving or...?)
- Their family/ friends/ groups they belong to.
- The person under investigation/ convicted – how is it most appropriate to show them love?
- Those who worked closely with the person under investigation/ convicted – they may be shocked/ horrified – feeling guilty that they did not know or did not express concerns – be totally disbelieving that the person they worked with would do something like that.
- Local community/ other churches/ agencies that the person was involved with (esp. but not exclusively charities involved in work with children and vulnerable adults).
- Reference could also be made to those such as bishop/ those charged with steering the process/ police/ solicitors, etc... again, how could they be loved appropriated (even where not possibly directly)
- “Us”

Table/ group conversation

(Slide 17)

If available, use the 2-minute timers, followed by a shared reflection/ conversation.

- Who needs this love in action?
- How can we be a community that offers real and active love (sometimes words being necessary, of course)?
- How can we help others to trust that we are a community of love and truth?
- What practical suggestions do we have to offer? Jot these down and prepare to share – just in case there isn't time to contribute them all in the plenary.

Plenary

Invite initial thoughts from the day.

Reminders of what happens next.

(Slide 18)

Insofar as it is possible, give an indication about how long the process might take (at least pointing out that it is likely to be a long haul).

Address any questions that have emerged during the session – and acknowledge that some are valid but cannot, at this stage, be answered.

Offer contact details for people to use if they have further information to share in confidence.

Assure people of your prayer – and ask for theirs during this time.

Review of the Day – examen-style.

(Slide 19)

Run through the day – from arrival to this point.

What has been a blessing?

What has been a challenge?

What are our hopes to take forward from this day?

Closing Prayer/ Mass

Could include a ritual – e.g. tying ribbons/ adding fruit to a vine (people could be invited to add a word/ short phrase to the outline of a bunch of grapes as a fruit of the day before attaching).

Intercessions

(Slide 20)

See Intercessions document or:

Reader As our day draws to a close,
we acknowledge the journey we have been on –
and what lies ahead.
We pray that we – and those who are not here today –
will remain rooted in Christ during these difficult and unsettling times,
trying always to bear the fruits of the Spirit
that bring life and hope to ourselves and those around us.

Pause

Reader Over coming weeks and months.

(Slide 21)

May our love
All **be alive and active.**

Reader May our joy
All **be alive and active.**

Reader May our peace
All **be alive and active.**

Reader May our patience
All **be alive and active.**

Reader May our kindness
All **be alive and active.** (Slide 22)

Reader May our generosity
All **be alive and active.**

Reader May our faithfulness
All **be alive and active.**

Reader May our gentleness
All **be alive and active.**

Reader May our self-control
All **be alive and active.**

Reader And may God bless us and keep us; (Slide 23)
All **May the Lord make his face to shine upon us and be gracious to us;**

Reader May the Lord lift up his countenance upon us;
All **and may the Lord give us peace.**
Amen

Thank people for coming. (Slide 24)