# Conversation Guidelines for Community of Solitude (v. 2 July 2022) by Br. Leo, CoS

This is a short guide on conversations. The original focused on email conversations, to be observed by all in the Community. With the changes in the past few years, I have added a section on Zoom communications. The spirit of the original came from my own painful failures in communication which I wish to help others avoid. If you have a better way of doing this let me know.

# Communication

There are some levels of communication which we all participate in daily. Roughly these are three: informal or trivial, formal, or serious, and intimate.

In trivial conversations, such as chit-chatting or making a simple request, when we encounter a misunderstanding, we usually address these quickly and simply: "I asked for ketchup not mustard", for e.g. What is common to all these conversations is the low emotional level as well as the low importance of the topic itself. Not much needs to be said about these.

The formal or serious conversations are those where there is a higher level of engagement on both parties. The emotional content of these can vary substantially from conversation to conversation, but any time you have two (or more) people putting a lot of attention into a subject it is a guarantee that there will be misunderstandings. These can escalate quickly and need to be monitored for potential breakdowns.

But even these are not at the level of most spiritual talk. Spiritual talk, as will be practiced in this Community is of an intimate nature. People are talking about their hearts and from their hearts. The emotional content is VERY high, even if the words are measured and the tone in kept low.

What is critical to remember is that when talking spiritual matters, we are entering into a sacred space. For there to be spiritual conversation, there must be a willingness on both sides to be open, unguarded, defenseless. Without this 'nakedness' the conversation is at best formal.

One more thing to keep in mind: monastic life, and certainly in this Community, is about creating a safe space where people can explore God's calling in their lives. Safety is the operative word here. To be safe does not mean I have the best defenses. In the case of "spiritual safety" it is quite the opposite. A safe spiritual environment is one where I can put down all my defenses and be what God wants me to be.

To enter a spiritual conversation with someone is to enter very sacred work. It must be handled with the appropriate reverence just as St. Benedict advises us to handle every instrument with as much love, reverence, and respect as the sacred vessels of the altar. The following general rules will serve us well in all contexts:

1. Listen to others with our entire selves (senses, feelings, intuition, imagination, and rational faculties).
2. Don't interrupt, challenge what others say, give advice, or criticize.
3. Pause between speakers to absorb what has been said.
4. Don't formulate what we want to say while someone else is speaking.
5. Speak for ourselves only, expressing our own thoughts and feelings, referring to our own experiences.
6. Listen to the group as a whole — to those who haven't spoken aloud as well as to those who have.
7. Leave space for anyone who may want to speak a first time before we speak a second time.

ourselves.

1. Hold our desires and opinions — even our convictions — lightly (see Rule of Benedict chapters 68-70)
2. Keep the sharing in the group absolutely confidential.

There is another version, an acrostic adapted by one of our members from the Kaleidoscope Institute (https://www.kscopeinstitute.org/):

**R** – take Responsibility for what you say and feel without blaming others

**E** – use Empathetic listening

**S** – be Sensitive to differences in communication/cultural styles

**P** – Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak

**E** – Examine your own assumptions and perceptions

**C** – keep Confidentiality

**T** – Tolerate ambiguity because we are not here to debate. There are no “winners” or “losers.”

You get the idea. Listen mindfully with the “ears of your heart”, speak sparingly and only to elevate (see Rule of Benedict Chapt 6), and all will be well.

**Video Conferencing**

There are a variety of video conferencing technologies, but they all function in a similar way. I will be referring to Zoom in this document because it is the one, we use for our own Community calls.

Video conferencing allows for a richer communication environment, but it is not without its own drawbacks. The most common issue is the perennial battle between extroverts and introverts (even in a community such as ours). Some people think better when speaking, others prefer to formulate their thoughts before talking. While introverts will generally feel drowned out by extroverts in all communications, it is especially so in an environment like Zoom which will automatically focus on wherever the noise is coming from. It will present only the most current source of noise, drowning others. In this environment, if the extroverts are not mindful, the introverts will have no chance to even be heard – here’s where rule #7 above is so useful.

Having sufficiently scolded the extroverts, let’s turn to the introverts. Realize that the Community does not have the time to wait indefinitely until you can come up with your best possible answer or comment. Take a risk and put something out which is incomplete. It’ll be ok. If you are not ready to discuss the point, then it is your responsibility to say so. Something like “I am not ready yet. Come back to me in a few minutes.” Or “I will think about this and then send an email later” or some such thing. Do not expect others to somehow read your minds. Speak up. Use the Raise a Hand button, or type your question, concern on the group chat. It is up to you to engage the flow of the conversation.

Joining a meeting:

* When joining a meeting turn on your camera and *make sure it is centered on your face*.
* When joining a meeting make sure you are muted.
* In a meeting set your view to Gallery that way you can see everyone. See here for more information: https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362323-Adjusting-your-video-layout-during-a-virtual-meeting
* Get familiar with the **Raise a Hand** button on Zoom, that way the moderators can recognize who will speak next. When you have the Zoom app open, you'll see the “Reactions” button at the bottom of the screen. First, select the “Reactions” button, and then select the “Raise Hand” option to raise your hand.
* Do not start talking if not called upon.

Participant responsibility

* Pull together any resources you might need during the meeting ahead of time (prayer books, agenda, etc.).
* ‍Review the agenda beforehand and come prepared.
* Silence your phone.
* *‍Keep your camera on and position it at eye level*. No one is interested in the contents of your nostrils or some other part of your body or your room.
* *Enter the meeting with your microphone muted*. Practice unmuting and muting when you speak.
* Always mute your microphone when you’re not talking, and especially after you have talked to give an opportunity for others (rule #7 again!)
* Stay with the conversation. While some of us like to multi-task, it is usually not appropriate - there are exceptions of course.
* Stay with the silence. We are a community which should be comfortable with silence. If no one is talking, and you have already talked, then wait. And wait some more.
* Do not engage in other activities when on a Zoom call - be present and give others the gift of your prayerful discernment.
* Flooding: this is when you are particularly excited about the topic and cannot contain yourself, either in defending or in evangelizing others. Don't do this! (See rule #8 above)
* Take slightly longer pauses between sentences or thoughts to give people the chance to respond. (Rule #3 above)
* Sometimes connection speeds and interruptions at home can make it harder for some participants. So, give plenty of time for everyone to catch up.
* Talking stick: in older times, when meeting in person, some groups had the practice of the "talking stick" where only the one holding it could talk. This applies doubly so in a Zoom call. Do not interrupt someone else who is talking unless it is to tell them that you could not hear or understand something. Use the Raise a Hand feature.

Host responsibilities:

* Manage the room and address disruptive participants, especially those who have already spoken more than once.
* Place all participants on mute upon entry.
* Make it a priority to give everyone the opportunity to interact or contribute. Monitor the chat room as well as keeping tabs on who raised their hand, and most importantly who has not spoken yet.
* Focus on the agenda and make sure the discussion stays on topic.

# Electronic Communication

It should not be necessary for me to remind anyone that emails can and will be misinterpreted? tone, intention, meaning. All of it will be lost when you hit the Send button. Keep this in mind. The most positive, encouraging, friendly email you can send will be seen as a vicious, underhanded, cowardly attack by the receiver.

The use of smileys can help to put across some tone. But not much. They too can be misunderstood or simply overlooked.

Without the benefit of being there in person to ensure that the right words and ideas are emphasized, using gesture, tone, facial expression, the recipient of the email will have to work to provide them. And if they have never met the other person then they will project their own emotions into your words.

# Guidelines

Because 90% of the communication in the Community will be via email, and because we actively encourage constructive conversation, and because of the potential for disaster here are some guidelines to be accepted, learned, and lived by all of us.

# On receiving an email

1. **Pray**. Before you go clicking and plunging into the email make sure you take a deep breath and say a prayer. You are potentially entering a period of prayer and discernment - take it seriously. Email correspondence can be prayer if you let it! And it almost always is discernment - you are trying to discern the writer's heart, and your own motivations.
2. **Read deliberately**. As you recite the psalms, so too you should recite your email. Take your time. Absorb the words first. Read it at least three times. Read it once for the general context. read it a second time slowly noticing the language. Read it a third time as if in lectio asking God to point out what you are supposed to learn from this.
3. **Imagine the email is from God**. This may be especially hard for emails which hit a nerve. But as contemplatives we should be able to be introspective enough to allow these nerves to be hit without hitting back in retaliation. There is hardly a harder spiritual discipline than turning the other cheek! But if you imagine this is a message from God you may be less inclined to strike back!
4. **Walk away**. Even in potentially happy, joyous, and otherwise positive emails, there is hardly a time when they need an immediate answer. In fact, the urgency of response is inversely proportional to the level of intimacy of the email. The trivial emails, instant messages and chats tend to need an immediate response measure in seconds. The serious and professional emails tend to require responses measured in hours. Spiritual conversations do not have a maximum time limit, but there will never be a need fo ran immediate answer. Slow, deliberate conversations foster intimacy, trust and love. Quick, haphazard chats foster nothing but grumbling and gossip.

# On sending email

1. **Pray**. Writing a spiritual email is a sacred activity. Pray before, during and after composition. Hold on to the composed draft and do lectio on it. Let the email be so full of your prayers that no matter how the words are misinterpreted the prayers will carry the message across.
2. **Need versus want**. Is this something that needs to be communicated? Or is it something you want to get off your chest? A need should be something filled with love and charity, gentleness and caring. A want is usually more forceful. If you want to get something off your chest a phone call may be better, especially a phone call with your formation master first. It can also foster a very fruitful conversation with your spiritual director. Be very watchful that you listen to these impulses so you can always be answering God's call.
3. **Composition**. The usage of more advanced writing techniques, such a puns or irony, can (and frequently will) be lost on email. It requires that both sides be at the same level of reading ability and expecting to read ironic words. The best course of action is to avoid them. Keep your words simple and direct.
4. **Me, myself, and I**. Do not talk about "you", but always own up to your opinions and positions. Do not say "You are wrong", but rather "I see it differently"; do not say "Compared to you" - never compare. You have logs in your eyes you need to whittle before you can successfully clear the speck out of your brother's or sister's eyes. Talk about how you feel, how you see. Do not say "I feel you are wrong" - this is an old trick! Avoid it. Say "I do not understand," or "This makes me very sad".
5. **Love**. Write with love. This does not mean you only approve of everything. Stand your ground - in love. We cannot grow spiritually if we are not challenged. This is not a society for Yes Men and Women. But it is also not open season for bullying. Just state your case, openly, assuming responsibility, and then stop and let the other person have time to prayerfully respond.

It is very easy to hurt someone, not so easy to repair a hurt. Try not to add to anyone's daily burdens and sorrows. Try to be the one email which someone will be eager to read, to be inspired, to grow, to learn, and to love.

Do these things above and you will develop deep, long-lasting, and fruitful relationships.