

THE ART OF ACCOMPANIMENT

Four essential conversations on becoming
the kind of parish the church needs today

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How to use this resource

STUDY

This booklet provides a guide to four conversations designed to help pastoral leaders understand, plan for, and become an accompanying parish. It is also suited to individual use. If used alone, simply read through each statement: pray the prayers, reflect on the content, and think through the discussion questions. If used as a group, we recommend you gather your group and begin with the prayer we provide. Then move around the circle in your group and read aloud the numbered statements, rotating readers with each stanza. Group members should note items that strike them as especially important and return to them during the discussion periods.

CONVERSATION AND PRAYER

When you come to the prayer and group process notes, continue around the circle discussing or praying as the notes direct. Use our suggestions as a starting point and add your own questions, prayers, or action plans. The group may also pause anywhere along the line to discuss the content.

FOUR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ACCOMPANIMENT

Each conversation opens with a brief shared prayer

CONVERSATION ONE

Accompaniment as a Pastoral Strategy

- An introduction and three principles
- Introduction: The church needs accompanists
- Principle #1: Accompaniment is a sacred task

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- Principle #2: Grace is the force behind accompaniment
- Principle #3: We have reverence for the divine mystery in each other

CONVERSATION TWO

Accompaniment in the Formation of the Conscience

Five principles leading to the wisdom of Jesus

- Principle #1: God speaks to us in the depths of our conscience
- Principle #2: We accompany people to help them hear God
- Principle #3: Avoid being overly church-law-centered
- Principle #4: Avoid being overly self-centered
- Principle #5: Seek to be well-balanced and Christ-centered

CONVERSATION THREE

Accompaniment toward Discernment

An introduction and four principles

- Introduction: Listening Deeply for the Voice of Jesus
- Principle #1: Discernment deals with practical, life-changing questions
- Principle #2: Discernment is couched in prayer
- Principle #3: Discernment eventually leads to a discussion of the matter
- Principle #4: Good decisions made in discernment lead to consolation

CONVERSATION FOUR

Hallmarks of an “Accompanying Parish”

Nine hallmarks for use in pastoral planning

- Hallmark #1: The parish priest and pastoral team are committed to accompaniment
- Hallmark #2: The parish team plans for ways to increase accompaniment
- Hallmark #3: Mercy for people’s life situations is obvious and generous
- Hallmark #4: Families are accompanied in the religious education programs
- Hallmark #5: Everyone is accompanied through the Sunday Liturgy
- Hallmark #6: Pastoral care ministries are “accompaniment specialists”
- Hallmark #7: The “voice” of the parish is consistently companionable
- Hallmark #8: The parish respects that people gradually become fully faithful
- Hallmark #9: The parish reaches out beyond its comfort zone

Accompaniment as a pastoral strategy

AN INTRODUCTION AND THREE PRINCIPLES

PRAYER

Become aware of the presence of God

ALL: In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[1] Jesus accompanies us through each day as a shepherd does the sheep. Jesus walks beside us aware of our needs and desires, tending us gently. The Holy Spirit guides us and opens our hearts to hear the word and live by it. God fills the world with the fragrance of Christ, now flowing through us as we accompany each other to new life.

[2] “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (2 Corinthians 2:14–16a, NRSV).

[3] Let us become consciously aware now of this ever-present God, allowing our hearts to swell with the experience of the divine presence. Allow the fragrance of Christ to fill your senses. Let his gaze of love for

you fall upon you. What is this experience of being near to God like for you? (*Brief sacred pause, followed by sharing.*)

[4] O God, we know that you are with us, and that you accompany us in all that we do. We open our hearts to your love. Grant that, by the light of your Holy Spirit, we may be humble as we walk with others and charitable in all that we do here today. We pray through Christ, our Lord.

ALL: Amen.

INTRODUCTION

The Church needs accompanists

[5] “In our world,” Pope Francis teaches us, “ordained ministers and other pastoral workers can make present the fragrance of Christ’s closeness and his personal gaze. 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” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 169).

[6] With these words Pope Francis has called us all to understand how to accompany others and how to make such accompaniment part of our pastoral practice in every parish. Learning this art and putting it into practice is the purpose of these four conversations. As we talk together about this, we grow together as accompanists. Let us bring our hearts and souls into these conversations in order to make present the fragrance of Christ to those who need it most.

[7] For many in pastoral ministry, this will come quite naturally and be a welcome affirmation of how they have always done their work. For others, this will be somewhat new and challenging in their ministry. Pope Francis is asking us to have deep reverence for the experiences of others. We may not understand or identify with someone who has, for example,

left the church for decades and now wants to return, or someone who is living in a second marriage and cannot ask for an annulment, or someone who is at odds with church teaching on contraception. But Pope Francis teaches us that, as accompanists, our task is to listen and guide but not to judge and condemn.

[8] But first, what exactly is accompaniment? How do we become an “accompanying parish? To most of us this is a new term when applied to pastoral ministry. We are accustomed to hearing about “accompanists” but we think of them as piano players who accompany singers. What do we mean when we use this term to describe the art of accompaniment when it applies to each other as Christians on a lifelong journey to the heart of Christ?

[9] The metaphor of the piano player is actually quite a good one. A musical accompanist is somewhat in the background of the performance, allowing the singer to shine. It is the singer who sets the stage and who determines the phrasing and tempo of the song. The role of the accompanist is to help the singer stay on tune and to embellish the singer’s performance with stunning beauty.

[10] Accompanists often sit in the shadow of the great voices of these great singers. Being the pianist who plays for them can feel like the most thankless job in music. The singers couldn’t do it without them but it’s the sopranos and the tenors who get all the glory, as well as most of the cash and applause. It’s all about the singer on stage; the accompanists, meanwhile, are busy playing fiendishly difficult accompaniments by Schubert or Schumann.

[11] It’s very similar for pastoral ministers who accompany persons through the ups and downs of life and faith. As accompanists, we learn to allow the parishioner being accompanied to shine. Each person is “making their own kind of music,” and our role is to help them do it well. We make use of the tools given to us by the church to offer them

guidance but, in the end, the conscience of the one being accompanied must be allowed to set the stage. Their timing (and it may take many years in some cases) is our timing.

[12] Ours is not to choose the song, not to set the tempo, and not to dominate the conversation. We can coach them into quiet times of prayer as a way of helping them be in touch with what God is calling them to, but in the end, the mystery of God's grace in their lives is not for us to direct. As accompanists, we need few words; we must be careful not to numb the one being accompanied by our sermons and explanations.

[13] To accompany another Christian on the journey of faith requires first and foremost as pastoral leaders that our own hearts be in Christ. We become the hands and feet, the voice and gaze, *the very fragrance* of Christ for one another. How can we accompany someone else to accept God's desire for them if we ourselves are not reflecting God's desire for us in our own lives?

IN YOUR OWN WORDS (DISCUSSION TIME)

[14] Therefore, we who would accompany others must be accompanied by someone ourselves. Who accompanies you? Looking back over your life, who are the people who have appeared at the right moment to accompany you so that you could become your most real self? When have you experienced a dearth of accompaniment, a time when you needed encouragement and assistance but were not offered it?

[15] Likewise, how has the word of God accompanied you? How has the church through her sacraments and people been your companion and guide? In your life today, to whom do you turn in those moments when you most need the companionship that assures you; challenges what you think, do, or fail to do; and tells you the truth?

PRINCIPLE #1

accompaniment is a sacred task

[16] To accompany others is a sacred task but one that occurs in our daily lives very often. We walk with one another day in and day out. Parents with their children. Spouses with each other. Friends, colleagues, teachers, neighbors, and even strangers may appear in our lives as companions.

[17] This daily "walking with" becomes "accompaniment" only when we lead others ever closer to the heart of God. If all we do with others all day is "chatter," then we are merely standing side by side without that all-important common, inner force that is the Spirit. Our task as accompanists is not to affirm everything in each other's lives, but to invite each other to the freedom of God. This means that we invite each other to follow the pathway of love and joy that leads us, deeply and truly, to become the persons God creates us to be.

[18] Without this orientation toward the desire of God for us, we quickly become drifters in a world lacking meaning. We become spiritually homeless. Walking with each other without calling one another to the heart of God is counterproductive. It's a sort of self-absorbed therapy, but it is not a pilgrimage to the Father (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 170).

[19] Therefore, we can say that to accompany another is more than merely "to walk with him or her." Accompaniment is more intimate and intentional; it's more dynamic and life-changing. The word "accompany" itself suggests this intimacy. Its literal meaning might be rendered as "to break bread with another..." We become companions, trusted and known. Pope Francis reminds us to "remove our sandals" with reverence—for the personal journey we witness when we accompany another is indeed a glance at the face of God.

[20] In today's church, Pope Francis tells us, we need men and women who, on the basis of their experience of accompanying others, know how

prudence, understanding, patience, and docility to the Spirit play a role in leading others closer to Christ. One who accompanies others must be willing to wait for the Spirit to move in the heart of the other. Without the Spirit, any imposed set of rules or laws, even if they come from the church, will fall on deaf ears, leaving the one being accompanied with anger and hurt and the accompanist feeling frustrated (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 171).

PRINCIPLE #2

grace is the force behind accompaniment

[21] One who accompanies another must always cooperate with grace. Grace is enough for us. Without grace, we are powerless.

[22] Grace is a free gift from God who loves us unconditionally. It is God giving us God's own very self in a radical and real way, empowering us to become the persons we are created to be. In this relationship of love offered to us by God, we find ourselves saying, "I am a sinner whom the Lord looked upon with mercy" (Pope Francis in an interview, December 2, 2015). This grace is given to us even as we live in our individual situations in life, experiencing our own spiritual journeys (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1999).

[23] Grace is a personal communication from God. It elaborates the relationship between God and us in a profound way. It is like a force or sacred power that fills us. Through grace we are enthused for love, empowered to work for justice, and able to become the richly gifted persons God desires us to become.

[24] Spiritual accompaniment operates in the realm of grace. Grace gives accompaniment its force. We might say, then, that accompaniment is "help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her [that is,

to *the force of grace*], to respond to this personally communicating God, and to live out of the consequence of the relationship" (William Barry SJ and William Connolly SJ. *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).

[25] And what exactly is "the consequence" of being related to God or of receiving grace? It is to be oriented to the heart of the Lord. Even during a busy day or in the middle of the night, we find ourselves mindful of the presence of God. This becomes our compass; everything in our life is directed by it.

[26] And even more, the consequence of being given grace is that we begin to realize, ever so slowly at first, that God loves us. God has forgiven us even if we have not forgiven ourselves, even if other people or the church itself has failed to forgive us. This is where real faith is needed. Do you believe that God has forgiven you and still loves you, even as a sinner?

[27] "No one can be condemned forever," Pope Francis reminds us, "because that is not the logic of the Gospel!" (*The Joy of Love*, 297). "The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone forever; it is to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart" (homily at Mass celebrated with the new cardinals, 15 February, 2015).

[28] Thus in spiritual accompaniment we are guiding each other along the pathway of God. We extend to one another the unbelievable and life-changing truth that we have seen; and the truth is that God forgives us completely. Accompaniment also leads us to become God-like. We call each other to be more forgiving, more generous, less judgmental, less greedy, more loving, more enthused, less harsh, less full of lust, and closer to the heart of Jesus.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS (DISCUSSION TIME)

[29] Go back over the section we just read and in your own words describe what it means to accompany someone, cooperating with grace

in their lives. Think about the families and individuals in your parish including those who are absent from regular parish life. How can the parish and you as pastoral ministers better accompany them at times like baptism, religious education, preparation for a child's first sacraments, illness, family planning questions, the dying process, or whatever marriage situation they live in?

PRINCIPLE #3

We have reverence for the divine mystery in each other

[30] No one can plumb the mystery of God's presence in the life of another person. Therefore, we must listen carefully to how God calls each person to himself (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 171). It goes without saying then that we who accompany others must learn the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. To listen is to have an open heart; this leads to genuine encounter and intimacy in Christ.

[31] A good accompanist can also find the right gesture and word in just the right moment when it is time to speak, offering the one being accompanied a gentle nudge toward God's heart. For we are more than mere bystanders, watching each other from a distance but saying nothing in the face of evil and darkness. We are also more than mere judges, lording it over others as though only we have the right answers for everyone in every situation.

[32] It is in this middle ground—between saying nothing and rendering harsh judgments—that accompaniment flourishes. An accompanist has his or her heart tuned into the flow of grace, of God's love for us, God's willingness to forgive even the most serious offences. The accompanist listens to both God and the one being accompanied and draws them together with the gentle love of the father who was awaiting the return of his prodigal son, arms open, heart ready, reflecting the face of God's love.

[33] One who accompanies others must realize that each person's relationship with God is a mystery. God calls us in ways that often surprise us and may not be fully understood. A spiritual accompanist, therefore, is not an intrusive judge who scolds and condemns but a companion who has reverence for the mysterious ways in which God may be working in the life of the other (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 172).

[34] A well-trained accompanist "invites others to let themselves be healed, to take up their mat, embrace the cross, leave all behind, and go forth ever anew" (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 172). We learn as accompanists to be patient and compassionate with others, as we hope they will be with us.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS (DISCUSSION TIME)

[35] What is your experience of accompanying others? How have you learned this art? Without betraying the confidence of anyone in the parish, take all the time you need at this point to share some stories of accompaniment.