Class 8

Group Process and Group Dynamics

As the leader of your group, it’s important to be aware of the meeting on three levels:

1) *Content* (the material you are covering);
2) *Group process* (how the class moves along);
3) *Group dynamics* (how the students interact).

You need to be presenting the material, facilitating the process, and being aware of the dynamics. This is a “facilitative teaching” approach. Teaching and facilitating are not mutually exclusive; a good teacher is also a good facilitator. Your students will learn both from what you are teaching and how you are teaching it.

We have discussed presenting the content in earlier classes. Today we will be talking about:

**Group process**, which is about working with your group members and leading them along smoothly and effectively in order to help them learn. Group process is in the service of learning.

**Group dynamics**, which is about the forces (the personalities, attitudes, and behaviours) at play within the group and how they affect the process, either helping or hindering it.

Understanding group process and dynamics and being aware of how they operate in your group will:

- Help you keep the group on track in a loving, respectful way;
- Help you facilitate a solid learning experience for your students;
- Contribute to building a sense of trust, safety, cooperation, and joining within the group;
- Be especially useful when leading a discussion, taking comments, fielding questions, or dealing with a difficult member.

Setting guidelines, equalizing participation, dealing gently but firmly with problematic and disruptive attitudes and behaviours (such as monopolizing, attention getting, trying to teach, communication blocking, and resistance to you as teacher and to the material you are teaching) are basic to this.

Try to bring out the best in all the group members. Foster an environment in which they see this as a holy endeavour and a collaborative venture.

We have already covered some of the elements of group process, in the classes on “Teaching as Miracle Working” (Class 4), “Meeting Preparation and Format” (Class 5), and “Leading Discussion” (Class 7). We’ll go into more detail here.
Group Process

You as the leader

First of all, in the interests of both the content and the process, you need to be the acknowledged leader, acknowledged by the group members and by you. You need to take on the role of group leader with confidence and without apology or hesitation. (This may be a process in itself!)

Being a leader in the context of teaching the Course means that you are both clear about what you want to achieve in the meeting and conscious of modeling Course principles. You really care about the group members and about the ideas of the Course reaching into their hearts and minds, and you want to share your understanding and experience with them in order to facilitate that happening.

You want to be a devoted teacher, as we talked about in “The Role of the Teacher” (Class 2) (devoted to the Course and to the students, not to your ego. Your group members will learn both from what you are saying and how you are saying it. They will take their cues from you. You will set the tone for the meetings. Being loving, welcoming, respectful, and non-judgmental will put them at ease and will also be a guide for how they can be in the group. Sharing your love of the Course and the transformative effect it has had on you as you have studied, practiced, applied, and extended it can have a powerful effect on the group members.

People learn best from being engaged in their own learning process, so do what you can to reach them and engage them. We saw last week how asking questions does that. Don’t lecture them or teach at them but teach to them. Be engaged with them. Draw them in with your presence. Be aware of your body language. (Your body will convey meaning to the group members; for instance, via you crossing your arms over your chest, rolling your eyes, looking or turning away.) Maintain eye contact with the group members (not just some). Maintain an open, inviting stance and be relaxed, personable, and approachable.

Most of all, be aware of your mental state. Just as presentation is meant to be a holy encounter (Class 4), so is group process. As you lead the group, you want to do so from a miracle-minded state, not an egocentric one. Actively monitor your internal environment/state of mind before, during, and after the meeting. Develop a witness self and catch yourself when you are moving into “image mode” and apply a response to temptation practice. Be aware of what pushes your buttons, what your triggers are in what people say and do. Be alert for when this might happen and have a favourite practice at the ready. Consider compiling your own study group leader response-to-temptation/problem-solving repertoire. This will be most helpful when dealing with members who pose a challenge to you and to the group process, as we will see later.
**Some general points:**

- Remember that you are here to be truly helpful (T-4.XI.8), and invite the Holy Spirit to be with you before, during, and after the meeting;
- Demonstrate the Course’s way through your communication and interactions with the group members;
- Be respectful of everyone, giving them time, listening to them attentively. This elicits their respect for you and the process; i.e., their questions and comments will be expressed respectfully;
- Be present to every person, giving each one your full attention;
- Be patient, kind, and courteous with every individual;
- Be encouraging and welcoming of everyone;
- Be confident about what you are teaching and your role in teaching it; don’t be tentative;
- Be authentic and honest about where you are in your journey along the path;

**Guidelines**

When you start off with your group, we strongly recommend setting some basic guidelines, which will help you keep the group on topic and focused and will contribute to the group members working together smoothly and respectfully.

(Suggested guidelines for you as group leader and for your students follow as a separate document.)

**An initial introductory meeting**

It could be very helpful to have an initial “Meet-and-Greet” before the actual study group meetings begin. Since you will be starting to teach the Text in the first meeting, you won’t have time to set the stage and for people to get to know one another a bit. Some possible topics are:

- The nature of the study group; that is, that the intent is to study the Text readings together through the Complete and Annotated Edition (the CE);
- Your role; that is, you will be leading the group, having a teaching role based on the Circle’s approach and the CE;
- Introductions: You: a bit about background and your relationship with the Course. The group members: Whatever they want to share about themselves, both personally and in relation to the Course; what brought them to the group; how they feel about being in a study group (this may be where some may talk about how they learn and how easily they contribute in a group setting or not);
- Introduce and go over the guidelines with them and ask if there are others that would contribute to their learning and to them feeling safe in the group;
- Let the group members know how available you are outside the meetings; that is, whether or not you are willing to meet with people individually and, if so, in what way (email, phone call, Zoom, etc.).
If this is an in-person group (rather than online), you might want to consider having a time for refreshments and socializing afterwards or during a break time, if you have one.

**Timing and pacing of the meetings**

- Try to start and end on time; this will provide a model for the group members to follow;
- Be attentive to timing and pacing as the meeting progresses;
- When you are reading from the Course, read slowly to allow the words to sink in;
- Pace yourself. If you have a certain amount to cover in the meeting, don’t take it slowly in the first part and then race through the last part.

**Leading discussion**

As Robert said in Class 7, “Your objective for the meeting is for your members to understand the teaching and take it in on a personal and practical level.” To accomplish this, you will need to lovingly guide them, eliciting their cooperation and engagement in the process.

Try to stay on purpose and focused and keep the participants on track. Do so while remaining in a place of calm and loving authority. Try not to get sidetracked and distracted by their behaviour or attitudes. (See later comments under “Group Dynamics.”) Likewise, do not get sidetracked by going off on your own tangents with favourite ideas, unrelated topics, or topics that will come up later, Course pet peeves, etc. You are here to impart the material; therefore, you need to stay focused yourself. If you allow yourself to get sidetracked, you are essentially giving the students permission to do so as well.

If someone does go off on another topic, a way to bring the discussion back is to ask something such as, “How does that relate to the question?” Or: “I’m not seeing how that relates to the idea we’re discussing now.” You can also say, for instance, “We’ve got a bit off track here, so let’s get back to the topic at hand.”

You can gently stop run-on comments, with something like, “This is interesting, and we could discuss this all evening, but let’s move on now to make sure we cover all the material.” If it seems as if someone really wants more help with an idea, you might say something like, “I’ll send you an article that may clarify this.” Or: “If you want more help with this, get in touch with me later.” Or: “I’d be willing to stay a while after the meeting to talk about this” [that is, if you are].

**Encouraging and equalizing participation**

Some participants find it very easy to talk in a group; they naturally jump into a discussion or respond to a question, or they may seem to have a comment to make about almost everything. There are others who tend to hold back. This can have an impact on group process. When someone habitually refrains from participating actively in the group, it can affect the sense of joining and bonding, as well as the sense of safety and trust.
In your group, try to draw out the quiet ones, while gently reining in the vocal ones. At the same time, it’s important to respect group members if they choose not to contribute actively. They may be introverted, or don’t feel safe sharing in a group, or be the kind of person who takes time to process a question before commenting. People have different learning styles, and these may learn best by listening and taking things in. Some people come to listen. They may be seriously applying the material in their own mind and just don’t want to say much. Whatever you do, it’s important not to pressure anyone to talk. If they are the kind who want to remain silent, pressuring them will mar their experience.

To encourage broader participation, you can say something like, “Who hasn’t commented and would like to?” Or: “We haven’t heard from some of you. Who else would like to comment or ask a question? I’m interested in what you think about this…”

If you are attentive and alert to what is going on in the group, you can tell when someone would like to share but is holding back, and you can say something like, “[Name], did you want to comment?” Likewise, pay attention to when someone looks puzzled, and ask, “[Name], do you have a question about this?”

Starting your meetings with a brief check-in may provide an opportunity for the quieter ones to share, and this may open the way to them contributing more actively in the teaching and learning part of the meetings. Here are some suggestions for an initial sharing:

- Anything that has arisen from the material we covered in last week’s meeting;
- What effect last week’s readings and our discussion had on you;
- Anything significant that happened during the week or any insights you had (especially in relation to the material we covered).

Be aware that, if at the beginning of the meetings, you do have a sharing such as this, it may end up taking over unless you are clear with your students about this being a brief time of checking in. Focusing the sharing on things related to last week’s meeting will help guide the sharing. You may want to use a timer to keep people on track with their sharing.
Group Dynamics

The dynamics at play in your group may be healthy and cooperative and help further the process. However, you may have students whose attitudes and behaviours hinder the process. The attitudes and behaviours of the group members that pull the meeting off track and threaten group process can be noticeable by what the person is saying and also by what he or she is doing—or not doing. Some of them you just need to be aware of; others you will want to deal with. When deciding if you should address or deal with a particular behaviour, attitude, or situation, ask yourself, “How much is this affecting my teaching objective and the group process?”

Dealing with people who manifest attitudes and behaviours that hinder the process

In dealing with group members who exhibit attitudes and behaviours that hinder group process, remember that it is most important that you be the leader and that you show leadership in a Course-based way. Most of the students have come because they want to learn, and they want you to lead them to that learning. They depend on you to provide a safe, enjoyable, and healthy environment in which they can learn.

Some general guidelines

• Check in with the Holy Spirit and ask Him how to be truly helpful both to the person and to the group;
• Remember that you are the leader; don’t let the person take over; be gentle and firm about maintaining your role and regaining it if need be;
• Remain centred in a place of calm and loving authority;
• The person may be acting out of his or her ego, but you need to set yours aside and be the devoted teacher, even if you are dealing with a “difficult” person or situation;
• Attend to your own mind: Be aware of attitudes and behaviours that push your buttons. Refrain from judging the person; be truly willing to see him or her as a holy Son of God. Stay centred on the person’s holiness, worth, and equality. Have a phrase at the ready such as, “Holy Spirit; let me see my brother with vision instead of judgment.”;
• Do not take the person’s comments personally, as an attack upon you;
• Stay focused on your goal of helping your students learn;
• Gently but firmly dispel everything that diverts you from that objective. Bring the discussion back to the topic at hand and get the class back on track;
• Do not dismiss the person, brush him or her off, embarrass, or put him or her down.
• Avoid being defensive or getting caught up in a debate;
• Hold a space for the person to say what he or she wants to say and then bring the discussion back to the topic at hand, back to the Course teachings.
Some specific attitudes and behaviours you may encounter and how to deal with them

Taking up a lot of space

- **Monopolizing/dominating**: wanting to comment on almost everything: If someone has commented several times and tends to dominate, you may want to say, “[Name], before we hear your comment, let’s see if someone who hasn’t shared yet would like to.” (See also above under “Encouraging and equalizing participation.”)

- **Seeking attention**: Grandstanding is acting or speaking in order to impress or gain approval. Some other attention-getting behaviours are storytelling and joking. This doesn’t mean that sharing a story or telling a joke is a problem. It is just helpful to be aware that this is how some people relate in a group—on a regular basis. Sometimes, not buying into these behaviours, but just moving on is enough. Sometimes, for instance with storytelling, you may want to ask how their story relates to the topic you are discussing. Finding the kernel of Course teachings in the story and moving on from there is another way to deal with this. As long as it does not interfere with your teaching objective and the group process, just relaxing and letting the person tell his or her story may also be the most loving way to go.

- **Verbosity**: going on and on about something, using an excess of words, sometimes as a defense and diversion, and sometimes as an attention-getting device and attempt to dominate. You may just have to let it run its course or look for an opportunity to break in and say, for instance, “I hear your interest in this topic, [Name], but we’ll have to move on now.” Or: “We have more to cover this evening so let’s move on.”

Communication blockers

- **Jumping in**, interjecting, interrupting, not letting people finish what they’re saying, or filling in the rest of their sentence. Interject with a gentle but firm comment such as, “Hold on a minute; let’s let [Name] finish what she was saying.” If the person has inserted him or herself too firmly, you can wait until he or she has finished and then go back to the initial speaker; for instance, “[Name], I’m not sure that you were finished. Is there more you’d like to say?”

- **Advising**, fixing, lecturing, patronizing, probing, dismissing, negating, judging, or delivering a Course truism or platitude; such as, “Well, you know that’s just your ego.” Or: “You must be projecting.” Or: “Well you know you can only be hurt by your own thoughts.” This may be true, but it probably will not be helpful.

These behaviours affect the sense of safety of the group members and their willingness to share. It will be important to address them if they become a regular happening. A reminder of the group’s guidelines may be in order. Reviewing the guidelines periodically will also be helpful.
Resistance to your authority as the group leader

This may show up in a group member as:

- **Teaching**: assuming the role of the Course expert and corrector;
- **Challenging** and being argumentative: attempts to undermine your teaching and authority. A typical comment might be something like, “I agree, but…” Or: “The way I see it…” Or: “But the Course tells us to…”

With these attitudes and the ensuing behaviours, it is so important to not react defensively or engage in debate, but to maintain a calm, loving, non-critical approach and a clear sense of your authority as leader. You may let the person have his or her say, affirm what there is of the Course’s true teachings in what he or she has said, and then offer the correct idea, with support from the Course. As the person is talking, also look for an opportunity to break in and take back your role as leader. Continue bringing the discussion back to what the Course says, with comments such as, “The way I understand the Course about that…” Or: “If we look at what the Course says…” Or: “However, time and time again, Jesus says….”

- **Disagreeing** in a subtle or “agreeable” way, such as remaining silent or through one’s body language.

- **Coming in late** regularly and/or not doing assigned exercises also indicate an authority problem. They say, “I don’t abide by the rules; I do as I please.” This can also be seen as a sign of disrespect to the group members and can affect the trust level and bonding of the group. If this is habitual, it will be important to address it—outside the class and one on one with the person.

- **Distracting/Disrupting**: shuffling papers; talking with person beside them; talking while someone else is sharing; walking in and out, getting up to get a beverage while someone is sharing; texting, playing with a pet. Setting guidelines for some of these behaviours at the beginning will provide something to refer back to. If the behaviour is disruptive, it is perfectly fine to address the issue directly in a gentle, loving way. If it continues, you may talk with the person apart from the meeting.

Resistance to the material

- **Diverting**: asking unrelated questions; having one’s own agenda; going off topic onto side issues. It may be tempting to follow the person and get engaged in tangential issues, but it is important to keep on track. Try not to get sidetracked. Remember that if someone does go off on another topic, a way to bring the discussion back is to ask something such as, “How does that relate to the question?” Or: “How does that relate to the idea…?” You can also say, for instance, “We’ve gone a bit off track here, so let’s get back to the topic at hand.”
• **Bringing in other spiritual paths or teachings.** (Robert has dealt with this in detail in Class 3 on “Helping Them Get It Right.)

• **Evading:** skirting the question or the issue; not answering on topic. You may ask the question again, ask the person if he or she could be more specific, or rephrase the question. You may just have to let this go, because you can’t force the person to address something he or she is resisting.

• **Theorizing:** bringing in metaphysical discussions, “philosophical speculation” (C-In.1:1) and “theoretical issues [which] but waste time, draining it away from its appointed purpose” (M-24.4:5). This may be to bolster one’s self-image by appearing to be the one who knows, or it can be to keep from getting practical and down-to-earth with the Course. You may remind the person that Jesus asks us not to get caught up in this sort of exercise because it is futile and bring him or her back to the practical application. “That’s correct, but let’s look at how we can apply this in our daily lives.”

• **Spiritualizing/spiritual bypass:** This is a “holier than thou” lofty stance, implying that the person has already got it or is already there; is more “spiritual.” He or she may offer an abstract spiritual-sounding answer. An example may be someone who dismisses doing what the Workbook asks because, “I’ve already done the Workbook.” One of your students may reject looking at his or her ego, because “the Course wants us to accept the truth of what we are, so I just focus on the light.” Or: “I just keep in mind that we’re all one.”

The spiritual bypass is a defense mechanism used to protect oneself. The person may be using spiritual ideas as a defense against looking honestly at the darkness of the ego or facing painful feelings. Here you can remind the person that Jesus tells us time and time again how important it is for us to look at the darkness in us and be honest about the ego as it operates in us. Looking at the darkness allows us to go beyond it to the light.

**Dealing with potential conflict over interpretation**

As group leader, don’t get drawn into a potential conflict over interpretation. Avoid engaging in a battle of wills. (It’s useful to be aware of a possible “double wish” (M-17.2:4) to help and to harm; see Manual sections 17 and 18 for more on this and on correcting).

• Remind yourself of the person’s holiness, worth, and equality;
• Affirm what you can in what the student says, what is aligned with Course teachings;
• Lovingly correct if you need to or elaborate on the teaching, backing up what you say by referencing a Course passage.
Dealing with unloving behaviour

This can take different forms; for instance, someone negating another, telling the person he or she is wrong, putting down, labeling, correcting, or judging the person. These are all forms of attack. Depending on the intensity of the behaviour and the level of tension, here are some ways that may be helpful in dealing with this:

- Stop the behaviour;
- Remind everyone (especially those directly involved) of the guidelines, in particular the one(s) that pertain to what transpired;
- Bring everyone back to the Course;
- Have a “time-out.” Invite the Holy Spirit to be with you as you do a practice (response to temptation or lesson of the day) or pray together;
- Check in to see if there’s anything anyone wants to say before moving on.

Because this is a study group with a certain purpose and not a support or discussion group, it is not be advisable to get into a full-blown conflict or mediation process because it could easily take up the rest of the meeting time. Also, it’s important to handle this in a way in which you feel comfortable; don’t take on more than you can handle or are trained to do.

Note: If there are still some residual effects, such as someone else in the group has shut down because of the interaction, you may want to talk with the person outside class.

Dealing with someone who exhibits mental health issues or wants to share a lot of personal information and seems to need help.

You may say something like, “I appreciate you trusting us enough to share this with us. We’re not, as you recall, a support group, but if you want to stay for a few minutes after the meeting, we can talk.” You may end up simply listening to the person or suggesting that he or she look for a support group or counselor in addition to these study group meetings.

Summary

Remember that you became a study group leader because you care about the Course and sharing Jesus’ teachings and because you care about the group members, and you want to facilitate their learning. The way you deal with group members and their behaviour will say a lot about how well you have integrated the Course’s way into yourself. Remember that you are here to lead “so as to demonstrate that you are not an ego” (T-4.VIII.14:2), “only to be truly helpful” (T-4.XI.8), and to…

Teach only love, for that is what you are. (T-6.1.4:4)

(Revised, November 7, 2020)