

Rules of Engagement for Pastoral Care Counseling Sessions

From Dr. Benjamin Gonzales

When couples come to us for relationship problems, which could include married couples, engaged couples, a couple of friends in conflict, siblings, or what have you. We insist on a few things.

1. Their relationship with the Lord is the most important aspect of their lives on earth, so that is the first thing we discuss. If we sense they are not saved, we evangelize before going any further. If they are saved, but have strayed away, we coax them back before we go any further. We believe that there is no sense trying to fix something that will not remain fixed for long if they continue to stray from the faith.
2. Not matter how many people are in the room, there is an extra chair for the Holy Spirit and we insist that they recognize that He is not only present by invitation, but ultimately He is the only one who is truly in charge.
3. From a practical standpoint, My wife, Theo, and I are the counselors and in charge of the meeting. We set the pace, and ask the questions. We also give them plenty of opportunity to ask questions.
4. We have the authority to cut them off if they are rambling or trying to control the meeting.
5. When they are talking, they talk to us and not the person they came in with. When we ask them a question, they answer us, and not answer by looking at the person they came in with. We correct them if they start talking to or looking at each other while talking.
6. They are not allowed to state subjective facts, which I don't believe exist. They can state things subjectively, but not insist that they are factual because it is merely their viewpoint of the situation.
7. They are allowed to state objective facts, such as "That made me feel useless and demeaned" or "I felt like my spouse was attacking my integrity" Feelings are valid.
8. They cannot leave the session without saying something good about the one they are in conflict with.
9. They cannot leave the session without promising to work on a specific weakness that they Lord has shown them to have.
10. Finally, they cannot come back to counseling until their assigned homework is completed.

I hope these simple rules of engagement are helpful. They are not out of a book or taken from the Internet. They are simply lessons taught and hopefully learned while counseling with the Holy Spirit in charge.