

Listen . . . attend with the ear of your heart

THE RULE OF ST BENEDICT



Barbara Schwarz OP

A CHURCH THAT LISTENS & LEARNS

In his address in 2015, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis stated:

A synodal church is a listening church, knowing that listening "is more than feeling." It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. Faithful people, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: we are one in listening to others; and all are listening to the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:17), to know what the Spirit "is saying to the Churches" (Rev 2:7).

Following the Synod of Bishops on young people in 2018, Pope Francis wrote an Apostolic Exhortation, *Christus Vivit* in which he acknowledged:

There are times when [the Church] needs to regain her humility and simply listen, recognising that what others have to say can provide some light to help her better understand the Gospel.

A Church always on the defensive, which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no room for questions, loses her youth and turns into a museum. n41

LEARNING FROM ST BENEDICT OF NURSIA

Benedict lived in the historically chaotic times following the fall of the Roman Empire in the early 6th century. Social unrest and corruption were widespread in Rome where Benedict went to study. *The Rule of St Benedict* has done more than survive into the 21st century, its wisdom is enduring not only in monasteries but also for many Christian lay people and contemporary religious congregations such as the Sisters of the Good Samaritan.

LISTENING

A Benedictine sister, Mary Bennet McKinney wrote a book in 1986 to assist groups such as Pastoral Councils to move away from voting (or parliamentary meeting processes) in their decision making, and to instead engage in discernment and consensus.

She drew from her Benedictine charism to name the process *Shared Wisdom*. At the heart of this process is the belief that the Spirit graces us with wisdom that is unique to our life experience, so that each of us holds a different piece of the wisdom. When we gather as the people of God to make decisions, no one person holds all of the wisdom. Listening to each piece of wisdom is critical. Coming to consensus is less about a majority agreement but more about ensuring that even those who may hold reservations can comfortably live with the discerned decision.

ATTENDING WITH THE EAR OF THE HEART

A biblical understanding of the heart holds the spiritual, intellectual, emotional, ethical and decision making dimensions of who we are. During the Eucharistic Prayer we are invited to 'lift up our hearts' to the Lord, that is, every dimension of ourselves.

In Jewish tradition, the heart is where the shekinah, the presence of God, is found most deeply. For example, in Luke's account of the two disciple's journey to Emmaus, their hearts burned within them when they recognised Jesus as the longed for Messiah, the Son of God.

Benedictine listening involves our whole selves. It is not easy. Letting go of personal agendas, prejudices, answers and solutions, to be really open to receive the wisdom of others for authentic discernment, can also be an invitation to radical change; conversion and transformation.

A LISTENING LEADERSHIP

Chapter 3 of the *Rule of St Benedict* concerns leadership, mutual listening and obedience in the sense that draws from the Latin *obouidiere* – to give ear, to harken, to listen. This moves well beyond an authoritarian, 'top-down' dynamic. St Benedict stresses 'mutual obedience', a horizontal relationship where attentive listening and consideration is given reciprocally in a community.

The function of those in positions of authority is to guide, challenge and to enable, not to control.

SYNODAL LISTENING PROCESSES

The synodal process of global listening emerges from the understanding that the people of God together have a 'sense of the faithful', as Pope Francis explained in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

In all the baptised, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelisation. The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing . . .

*As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. n 119.*

The Document for the Continental Stage of the Synod is an extraordinarily large example of mutual listening. It synthesizes the result of consultations from around 112 national bishops conferences. Each of these contain diocesan syntheses from parishes, religious congregations and Catholic agencies.

All of this has now been given back to the global people of God for further listening and discernment.

Discernment engages us in the dance of the music of the Spirit. It puts us in touch with the Spirit of God who invites us to cooperate in the creation of a world made in the image of God.

Fr David Lonsdale SJ

THE NEXT STEPS

A JOURNEY OF CONVERSION & REFORM

In the reports, the People of God express a desire to be less a Church of maintenance and conservation and more a Church that goes out in mission. A connection emerges between deepening communion through synodality on the one hand and strengthening mission on the other: being synodal leads into renewed mission.

As the Spanish report says: *"we believe that communion must lead us to a permanent state of mission: meeting and listening to each other, dialogue, reflection, discernment together are all actions with positive effects in themselves, but they are not understandable if they are not directed at pushing us to go beyond ourselves and our communities of reference in order to carry out the mission entrusted to us as Church."*

The People of God have found joy in walking together and express the desire to continue doing so. How to do this as a truly global Catholic community is something that still needs to be fully discovered:

"To walk in a synodal way, by listening to one another, participating in mission, and engaging in dialogue, has possibly an 'already and not yet' dimension, it is there, but much more to be done. The laity are capable, talented and willing to contribute more and more, provided they are given opportunities. Further surveys and studies at the parish level can open up more avenues where the contributions of the laity can be immense and the result would be more vibrant and flourishing Church, which is the goal of synodality" (EC Namibia).

We are a learning Church, and to be so we need continuous discernment to help us read the Word of God and the signs of the times together, so as to move forward in the direction the Spirit is pointing us.

Document for Continental Stage paras 99 &100

<https://www.synod.va/en/highlights/working-document-for-the-continental-stage.html>

RESPONDING TO THE DOCUMENT FOR THE CONTINENTAL STAGE

Australia's bishops through the National Centre for Pastoral Research (NCPN) are inviting people to form small groups to respond to the document following a process provided by the NCPN. The timeline is tight as Australia's summary report must be submitted to the Oceania Taskforce by 21 December.

Information is available at:
<https://mediablog.catholic.org.au/>

Some key Dates:

NCPN Portal Opens 4 November

NCPN Portal Closes 9 December

All responses need to be received via the NCPN Portal and should be no more than 2 -3 paragraphs

NCPN prepares Australia's Report 12 December