

COVENANT

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Active Listening: The Lord's Invitation and Gift

"But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear."

(Matthew 13:16)



Throughout the Gospels, we find Jesus continuously inviting the disciples to truly hear the Word of God, the Word of Salvation, the Word of Healing, and the Word of Life. This invitation is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago. To truly hear, however, we must actively listen—listen with our ears, our heart, and all of our senses. Only then will we be able to receive the Good News and live a fruitful life. Active listening is not only a channel for God's grace in our lives, but also an essential communication skill that affects the quality of our relationships with others. We need to practice, strengthen, and develop that gift and skill. The articles in this edition of Covenant help to remind us of the importance of active listening in our daily lives.

At Southdown, the practice of listening is essential to the achievement of our Vision for "Healthy Individuals, Healthy Communities, Healthy Church." In our ministry of healing, we strive to foster the gift and skills of listening in each of our programs and services.

In our outpatient and residential programs of psychotherapy and spiritual direction, listening is key to a beneficial outcome. Providing unconditional positive regard, a safe and non-judging environment, and meeting each person where they are on their journey, are essential elements of listening on the individual level.

In our preventative outreach work in the community, by way of providing education, workshops, formation, and training, we listen to the needs of each community we serve, and tailor our presentations accordingly. Compassion and openness to unique needs and contexts are essential elements of listening on a communal level.

In our consultative work with pastoral and ecclesial leaders, we recognize synodality, collaboration, and teamwork as essential elements of listening on a Church level. We trust that our work of empowering ordained clergy, vowed religious, and lay pastoral ministers with renewed capacities for active listening has a ripple effect for a synodal, respectful, and listening Church.

I pray that our summer months will offer us time for renewal and refreshment. May we open our hearts and minds to the Lord's invitation to truly hear God's voice in our day-to-day lives and grow in our capacity to actively listen to one another.

Sincerely,

Rev. Stephan Kappler, Psy.D., C.Psych., R.Psych.
President and Chief Psychologist

A Church That Learns to Listen and Listens to Learn

By Catherine M. Pead



The Synod on Synodality was launched in October 2021. This courageous and risky undertaking, which invites everyone to listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to the Church by **listening to each other**, was a gift for Concerned Lay Catholics.

Pope Francis believes the Church needs to become 'a listening Church,' a Church that is open to hearing how God is speaking through everyone. And so, in preparation for the formal Synod meetings in 2023 and 2024, Pope Francis asked all the bishops of the world to take some time to listen to the people in their own dioceses, so the bishops might become better informed about how God is working in the lives of ordinary people. But it is not just the bishops who need to listen. Pope Francis wants all of us to become better at listening to one another and at hearing how God is speaking through our brothers and sisters.

Pope Francis seems to be doing something quite new here, yet at the same time, he is rekindling something ancient. Let us not forget that before we were called Christians, we were known as followers of the Way. This is referenced numerous times in the Book of Acts and it is what links this present synodal process to our roots as a community of faith moving through time and space.

Synod means 'walking together' or 'common path.' The word shares a root with 'syn-thesis' and 'syn-ergy,' because *syn* in Greek means 'together.' The word *hodos* in Greek refers to 'path' or 'journey,' so SYN-OD means to 'walk together on a common path.' This is what we are doing as a community of faith—walking a shared path. Many Christian churches, not just the Catholic Church, have traditionally used the term 'synod' to refer to official meetings where church leaders come together to make decisions. As a synodal Church, we walk together on a common path and listen and learn from each other as we do.

The image of people walking together on a path is so human and so familiar. How many of us have gone for a long walk with friends, and as we walked perhaps shared some deep thoughts or experiences? When we stop for a rest or arrive at our destination, we may reflect on the journey together and discover key moments of insight. As we listen to one another's experience of the journey, new perspectives come clear, our horizon is widened, our communion is deepened.

If God speaks through everyone, how do we learn to be a listening Church? The Church, like the rest of society, tends to listen preferentially to those with privilege and power. Pope Francis says it should not be like that with the Church. In the Gospel, Jesus always has a listening ear

for those in need, those left out. If we are truly to follow Jesus, then, Pope Francis says all of us, and especially our leaders, need to reach out to those who are often forgotten marginalized, silenced, rejected, poor, and without power.

Listening to those who have previously been excluded is not easy to pull off for the obvious reason that trust is required. The Canadian Bishops in their synodal report acknowledged that the invitation to participate in the synodal process was often met with skepticism and even suspicion. So, in addition to truly wanting to listen, it is essential to develop the skills and patience to create conditions where people feel welcome and safe to share.

Listening is first and foremost an act of humility. It acknowledges that I do not know everything and that I have something to learn from you. Implicitly, listening says that the person I am listening to has value. For people who have often been ignored or excluded, this is a great gift. So the second thing about listening is that

it is an act of caring. The third thing to say about listening is that it is an act of faith, faith that God truly does speak through everyone and that by listening to another, I am opening myself up to some new understanding of God.

This way of listening, by being humble, caring and open, is something that our Church needs to learn in new ways. The Church's leaders especially must learn it, but so do the rest of us. Most of us have learned to listen to respond, to listen to correct, to listen to win an argument. But

how many of us have learned to "listen with the ear of the heart" as Pope Francis says. The Holy Father emphasizes that to heal the wounds of the soul, the greatest need people have is to be listened to.

At the synodal listening sessions, hosted by Concerned Lay Catholics during the diocesan phase of the Synod, many participants shared that their spirits had been wounded by NOT being listened to by their pastors, by their bishops, and sometimes by their fellow Catholics. Conversely, people also shared experiences where they WERE listened to in Church, their voice was welcomed, and that made them feel supported and connected to the mission of the Church.

The most important thing our Church can do in this synodal moment is to make a commitment to foster a culture of **listening**. Indeed, to adopt 'listening' as official policy. Then it must support its members in that listening. Listening is not natural to everyone, and even where it is natural, it requires training and practice. It is too easy to listen only when people agree with us, or to listen to respond rather than to understand. But if we truly believe the Spirit of God speaks through everyone, then everyone, and especially our ministers, must become

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expert listeners. Listening is not a commitment to agree in all cases, but rather a commitment to seek to understand where people are coming from.

If as a Church we can learn to listen, then we will become a Church that listens to learn. As Pope Francis beautifully articulates, listening allows us “to orient ourselves in a symphony of voices.”

“With the awareness that we participate in a communion that precedes and includes us, we can rediscover a symphonic Church, in which each person is able to sing with his or her own voice, welcoming the voices of others as a gift to manifest the harmony of the whole that the Holy Spirit composes.”

Let us pray for the synodal process, in the words of Pope Francis, “that it will be a great opportunity to listen to one another.” ■

Catherine Pead is a founding member of Concerned Lay Catholics in Canada, an organization whose mission is to amplify the voices of lay Catholics in Canada. Last year, during the Diocesan Phase of the Synod on Synodality, CLC hosted 15 synodal listening sessions with eight different demographic groups over a period of five months. The groups included: older Catholics, 2SLGBTQ+ Catholics and their families and allies, survivors of clergy sexual abuse and their families, lay ecclesial ministers/lay employees of the Church, racialized Catholics, Spanish-speaking Catholics, disengaged Catholics, and Interfaith friends. The report on CLC’s listening sessions can be found on their website at this link: <https://concernedlaycatholics.ca/articlesandlinks/clc-synodal-survey-resultsjune-2022>

The Gift of Listening Within

By Nadine Crescenzi, RP (Qualifying)

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

(Mary Oliver)



The unrestrained pace of life can consume us as we struggle each day to maintain balance amongst the competing demands for our attention and in the business of our lives. Our energy can be drained by an endless number of stressors, and we may automatically react out of conditioned patterns from the past, or seek our answers from external sources. The imbalances in our lives may stimulate undercurrents of fear, worry, uncertainty, and darkness; we may feel disconnected from ourselves. While we may practice effective listening skills in our relationships with others, we can easily forget the gift of listening within.

Listening within is when we take time to become more aware of our thoughts and feelings, and our will. We turn our inner-ear to our soul-needs, tune into our true desires, and carefully attend to the workings of our interior life. Listening within deepens our relationship with ourselves—enriching our soul. Through our personal insights and inner guidance, we can alter our narrative, consciously create positive change, hear our life purpose, and renew our determination. This can be a transformational moment, an invitation to become more aware of what is present in our lives, of who we are, and who we are called to be. We may renew our life-intention influences in how we choose to move forward and respond in our daily lives.

When we take time to slow down, pause, sit quietly, breathe, notice, listen, feel, and witness what is consuming our minds and hearts, we are practicing listening within. When we are present in the moment—not dwelling in the past, or fretting about the future—we are more present to ourselves. Within our self-awareness and openness

to our senses, we can hear through the chaos of our chattering mind, and create order. In silence, in stillness, we can harmonize with the flow of our breath, the beating of our heart, to the rhythms of our lives. We interiorly-connect to our inner-wisdom, our spirit, our will, our faith, and to God. This is known as the body-mind-spirit connection.

In this state of attunement, we can compassionately listen deeply to ourselves, and hear our inner voice speaking the subtleties of our heart, our own values, desires, gifts, and needs. Here, we can create space around our thoughts, emotions, and issues. We can choose to let go of our negative biases as they arise, and open ourselves up to creation, imagination, and possibility. The more we practice self-awareness by listening within, the more we integrate our thinking, process our feelings, calm our response, and improve our interaction with others. Settling into our wholeness, we become attuned to what our thoughts, sensory system, heartfelt feelings, and gut instincts are communicating to us. We can identify negative beliefs that are self-defeating and values that we no longer hold as valid for us. Our growing self-awareness enables us to consciously shift our state-of-mind, alter our narrative, and intentionally create positive change in our lives.

The practice of listening within has the potential to increase our self-confidence, raise our self-esteem, and reduce stress, as we grow in self-awareness of our internal activity, listen to our inner voice, regulate our emotions, embody faith, gratitude, joy, love, hear our truth, and access our inner wisdom. There are many skills and techniques available to practice listening within. They are well worth the effort of discovery, and incorporating into a personal daily practice of self-care. ■

Active Listening – A Key Communication Skill

By Sr. Marie Josée Akom, SSCM, M.A., RP (Qualifying), CCC

“Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand.”

(Karl A. Menniger, Psychiatrist)

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Listening is an essential and powerful communication skill in many aspects of our lives, especially in our connection with ourselves, others, nature, and with God. Listening entails not only hearing the words or sounds directed to us, it also helps us to effectively communicate. It allows us to establish a quality relationship with the other. Those who listen well are often considered to be caring and kind people. But, in a world full of distractions, listening is not always easy. In this sense, active listening becomes a skill you can learn and an art you can practice daily.

Active listening can transform our relationships. When we actively listen, not only do we hear the message directed to us with our ears, but we also hear it with our hearts. We concentrate on what is being said, both verbally and non-verbally. Our active listening response to the person is a sign of our respect, and helps demonstrate our interest. The person to whom we actively listen feels validated and valued. The practice of listening actively to a person who is going through a distressful situation can be very helpful. Sometimes, the person just needs to be heard, and to have another person listen actively in those moments can make a difference. Active listening connects us to the other person, who then feels comfortable, and accepted as they are, rather than judged. A complaint often heard in interpersonal conflicts is, “You don’t listen to me,” or “I am feeling judged by you.” The skills of active listening can provide an opportunity to cultivate empathy and understanding, thereby helping to avoid or reduce conflict situations in relationships, or to prevent potential conflicts from arising.

There can also be barriers that interfere with active listening. The barriers can be psychological (e.g., the listener’s emotions), or physical (e.g., the listener’s environment, noise, or visual distraction). Low concentration, poor judgement, and a focus on style rather than substance, or cultural differences, can also be barriers to active listening. Other barriers include mental filtering tendencies, or having a predetermined notion about what the other person is going to say, and making assumptions about it before a word is spoken. Furthermore, when a listener feels negatively impacted by what the other person is saying, and responds defensively, this can be a barrier to fully comprehending what the other person is communicating. Minimizing, impatience, and other forms of invalidation, are also obstacles to active listening. When we learn about the barriers that can interfere with active listening, and recognize them when they occur, we can make the necessary changes to further improve our communications.

The techniques available to enhance active listening skills in our everyday conversations include attentiveness, paraphrasing, asking specific probing questions, asking open-ended questions, summarizing, providing verbal and non-verbal feedback, and reflecting feelings. While these techniques can be learned, active listening takes time, intention, and daily practice to develop. We can become increasingly more effective active listeners, if each interpersonal conversation is considered an opportunity to practice the necessary skills. In this way, we can create a solid foundation from which to build stronger relationships with our family, friends, at work, and in other relationships. ■

Covenant is produced and published by The Southdown Institute. Its purpose is to inform and educate the readership about clinical issues that surface in our work and to invite integration of the emotional and spiritual aspects of our lives.

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