



*"You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." (Jas. 1:19-20)*

One of the ten themes emerging in our listening sessions was the laity's appreciation for our efforts to listen to them and their hope that those efforts would continue. The ideal kind of listening is what has been called "deep listening" or "empathic listening." A company cleans my rectory and parish offices once a week, and, twice a year, another company is hired to do what is called "deep cleaning." Deep cleaning takes more time, personnel, effort, materials, etc. than regular weekly cleaning, and it makes a big difference in the appearance of the home and offices. The Church has invited us to engage in "deep listening" with our members, not just a few times a year but often – that is to make the effort and to allocate the time, energy, and personnel to engage in empathic listening and good conversations with all, especially the marginalized. We are to carefully listen to what is said, to what is not said, how it is said, and why it is said so that these individuals know that they are respected, heard, and understood.

Saint James reminded his early Church community to do something similar. He wrote, "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." (Jas. 1:19-20) He invites them and us to listen carefully to God's word and to listen carefully to one another to communicate love for neighbor. Individuals today can be quick to anger and rush to speak rather than to listen, especially when the message is one that we may not want to hear. But patient listening, especially when one is sharing painful experiences, is an act of great charity.

I have been blessed to listen to my parishioners in my day-to-day ministry as a pastor, but to also engage in deep listening to marginalized individuals. For example, I served for ten years on the Diocese of Cleveland Review Board with some very dedicated and talented members of our diocesan Church. We listened to very painful experiences of those who had been sexually abused by a member of the clergy and we made recommendations to the Bishop as to how he should respond. I know from personal experience that the survivors appreciated the time we took to listen and to respond to them with empathy and compassion.

I have been blessed as well for twenty years to work with the family members of those who experience same sex attraction, gender dysphoria, and wrestle with questions about identity; who worry so much about their sons and daughters, how they are treated, and their relationship with the Lord and the Catholic Church. Both special ministries allowed me to appreciate how important it is for the Church and her ministers to engage in deep listening with the People of God.

The synodal process of the past year has also brought this message home to us and helped us to realize that the need for healing is closely related to the theme of deep listening. Pope Francis should receive credit for initiating this process of listening by the Church. In one sense it was his idea, but in another sense, it has been part of the Church's identity from the beginning.

*Lumen gentium reminds us:*

"The laity have the right to receive in abundance from their spiritual shepherds the spiritual goods of the Church. They should openly reveal to them their needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which is fitting for children of God and brothers in Christ. They are ... permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church. When occasions arise, let this be done in truth, in courage and in prudence, with reverence and charity toward those who by reason of their sacred office represent the person of Christ." (LG, 37)

I might add today that we need to encourage listening with reverence and charity, not just toward those who by reason of their sacred office represent the person of Christ, but to all Christians who by virtue of their baptism deserve to be heard and respected by the Church and her representatives.

May we continue to heed the message of Saint James, Pope Francis, the Vatican Council Fathers, and the laity who participated in our listening sessions: let us listen and be slow to speak and slow to anger for the sake of God's righteousness.

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