



Becoming Better Listeners: Letting Ourselves Be Transformed

Listening is an act of humility that is open to the Holy Spirit, as well as to learning about and from another person. Listening is not about response, but the possibility of mutual transformation.

Facilitators and leaders of the Synod process should be individuals with an open heart for others, with maximum flexibility and grace in the face of potentially challenging conversations. Facilitators should be people with a strong spiritual understanding of their faith who turn to prayer before engaging in any sort of consultation. In prayer, we should ask God to be better listeners.

It is helpful to establish a “way of proceeding” that can lay the foundation for authentic dialogue to take place, allowing all participants to be better listeners. Here is a suggested “way of proceeding,” used by national pastoral leaders in conversations¹ leading up to and following the most recent global synod focused on young people:

- **Start everything in prayer and sacred silence.** Use the [Adsumus Sancte Spiritus](#) prayer to invoke the Holy Spirit as a guiding collaborator in the dialogue.
- **Give and receive welcome.** Go out of your way to be radically hospitable.
- **Be present as fully as possible.** Keep your head in the room where your feet are. Be

in that space with your doubts, fears, and failings, as well as your convictions, joys, and successes. Listen with your heart and speak with your soul. Put mobile devices and laptops away for the moment.

- **Trust and learn from the silence.** Silence is a gift in our noisy world. Treat silence as a member of the dialogue experience. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words. Silence can even get its own chair in a small group.
- **What is offered in the conversation is by invitation, not demand.** It is okay if you or anyone in the dialogue does not have a response to a question. Facilitators should help people tell their story. Empathy is the ability to experience the thoughts, emotions, and direct experience of others. It goes beyond sympathy, which is a feeling of care and understanding for the suffering of others. Both words have similar usage but differ in their emotional meaning. Empathy is key.
- **Speak in ways that respects the dignity of other people.** This means not interrupting, interpreting, correcting, or debating what others say. Use “I” statements and own what you share. Do not say “you know when you...” or “people say...” or absolute statements (“everyone knows...” or “all Catholics are...”)

¹ Adapted from the *National Dialogue* “Way of Proceeding” for facilitators and participants (for more

about the *National Dialogue*, a process for Catholic pastoral ministries with youth and young adults, see www.nationaldialogue.info).

Furthermore, a facilitator should not “lead the witness,” show preference for answers that they agree with, judge the responses of certain participants, or dominate the conversation with their own experience, expertise, or opinion.

- **No fixing, saving, advising, or correcting each other.** This is one of the hardest guidelines for those who help and support others, but it is vital to welcoming the soul. The goal of dialogue is to let everyone be heard. The time for “teachable moments” is later, after the conversations are over. You can, however, take notes about what you need to follow-up on in other settings.
- **Respond to others with honest and open questions** instead of counsel or correction. “Tell me more about that...”, “Can you explain what you mean by...”
- **When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.** If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, “I wonder what brought him or her to this belief?” or “I wonder what he and she may be feeling right now?” or “I wonder what my initial reaction tells me about myself?” Set aside your own judgment to listen to others – and to yourself – more deeply.
- **Pay attention to body language.** Don’t stand over and apart from your conversation group. Demonstrate you are all in this together, by sitting on the same level. Don’t force sharing through non-verbal cues. Nod along to show listening. Be attentive to others’ body language and encourage others to be mindful of their non-verbal actions in a dialogue setting.
- **Have a clear understanding and know what you want to find out.** The questions or directives around the conversation should function as a reference, rather than as a script.
- **Observe confidentiality.** Respect the vulnerability of others in sharing their

story or opinions, and find ways to pass along insights without embarrassing or singling out anyone.

- **Trust in the Holy Spirit.** Local conversations are one component of a larger process that is taking place around the world. It may be tempting to suspect or be cynical about how the results of the dialogue will move through ecclesial structures; however, it is especially important that people trust in the Holy Spirit to guide the Church along the synodal path.

It may be helpful for everyone in a group to review these steps prior to engaging in any formal conversation around the Synod questions. For more informal or one-on-one dialogue, a facilitator should keep these points in mind before entering a space where discussions might occur. This way of proceeding is meant to keep the conversations honest and authentic, and thereby making the results of the consultation even more fruitful.

A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, “journeys together.” How is this “journeying together” happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our “journeying together”? As noted in the [Preparatory Document](#) (no. 26), this is the “fundamental question” that will guide consultations. Facilitators and pastoral leaders are asked to help people reflect on their lived experiences; be conscious of the joys, dreams, insights, wounds, difficulties, and obstacles that are brought to mind; and hear how the Holy Spirit speaks in the midst of this question, including raising up points of confirmation, change, consensus, or new pathways.

It may be helpful – before this conversation – to begin with some basic questions to stir up those lived experiences and memories and assist people in the discernment process. It is also important to realize that diverse groups will need distinct questions to guide their thinking, as terminology and comfort with

certain topics may vary from group to group and person to person.

in making your important life choices?

For instance, for active Catholics, some initial questions can include the following:

1. **Describe a time when your Catholic faith made a difference in your life.** In what ways do you grow in your Catholic faith? How would you describe your relationship with Jesus?
2. **What three words would you use to describe your experience of the Catholic Church?**
3. **Why do you remain Catholic or active in your Catholic faith?** What do you enjoy about being Catholic? What don't you like about being Catholic? Why do you think some people decide to stop being Catholic?
4. **What can the Church do to support you in your life and your Catholic faith?** Are there things the Church should stop doing? In what ways could the Church help you listen to and answer God's call for your life?

For Catholics who do not regularly participate in Church life or who are disaffiliated, the initial questions will need to be modified to speak to the realities of their journey. These can include:

1. **What brings you joy in your life right now?**
2. **What challenges are you facing in your life right now?**
3. **What can the Church do to support you in your life and/or your Catholic faith?** Are there things the Church should stop doing? In what ways could the Church support you

These sets of questions, adapted from the Church's *National Dialogue* process², can help individuals enter more willingly and comfortably into formal Synod consultations, especially those on the peripheries. Other options can include using the "ten thematic nuclei" (as laid out in the [Preparatory Document](#), no. 30) as conversation "tent-poles," asking people to reflect on whether or how each of those areas apply to their own faith journey in and through their Church experiences and how they apply to the structure and action of the Church within their area.

There are many other ways in which listening can take place and countless methodologies to elicit helpful feedback on Synod 2021-2023. Resources are available on the [USCCB Synod webpage](#) for your convenience. Pope Francis noted that "A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening 'is more than simply hearing' (*Evangelii Gaudium* 171). It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn." ([Address for the Ceremony Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops](#), October 2015). Regardless of the specific methodology, the core of using any tool or resource is **curiosity combined with authentic, humble listening** and how this effort can open us to trusting more in the Holy Spirit and in the mutual learning process, transforming our hearts and minds for the work that lies ahead of us.



² See more about the *National Dialogue* at www.nationaldialogue.info.
usccb.org/synod

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