
Listening & Dialoguing with society

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Why this iBooklet

During the **synodal listening** session held **online** in 2022, a strong call emerged for the Church to be open to listening, understanding, and engaging in dialogue with the society of her time. Many are calling for a Church that is attentive to what is happening, to the changes and needs of her contemporaries, a Church that does not focus solely on her own messages, but who is open to understand her contemporaries' dilemmas, doubts and hopes, and engages in dialogue with other organizations and institutions that also have something to say.

In this moment of high concentration of noise and false or contradictory messages, especially in the digital environment, it is important to re-understand what listening is, why it is important to practice it in different settings, and how it can lead the Church to dialogue with different stakeholders, and the possibility of mutual understanding.

In the digital environment, there are great opportunities for this listening and dialogue, according to the experience of those who carry out an evangelizing mission there. But there are also significant obstacles that must be identified and overcome.



1. CONTEXT: THE URGENCY OF LISTENING

1. Context: the urgency of listening

The society of this third decade of the 21st century is marked by:

- The fragmentation of dialogue (ideological polarization)
- The reduction of the others to a utilitarian object
- The colonization of silence by digital noise
- The invasion of false and unverified information

Social polarization makes difficult to listen deeply and acceptingly to others—those who are different, those we consider distant in their opinions, or we have categorized as unnecessary in our lives. This happens to us in personal, family, or work situations. And it also happens, on a larger scale, between groups, collectives, and organizations that don't properly recognize each other to be willing to listen. This leads to an ever-increasing distance, often fostered by hidden interests that seek to enhance opposing positions.

The urgency of listening arises at the individual, group, and social levels. Noise confuses, saddens, and disorients people.

A large, stylized white graphic on an orange background. It depicts a person's profile from the nose down, with a hand reaching up towards the face. The lines are thick and rounded, creating a modern, abstract look.

2. WHO AND HOW SHOULD WE LISTEN AND DIALOGUE WITH

2. Who and how should we listen and dialogue with

The thirst for listening that exists in our society is very notable. Many people lack someone with whom they can open, someone with the time to acknowledge their concerns, needs, desires, and fears. And from that listening, we can engage in dialogue to find ways out or at least make sense of what the person is expressing. But it doesn't only require person-to-person listening. There are levels or areas of listening and dialogue, and each has its own characteristics, challenges, and opportunities.

a) Listening inside ourselves

Human beings are capable of entering within themselves to know and listen to their own interiority. Within themselves, they can elaborate their own history, their memories, emotions, desires and hopes, fears and anxieties. By frequenting their interiority, they become capable of listening to and knowing themselves in order to mature and discover meaning in what they do, choosing a purpose to guide their lives.

On this journey of interiority, human beings also have, according to Karl Rahner, the intrinsic capacity to receive and respond to the communication of God, who is silently within the person. The discovery of this intimate Presence is not always discovered alone. More often, it is through someone who communicates, or bears witness to it in a convincing way. And we listen to the Word that reaches our hearts. Therefore, listening to and dialogue with this Other who inhabits us is also necessarily cultivated in community and sacramental life, as well as in personal solitude and silence.

Both communally and individually, divine self-communication requires an active disposition. True spiritual listening implies obedience (from the Latin ob-audire: to lend an ear). Listening requires humility and the recognition that we do not know everything. This attitude reflects our position as creatures before the Creator.

Listening and dialogue with ourselves and with God enable us to listen attentively and benevolently to those around us.

Two conditions are necessary to achieve this listening and inner dialogue:

- **Quiet time:** One cannot hear one's inner self amidst the noise and haste. Silence and solitude are necessary to enter the inner world.
- **Self-acceptance:** accepting the reality of who we are (our human condition, the foundations of our unique existence, just as we are), along with our future possibilities. Rejection of who we are prevents us from entering that inner realm.

b) Person-to-person listening

People grow and mature in relationships with others. Each "I" is shaped by other "yous" who also tell us who we are.

Specifically, the people who participated in the digital synodal listening session strongly expressed the need for spaces and times for listening in the Church. It's not enough to have sacramental celebrations, religious activities, etc. Many participants expressed the need to be heard. There is so much loneliness in our highly connected and technologically advanced society! And being heard by paid professionals is not the same as being heard by people inspired by the love of Christ and authentic human acceptance.

That is why they ask the Church:

- That priests and pastoral agents dedicate good quality time to listen.
- Open adequate spaces for listening.
- That the Church listen without prejudices or judgements

This entails:

- 1. Integral bodily presence:** Eye contact, open posture, eloquent silences.
- 2. Linguistic hospitality:** Welcoming the other's language without colonizing it with one's own.
- 3. Patient temporality:** Respecting the rhythms of personal revelation.

This requires appropriate training and coaching; authentic listening is not usually spontaneous.

Interpersonal heartfelt listening is one of the greatest gifts we can give to the others.

c) Listening among groups: discernment and conversation in the Spirit

The Church can be seen as a community of communities. Within it, there are not only parishes and dioceses, but also religious congregations, movements, associations, and small communities. Within the great family that is the Church, these communities are key elements for individuals, making them feel a specific belonging with their own charisms, shared identity, distinctive spiritual traits, and a particular style of following Jesus. It is important to promote listening and appreciation among them for the mutual enrichment and cohesion of the Church as a whole. It is so easy to fall into rivalry and the desire to prevail over others!

Within each group and in the dialogue between groups, the synodality promoted by Pope Francis takes on its full meaning. In these areas, conversation in the Spirit plays its key role for mutual understanding, the acceptance of differences, shared discernment, and progress as one body.

Conversation in the Spirit is a great gift that the Church received during the celebration of the Synod of Synodality. Its application has been extended to various levels of dialogue.



3. DIGITAL MISSION: LISTENING AND DIALOGUING

3. Digital mission: listening and dialoguing

“What were you talking about on the road?” (Mk 9:33 / Lk 24:13). Jesus asks his disciples what they talk about, because these conversations portray them. To establish authentic dialogue, the first step is to listen.

Digital Missionaries often embarked on this task because they listened to people in digital environments asking questions about God, Jesus, the Church...

Digital Missionaries carry out their personal work by paying attention to what their followers express and need. They don't approach their presence on social media as a simple means of accumulating followers, clicks, or likes, but rather as an authentic dialogue, to the extent that it can be achieved, depending on each person's charisma and capabilities.

Most Digital Missionaries engage in two-way communication on their social media. They strive to truly listen and establish a dialogue with their followers through the following actions:

- They create content that invites dialogue: issues of interest to their followers that encourage their participation.
- They pose questions and short surveys that allow them to hear the opinions of their followers.
- Live sessions are also an opportunity for two-way interaction.
- They spend time reading comments and private messages on their social media. This is where people feel as expressing their feelings and share their problems and needs.
- They take time to respond to questions in a personalized way.
- They create specific posts when they see that a question has the potential to address many people's concerns.
- They complement their public networks with WhatsApp or Telegram groups that make responses a little more immediate.

These personal comments often lead to face-to-face or online meetings for more in-depth dialogue. These are frequent occasions for followers' desire to establish a physical connection with the Church. They request information about physical locations where they can experience what they have learned online.

The underlying attitudes that support these actions are:

- **Welcoming and Availability:** The first step is to create a welcoming atmosphere on your digital platforms. This is achieved by responding to comments and messages in a timely and personalized manner, demonstrating that you value their opinions.
- **Empathy:** Digital listening goes beyond simply reading comments. It involves paying full attention to the needs, concerns, and perspectives of our followers.
- **Openness:** A digital missionary must be open to a diversity of opinions and beliefs. This means creating a safe space where everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts, even if they contradict the mainstream position. Avoiding judging or criticizing differing opinions, instead encouraging dialogue and the search for common ground.

These attitudes and the actions mentioned above make up the "**Samaritan**" **approach** to social media presence. They allow us to approach people who often suffer from loneliness, disorientation, and confusion without easily finding adequate support with respect, care, and authentic service.

"Samaritanize" is the verb the Pope uses to encourage us to do this work both on and off social media. "Even on social media, we must decide whether we want to be 'Good Samaritans' or 'indifferent travellers who pass by.' And if we look at the history of our own lives and that of the rest of the world, we are all or have been like each of the characters in the parable: we all have something of the wounded, something of the robber, something of those who pass by, and something of the Good Samaritan." [1]

Some obstacles

This doesn't mean that it's easy to carry out all these activities, especially when you have other pastoral obligations. Few people obtain permission from their superiors to dedicate themselves full-time to this mission. Among other difficulties, they face the following:

- **Lack of time:** as the mission is not usually self-sustaining; either they make a living from another activity, or they have other types of pastoral assignments.
- **Financial difficulties:** digital mission requires high-quality hardware and paid software, which requires resources that are rarely available.

[1] Towards Full Presence, 52. Dicastery for Communication, May 202

- **Overwhelm:** When you have many followers, there aren't enough hours in the day to read and respond to messages. In this case, a pastoral support team is required to expand the reach of the digital missionary. This more collaborative model of account management should not be ignored. A team helps read and filter messages, helps respond, and, if necessary, redirects people to entities or specialists who can support them with their specific needs.

We must not forget that people who carry out missionary work in the digital world do so in the name of the Church. Their personal charisma is at the service of the Gospel. Therefore, the support of a team does not contradict the value of their missionary work but rather enhances it.

4. LISTENING SOCIETY[2]: THE “SIGNS OF TIMES”

[2] The social understood in a broad sense, encompassing cultural, social, economic and political processes.

4. 3. Listening society[2]: the “signs of times”

A Church on the move

The Second Vatican Council alerted us to the structural need to listen to and understand reality to respond to the call of the Gospel. “To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.” (GS, 4).

The presence of Christians in reality, the pastoral impulse of the Church, is, like faith, linked to listening. Abraham the father, in faith, does not see God, but hears his voice (LF, 8) and sets out on his journey. Before we speak and make our judgment, we live in the reality that surrounds us. As Pope Francis likes to say, “Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. (...) realities are greater than ideas”. (EG, 231).

But what does it mean to scrutinize the signs of the times? How can we understand and give meaning to the social processes and events that surround us? How can we remain open to the invitation of reality without rigid moralism or empty relativism? How can we promote a solid hermeneutics open to welcome plurality?

It is essential to understand that the call to listen to the social is, as GS tells us, a "permanent" task. The *auditus temporis* is not a simple phase of a pastoral planning process. Undoubtedly, there are spaces and times of special intensity for listening, but listening to the social is a structural element of our being as Church. Social reality is complex, dynamic, and ambivalent in its evolution, and we cannot have final and complete visions of it. Listening is a process that is always unfinished, always limited, and always in the process of becoming.

Paul VI said in *Ecclesiam suam* 1:1 that the "Church engages in dialogue," but there is no dialogue without constant, humble, and patient listening. From this perspective, we can propose three processes and spaces in which the Church's dynamism becomes listening:

[2]The social understood in a broad sense, encompassing cultural, social, economic and political processes.

- **a) Listening as an understanding society:** The social world is filled with loud noises and sounds that often manifest as inarticulate voices. The invasion of data (Big Data), the ease of obtaining information with easy access, and the invasion of news through conventional or digital media make us understand that we are in a position of constant listening to reality. However, information without meaning and significance is not an understanding of reality.

A first exercise in listening leads us to begin processes of understanding society. This exercise is not merely an academic and research activity, although it presupposes this, but rather a continuous and deliberate effort to give meaning and sense to what is happening.

In this sense, it is essential to create spaces for deliberation, dialogue, and study of social reality. Listening to reality means seeking meaningful resonances within it, and these require reflective spaces.

The Church has the capacity to dedicate individuals and teams to this form of listening, which requires viewing society "from a drone's eye," so to speak, with perspective, to better understand emerging trends and social processes. There are religious congregations, university faculties, and ecclesiastical study centers specialized in this type of listening.

- **b) Listening and dialogue as participation in the social sphere.** Listening means being situated, having a perspective and a place. The temptation in the Church is to create self-referential places that aspire to a global vision of the social sphere. However, this, besides being impossible, produces an erroneous view of reality because it is one-sided. Listening to the social sphere is participating in the social sphere. It is necessary to be part of and take part in social and cultural movements, in solidarity institutions—not only ecclesial ones—in union and political life, etc.

The presence of Christians in social settings and institutions is a condition for true listening to the social sphere. A Church of listening, a Church that goes forth, is a Church that camps in the social sphere to have agile, incarnated, and committed antennas.

In this sense, social dialogue is a privileged means of listening (cf. FT, 48). Dialogue is serene listening, an open attitude, and close contact. "To draw near, to express oneself, to listen, to look at one another, to get to know one another, to try to understand one another, to seek points of contact—all of this is summed up in the verb 'to dialogue'" (FT, 198). When the capacity for listening disappears, we create silent spaces, and when we do not engage in dialogue, we become deaf to the clamor of reality.

- **c) Listening and dialogue as a recreation of the social:** Understanding and participating are necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for deep listening to the social. Listening is not a passive, secondary activity in social transformation; rather, it is part of it. Therefore, listening to the social is also introducing new sounds and melodies into reality. Listening is not about being recipients of messages produced by diverse transmitters through multiple channels. Listening is about being creative transmitters with resonant and meaningful messages through any possible medium. Translated into the social sphere, this means recreating social and economic projects, regenerating new political avenues, and building social spaces of hospitality to create a privileged and innovative space for listening.
- **d) Listening as a preferential option for the poor:** The Christian God is a God who listens to the social: “I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt; I have heard their cry before their oppressors, and I know their suffering. I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3:7-8). A God who listens preferentially to the quietest and most muted voices. It is not that they have no voice, but that they are silenced voices. Therefore, listening to the social requires a “preferential listening” to the cry of the impoverished. Listening to the social requires being attentive to the cry and being able to channel spaces of resonance for the voice of the poor. In other words, listening to the social requires a “preferential listening” and the continual desire to be heard.

Going to “how” we do it

But... where and how should this dialogue with society take place? In some spaces opened by the Church herself? In the forums and meetings organized by society stakeholders? Which should be the style and language of the Church in those environments? Should we stick to “our themes,” that is, propose the Gospel directly? Should we instead, begin with the issues that concern different social sectors? Should we adapt our language?

Surely the answers vary depending on the ecclesial sphere in which we operate:

- The universal Church is present in international forums where the problems of each era are debated, such as the UN with its various specialized institutions (health, education, technology, trade, etc.). The papal Magisterium often responds to the concerns of contemporaries with different themes;

- Many of the Church's schools and universities educate millions of young people around the world.
- National episcopates and diocesan bishops also try to respond to the important life situations of their people.

The question is whether all these documents and initiatives truly impact the thinking and attitudes of our contemporaries, and whether we reach to establish a mutually enriching dialogue. It seems we have room for improvement in many cases.

Text may not be the best way to reach the broadest sectors of society. Our communication strategies can greatly expand their reach.

Because listening is only the first step; dialogue is mutual listening; it requires that the other party also receive our responses to their questions or concerns.

o we need to multiply our ways of presence, expression, and rhythm in social conversation.

In summary...

- The Church must dedicate time and resources to understanding the society of its time. It is feasible through Catholic Universities, study centres, and also Episcopal Conferences.
- In addition to reading newspapers and listening to radio and television, today we have an extraordinary resource called “social listening”. It is the process of collecting and analysing shared and available content from publicly accessible online sources to understand priorities, concerns, dominant sentiments, and trends in public opinion.
- Born in the digital marketing environment, this method has seen the proliferation of digital tools for “reading,” “listening,” and analyzing content shared on social media, detecting the presence of brands interested in understanding their social echo and the sentiments associated with them.

- The emergence of artificial intelligence refines searches and facilitates content understanding with Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Large Language Models (LLM). These are based on the non-sequential analysis of vast amounts of data and quickly detect underlying trends in conversations.

The interest of these methodologies for the Church is not, obviously, to assess its own “brand position,” but precisely to have support to better listen to what society asks, needs, and is concerned about.

- a) To achieve this, it is essential to **avoid the "echo chamber effect" or "confirmation bias"** which traps people in just the contents that confirm their own opinions. The Church must transcend these closed cloisters of self-affirmation to understand society.
- b) Moreover, the Church has a widespread **presence** in territories around the world, allowing it to know firsthand much of what concerns people; but social media is a very new space for dialogue, where people who do not attend the Church's parishes and pastoral centres share content and concerns. Therefore, digital listening is an extremely valuable tool for breaking away from our familiar surroundings.
- c) There are several **methodologies for listening**, not only digitally, but also in person and through analogue media such as print, radio, and television, to help it capture the concerns of different social sectors in a more inclusive and comprehensive way.
- d) Once again, we **need institutions and teams** within the Church that can carry out this systematic, specialized, and professional listening, in order to keep our ears and hearts close to our contemporaries, so that we can break out of our circles of self-confirmation and self-reference.

A large, white, stylized graphic of the number '19' is positioned on the left side of the page, set against a solid orange background. The '1' is a simple vertical bar, and the '9' is a large, rounded shape with a pointed top and a curved bottom. The text '5. CO-AUTHORS AND ADVISORS FOR THE PREPARATION OF THIS IBOOKLET' is centered in the upper right quadrant of the page.

5. CO-AUTHORS AND
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THIS IBOOKLET

5. Co-authors and Advisors for the Preparation of this iBooklet

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