

Listening?

What was the great mission of the Church that our Lord imparted to the Apostles and other disciples right before He ascended into Heaven? Was it:

1. Go out and *listen* to the whole world, baptizing them..., or
2. Go out and *teach* the whole world, baptizing them...?

It was, of course, the second one. But since the creation of man there has been another voice demanding to be heard, saying you, Christ's Church, you will not teach, you have no right to teach, to speak, to be "judgmental," you must...listen. And not just listen, but listen to me. This voice made itself heard to man for the first time in the Garden of Eden and this listening had disastrous, indeed deadly, consequences. This is of course the voice of Satan and the other demons. St John the Apostle speaks of the "spirit of the world" (or the world), which is an echo of this voice; St Paul refers to the same thing as "the flesh." This demand for the Church to shut its mouth, to renounce the God-given duty to teach, and to instead "listen" has grown loud today. We must be weary of it. Indeed we must listen, but to whom and with what mindset? "My sheep will know my voice," our Lord said; if we want to live and move and have our being, we must be His sheep and it is to His voice we must listen. We do this through prayer and study. And we must listen to those suffering from vice so as to try to understand the difficulty and do whatever is possible to alleviate, *not* so as to understandingly affirm it.

Dr Jeff Mirus is, I believe, one of the best contemporary Catholic commentators. He writes many excellent articles for CatholicCulture.org and he recently wrote an article on this very topic. The following are excerpts from that article, which he entitled: **Is "listening" overrated?** And now, Dr Mirus' thoughts on this...

[He begins by giving examples of how the following mentality has crept into the human dimension of the Church] [We, so goes the implication] should embrace the theme that the "Church must listen to everyone". Unfortunately, this emphasis suggests also that the Church herself has nothing to say. And, to speak the full truth, there is something just "a little bit off"—indeed, one might more accurately describe it as "diabolically creepy"—about a Church which, through a process of endless listening, never actually comes to the point.

[There are times when this] reeks of a self-congratulatory childishness in its frequent testimony to the magnificent experience of mutual sharing and listening that [is]...so deeply meaningful, and its assurance that each participant feels—oh, so very, very deeply—that he or she has "lived this blessed time in profound communion with all of you", the People of God. One wonders whether what we are actually witnessing is a distressingly silly exercise in corporate team building....

Such reflections suggest that we have an enormous problem. The Church does not grow primarily through touchy-feely (and often utterly fake) "kumbaya" moments but through her members' sacrificial engagement with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Listening: Value and disvalue

It should go without saying, but it is unfortunately necessary to repeat, that we are not like Jesus Christ in our ability to learn what is most necessary for the effective proclamation of the Gospel simply by reading the hearts of those to whom we speak. Unlike Christ, we do not have an unerring understanding of what preys on the minds of those with whom we seek to share the Good News, the saving truth about God and His Plan for all of us. Yet the sin and selfishness and false gods of the present age grow increasingly clear to those who allow themselves to be formed by Christ through sacramental prayer and discipleship in the Church. And as for listening to others, there is a tremendous need for a genuine discernment of what we hear in light of the Gospel.

It is certainly true that the better we know others, the greater the likelihood that we can address their neuralgic points—the particular blindness, confusion and, yes, spiritual suffering which points to the very heart of their resistance to the Gospel. Moreover, listening is always a sign of respect in human relations, and in tending to the needs of others we must, as we strive to love, at least always treat them with the utmost courtesy.... For this reason, the willingness to listen to another is very definitely a component of Christian charity. It also helps us to get to know those with whom we interact, lest we leap to conclusions which may be as facile as they are false.

But surely we have learned by now that our incessant contemporary emphasis on listening is very often a means to advance the agenda of those to whom we are so piously instructed to listen. It is also—and far more importantly—a way to avoid both preaching the Gospel and insisting on the difference between truth and falsehood. Endless listening creates an illusory solidarity that has yet to be established in Christ.

But listening to anyone but God is never an end in itself. No human ideas and aspirations can possibly be on the same level of importance as the Gospel. Even if it is not a deliberate means of prioritizing an anti-Gospel, the pretense of “listening”—and especially a formal program of listening—very often masks a selfish reluctance to come to the point, a selfish failure among putative Christians to proclaim the Gospel, to share their life in Christ, and to live in exemplary obedience to the doctrinal, moral and sacramental authority of Christ’s Church.

Alpha and Omega

Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, and we know Christ accurately in this life (if never quite fully) only through the Church and through obedience to what the Church teaches. Moreover, if (in St. Paul’s theology) to be joined to Christ is to be joined to the Church, it is also true that to be joined to the Church is to be joined to Christ, and it is precisely through a complete Gospel that leads to acceptance of, reverence for, and joy in the Church that we most easily and fully attain unity with our Savior. Listening to others may enable us to respond more wisely and precisely to their particular spiritual needs, just as it may enable us to recognize some real deficiency in ourselves that is in need of correction. But in the work of Christ, it is not so much our deficiencies that matter as the proclamation of the Gospel itself, of which we must always recognize ourselves to be unworthy servants.

So color me suspicious of too much “listening”, which seems always to be a methodology to create a level playing field for sin and error in an ongoing effort to make the Church more acceptable to the world by diluting her goals and her methods, and above all the purity of her witness. We were not given the incomparable privilege of being joined to the Church so that we might discuss the pros and cons of Christianity or the pros and cons of the Church, or still less the pros and cons of Jesus Christ. We were given this incomparable privilege so that we could become one with Christ and forever bear witness to Him—that is, to the whole Christ, alive and active in His Church, and especially in defense of those aspects of the Way, the Truth and the Life that are, in our current circumstances, most frequently ignored or denied.

Our one requirement is sacrificial fidelity, fidelity when it chafes, fidelity when it hurts. Any other kind of fidelity is suspect because of its very refusal to be put to the test. Tellingly, then, perhaps the most obvious weakness of the Church in our current age is the extreme contemporary ecclesiastical reluctance to allow that to happen. I refer here to the constant emphasis on a kind of dialogue in which, since no one is ever wrong, no Catholic is called upon to be faithful, to press the truth as a requirement for Christian growth, to go out on that frightening limb which most people are eager to cut off. And why? What would be the sin? The sin would be to tell the truth when you were supposed to be listening....and listening....and perpetually listening.

You’re not *listening!*

Perhaps before we embark on an entire program of listening, we should listen first to St. Peter’s warning against precisely the kinds of frivolous and even false interactions I have been discussing here: Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? But even if you do suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord...

Why can we not see that whenever our listening undermines our willingness to proclaim the Gospel, it is a form of cowardice? Indeed, precisely insofar as listening to others becomes a comprehensive Christian program, it becomes a perpetual failure to take Christian responsibility. Is it not precisely this most cowardly of sins that defines the essential character of the post-Christian world? I mean the failure to listen first and foremost to Jesus Christ, and then to do whatever He says.

This is what Mary advised—because she believed in miracles. [END] God bless you, Fr Kuhn.