Opinion
Vatican
NCR Voices
Pope Francis listens to a question while responding to journalists aboard his flight from Tallinn

Pope Francis listens to a question while responding to journalists aboard his flight from Tallinn, Estonia, to Rome in 2018. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

October 13, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

To open the synod, Pope Francis delivered a brief address Oct. 9 in the Synod Hall, to give some indication of how he envisioned the synodal process. The Holy Father said:

> The Synod has three key words: *communion, participation and mission*. Communion and mission are theological terms describing the mystery of the Church, which we do well to keep in mind. The Second Vatican Council clearly taught that *communion* expresses the very nature of the Church, while pointing out that the Church has received "the *mission* of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and is, on earth, the seed and beginning of that kingdom" (*Lumen Gentium*, 5).

The pope compared this relationship between communion and mission to the life of the Trinity, with the mystery of its communion of persons *ad intra* and its mission to create, redeem and sanctify *ad extra*.

Also significant is the reference to the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. Earlier this month, I encouraged Catholics to prepare for the synodal process by rereading the four great constitutions of Vatican II and, as luck would have it, *Lumen Gentium* is the first one I reread.

It remains fascinating in every part, but for purposes of the synod, the most important thread may be the call for the church to be a leaven in the world. And that thread runs through the text:

> From this source the Church, equipped with the gifts of its Founder and faithfully guarding His precepts of charity, humility and self-sacrifice, receives the mission to proclaim and to spread among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God and to be, on earth, the initial budding forth of that kingdom.

And:

> The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven.

And:

> The faithful, therefore, must learn the deepest meaning and the value of all creation, as well as its role in the harmonious praise of God. They must assist each other to live holier lives even in their daily occupations. In this way the world may be permeated by the spirit of Christ and it may more

> effectively fulfill its purpose in justice, charity and peace.

And:

> Rising from the dead He sent His life-giving Spirit upon His disciples and through Him has established His Body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation.

You get the idea. We are not supposed to keep Christ locked up inside the church but are supposed to bring him into the highways and byways of life in our time. "Keep us from becoming a 'museum church,' beautiful but mute, with much past and little future," the pope said in his homily at the Mass to officially open the synodal process on Sunday.

Advertisement

If we as a church are to be a leaven in the world, we must first overcome the polarization within our own house. The world is profoundly divided, but so is the Christian community. Here in the United States, those divisions may be especially pronounced but they are found in other denominations and on other continents as well. Look at how divided the Anglican communion is over issues of gender and sexuality. Look at the countries throughout the world, many of them Christian, that are beset by civil strife and even war.

In the face of polarization, the pope encourages us to listen. In his homily, Francis said, "Let us ask: In the church, are we good at listening? How good is the hearing of our heart? Do we allow people to express themselves, to walk in faith even though they have had difficulties in life, and to be part of the life of the community without being hindered, rejected or judged? Let us not soundproof our hearts."

I have attended two conferences on polarization, one at Georgetown University and the other at the University of Notre Dame. The latter conference resulted in a book. Neither conference made much of a dent despite lots of listening.

Something else is needed. Some issues have become so fraught — abortion, race, polarization, to name a few — that when you come at them directly, we all get put back on their heels, we clench their teeth, we think they know all they need to know,

we are incapable of listening. We need to figure out how to come at such issues from a 45-degree angle, in a way that allows people to start moving forward together before they realize that they are hearing what the other person has been trying to say and they have no need to get defensive, that they are not back on their heels and it is OK.

Our sins are like that, too, sometimes, at least the deeply embedded ones. We have a million defenses for why we protect and even nurture our sins, why they are not so bad or so big, why they may not even be sins at all. A spiritual director who comes at them head-on is doomed to fail. He or she needs to find a different angle of approach so that the defenses are down, and grace can begin to pour in.

Columnists are called to be trenchant, to be sure, but we also have to listen far and wide if we are to gobble up the insights that form opinions that last and that make writing a joy. In these next two years, we should all, even the columnists, listen to each other and also to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. And then pause before shifting from listening mode to criticism mode. As the pope said:

> The Synod then offers us the opportunity to become a listening Church, to break out of our routine and pause from our pastoral concerns in order to stop and listen. To listen to the Spirit in adoration and prayer. Today how much we miss the prayer of adoration; so many people have lost not only the habit but also the very notion of what it means to worship God! To listen to our brothers and sisters speak of their hopes and of the crises of faith present in different parts of the world, of the need for a renewed pastoral life and of the signals we are receiving from those on the ground.

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.