Opinion
News
Spirituality



The Holy Spirit, traditionally depicted as a dove, is pictured in a stained-glass window at St. John Vianney Church in Lithia Springs, Georgia, in this May 4, 2015, file photo. In remarks about the upcoming Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis said that synodality is "an ecclesial journey that has a soul, which is the Holy Spirit." (CNS/Georgia Bulletin/Michael Alexander)



by Miguel H. Díaz

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

October 22, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis has convened a synod in Rome with the theme "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission." In his opening address he called us as church to engage this synod as an opportunity "to become a *listening church*, to break out of our routine and pause from our pastoral concerns in order to stop and listen."

This synodal process invites all the faithful and, in particular, our leaders within parishes, dioceses, hospitals, schools, universities and other church-related ministries to do some soul-searching. We must seize this moment to listen intently, especially to those who have been marginalized. We must listen to those among us who experience rejection, exclusion and unwelcome in their families, parishes and other Catholic spaces and contexts.

Listening is only the first step in this synodal process. Those who hold positions of leadership and power within the church, those who have the privilege and responsibility to lead the various households where Catholics gather to break bread and share wine, must embrace a new beginning. If there is a chance for transformation, now is the time to gather the broken pieces, to heed the suffering, to heal the pain. Now is the time to listen deeply to the stories of our crucified siblings in the body of Christ and empower their hope-filled desire to experience resurrection within the church and our Catholic families.

I learned about the value of listening during my time as United States ambassador to the Holy See, a diplomatic post often characterized as a "listening post." I was taught to engage in the art of diplomatic statecraft, guided by a threefold principle: Listen to others. Learn from others. Lead as a result of that listening and learning.

This wisdom was reflected by President Barack Obama in his thought-provoking 2009 speech at Cairo University in Egypt. He affirmed that overcoming distrust requires honesty and a change in our human relationships so that we may "say openly to each other the things we hold in our hearts and that too often are said

only behind closed doors. There must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground."

In the United States, our relationships within the church have increasingly become politicized and fractured, participating in the so-called culture wars and contaminated by the social viruses that threaten life all around us. While some church officials have eloquently spoken out against this brokenness, for the most part, we have miserably failed to unequivocally condemn the words, actions and policies that deleteriously impact our most vulnerable populations.

As COVID-19 has made clear, viruses target the vulnerable and know no borders, and the same holds true for the social illnesses and dysfunctions that continue to plague us. Heterosexism, racism, ableism, xenophobia, and new expressions of fascism and colonialism pose risks not only to the health of our democracy, they also threaten the health of the church. Catholics and our institutions and communities are not immune from the impulses that undermine mutual flourishing or seed distrust and destruction. Sadly, in some instances, abuses of power, manipulation of religious practices and misinformed theologies have been used to further spread dissension.

Advertisement

As the church undertakes this synodal process in the U.S., it is imperative for pastoral leaders to enact what Pope Francis has called an "apostolate of the ear." In *Christus Vivit* Francis reminds us that a "Church always on the defensive" is one "which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no room for questions, loses her youth and turns into a museum."

Transformational listening requires a humility on the part of our leaders and ministers to be still and sit with, listen to and learn from the stories of Catholics who have suffered at the hands of church authorities. Learning born of listening is proactive, not reactive, in addressing violations of fundamental human rights and dignity, in responding to the unresolved sexual abuse crisis in the global church. Failures to listen and learn have significantly impacted the faithful, diminishing and even erasing their participation in the church and its institutional life.

As church, we can no longer afford business as usual. This synod cannot become one more instance of talk with no action, a missed opportunity to tackle what Pope

Francis has called "the virus of indifference." This three-year process provides us time and space to set aside paralyzing fears, to listen deeply, intently and respectfully, and to open ourselves to encounter the presence of God in places and persons we dare not imagine.

Related: Francis is betting a synodal church will be a cure for a clerical church

Pope Francis envisions the synodal process as "an exercise of mutual listening, conducted at all levels of the Church and involving the entire People of God." Over the next few months, we will get a clear indication of how seriously the work of this synod will be embraced at every level in our personal, communal, and institutional lives.

Will we listen to and learn from the wisdom and struggles that come from the peripheries, or will we continue down the path of greater disconnect from the signs of our times? Will this interactive process lead us to become a more attentive, inclusive, and just people of God? Will this spirit of synodality impact our Catholic political leaders so that they too might listen to vulnerable populations and reach across the aisle to work for the common good of our nation? Will we listen to each other when it causes discomfort or will we end up after a three-year synodal process having not moved because we neglected to even enter the process?

If there is to be change, then perhaps we first need to join Francis in invoking the Spirit of God, "Come among us, so that in this synodal experience we will not lose our enthusiasm, dilute the power of prophecy, or descend into useless and unproductive discussions. Come, Spirit of love, open our hearts to hear your voice!" Through the process of synodality, we, as church, are being invited to listen to the whispers of the Holy Spirit.

Related: Editorial: Let's give the Holy Spirit a chance at synod on synodality
This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** and **Theology en la Plaza** feature series.