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Listening across the Américas: Base Ecclesial Communities and Relational Organizing as Listening Practices for a Synodal Church

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Abstract: Catholicism can draw on existing practices of listening to build a more participative church. This paper analyzes listening practices in Catholic and Catholic-engaged interfaith settings, drawing on the author's long-term ethnographic research: i) four years of weekly participation in meetings of *comunidades eclesiales de base* in Mexico and Central America; ii) two decades of participant-observation in multiracial faith-based community organizing work in low-income communities of the United States; iii) participant observation at the US expression of the *World Meetings of Popular Movements* initiative; and iv) participant-observation at the "Prophetic Communities" gathering of organizers, scholars, and church leaders, focused on synodality and community organizing (San Francisco, CA, in 2023). The essay frames its discussion of listening practices around contemporary ideas regarding *acompañamiento*, solidarity, encounter, and the role of civil society and "public religion" as cultural and institutional underpinnings of democracy. A restructured, more synodal church can enable "ethical democracy" in the future, in part through its practices of liturgy and encounter.

SINCE 2021, THE WORLDWIDE CATHOLIC CHURCH HAS engaged in perhaps the most widespread process of social consultation in human history, at least in its aspiration to hold listening forums within every Catholic parish and institution in every society around the world. This "synodal process" generated significant opposition from sectors of the church more oriented toward hierarchical exercise of authority, as well as legitimate criticisms for shortcomings in how the synodal process was carried out.[2] Nonethe-

[1] Profound thanks to Leo Guardado of Fordham University and the many participants in the "Listening Practices in Global Catholicism" conference in Rome (March 2024) for critical feedback and suggestions.

[2] The opposition to Francis's project to construct a more synodal church drew from many sources but has been centered particularly within conservative figures in the American episcopacy including Cardinal Raymond Burke and Vatican allies including former papal nuncio in the US Carlo Maria Viganò. Less virulent opposition has come from a new generation of conservative American Catholic priests; see Ruth Graham,

less, the effort to ground the exercise of legitimate authority via more participative ecclesial processes appears likely to survive into the next papacy. Indeed listening to the experience of the faithful may be vital to recovering institutional credibility and moral authority following the catastrophic sexual abuse scandals, related scandals of episcopal sheltering of pedophiles, and more generally the rising rejection of institutional authority under the pressures of modernism, post-modernism, and libertarian individualism.[3]

Synodality, or the construction of a "listening church," thus seems likely to be a central thrust within global Catholicism into the future. While some hope it leads to internal democracy within church structures, it more likely holds promise to advance a model of "participative hierarchy" that will exist alongside and complement the deep traditions of episcopal authority and apostolic succession that have long been central to Roman Catholicism.[4] If implemented successfully, such participative hierarchy might better root episcopal decision-making in the experience and faith journeys of the People of God in ways that generate greater internalization of Catholic spiritual teaching by lay Catholics *and* wiser discernment among church leaders (lay, religious, priestly, and episcopal), as well as a church better able to take advantage of lay professional expertise on the secular processes involved in running complex organizations and a global institution.

Contrary to common misperceptions, Catholicism does not need to start from scratch in learning how to listen. This paper mines extant practices of listening already widespread in some settings for insights and practical wisdom from which a synodal church of the future can learn. The author's ethnographic research in four settings informs the analysis: i) four years of weekly participation in meetings of *comunidades eclesiales de base* in Mexico and Central America; ii) two decades of participant-observation in multiracial faith-based community organizing work in low-income communities of the United States; iii) participant observation at the US expression of the *World Meetings of Popular Movements* initiative, convened for four days in 2017 by the Vatican's Dicastery for Integral Human Development and the Faith in Action national network in the Central Valley of California; and iv) participant-observation at the "Prophetic Communities" gathering of organizers,

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"America's New Catholic Priests: Young, Confident, and Conservative," *New York Times* (July 10, 2024).

[3] Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[4] On "participative hierarchy" and its promise for bringing Catholic mobilizing power and moral witness to bear on contemporary societal issues, see Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

scholars, and church leaders, focused on synodality and community organizing (San Francisco, CA in 2023). These represent a mixture of *ad extra* (ii and iv) and *ad intra* (i and iii) listening, but all offer lessons for the construction of a more synodal church—in the dual belief that internal ecclesial practices can empower a more effective public Catholicism and that public ecclesial practices can teach new listening skills useful for the internal construction of synodality. I analyze the listening processes in these settings under a conceptual framework rooted in contemporary ideas regarding *acompanimiento,* solidarity, "encounter," and the role of civil society and "public religion" as cultural and institutional underpinnings of democracy.[5] I argue that despite some retrenchment into narrowly hierarchical structures in recent decades, the church preserves vigorous listening practices that can inform restructuring efforts toward a more synodal church, while remaining grounded in deep Catholic tradition via liturgical practices and the practice of encounter. In conclusion, I argue that these dynamics are critical not only for the internal life of the church but also in enabling the church to more vigorously advance "ethical democracy" in the face of authoritarian assaults on democratic institutions worldwide.[6]

VIGNETTES: LISTENING PRACTICES AND RELATIONAL ORGANIZING IN FOUR SETTINGS

Comunidades eclesiales de base: Colonia popular (*pueblo joven, favela*) *in México (1987)*

Deep in a *barranca* on the outskirts of Cuernavaca, México, temporary shacks and simple cement homes sit on a steep slope. On a Saturday afternoon, fifteen people gather in the open air: migrants to the city from rural Guerrero, *campesinos* by origin and now urban

[5] Conferencia Episcopal Latinoaméricano y del Caribe (CELAM), "Documento Conclusivo" of the *V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe* in Aparecida, Brazil (Bogotá: CELAM, 2007), www.celam.org/aparecida/Espanol.pdf; Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: Encyclical on Fraternity and Social Friendship* (2020), www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html; María Pilar Aquino and Elsa Támez, *Teología Feminista Latinoamericana* (Quito: Abya Yala, 1998); and José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

[6] Wes Markofski, *Good News for Common Goods: Multicultural Evangelicalism and Ethical Democracy in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023); Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America*, Morality and Society Series (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Richard L. Wood and Brad R. Fulton, *A Shared Future: Faith-Based Organizing for Racial Equity and Ethical Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

construction workers, homemakers, road laborers, street vendors, clerical workers, and aspiring students. Many have no more than a sixth-grade education. We greet each other, tiredly but joyfully after a long work week, and gather as *iglesia*, church. For we have been constituted as church: by Vatican II and Medellín, Don Sergio Méndez Arceo as bishop, the *Escuela de Reflexión Popular* under Dutch former priest Gerardo Thiejssen in training CEB *promotores*; ultimately the Gospels, and ourselves in embracing the call to be church.

Sitting in simple chairs, we gather in a rough circle. Doña Marielena, a homemaker who gave birth to her children in their house at the bottom of the ravine, begins with a prayer. We sing in celebration of God's liberating will for humanity and the Spirit's presence in this community. Don Miguel (her husband, a laborer and the other *promotor*) asks a participant to read the first Bible passage for tomorrow's Mass. Santiago reads from the Book of Isaiah, one of the suffering servant passages from the *Biblia Latinoamericana*, with photographs from settings like this around Latin America and annotations helping less-educated people interpret the scriptures within the realities of their own societies: a liberating God, the call to holiness of all people, and God's will for justice in the world.

We take turns reflecting on this passage. Don Miguel encourages those reticent to speak, sometimes sharing his own thoughts. Everyone offers a reflection, some haltingly, others eloquently. The central themes revolve around what a suffering God means for those who struggle for a living, dignity, a voice. They speak of feeling that perhaps God is with them in that struggle. Another theme concerns servanthood: that a God who comes as a suffering servant calls *us* to also serve brothers and sisters, in the simple ways of daily life—and calls governing officials and other elites (including "those living up there" on the flat terrain above in the elegant second homes of Mexico City families) to serve the whole community.

We listen to each other for two hours while Miguel and Marielena occasionally explain subtler facets of the readings (from the psalms, a difficult passage from the Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, and especially Luke 4). We each speak of our own experience in light of those readings, sometimes amid awkward silences, at other times passionately. Then Miguel invites Ofelia, a skeptical young woman, to close with a prayer. She does so simply and directly by asking God to be with us through the challenges of life in the *barranca*. We chat, promise to see each other again, then climb the steep stairs back to homes higher in the ravine, amid the harder facets of life: raised voices of husbands and parents berating their wives or children, and groups of men drunkenly lounging on the stairway. These are realities in any community—just more public here among the poor.

Such are listening practices in a healthy *comunidad eclesial*.[7] But in other CEBs in other parts of town, the *promotores* are not so adept. Too often they dominate meetings, preventing others from speaking. Or, perhaps worse, they intimidate the reticent, shaming them into speaking rather than inviting them by "listening in the Spirit." Such domineering practices are sometimes adopted by *promotores* lacking adequate formation, as they copy the only model of leadership they know: a certain kind of authoritarian *cacique*, "big man," boss, husband, father, or priest who dominates those around him.

This vignette could have come from virtually anywhere in Latin América—this author has witnessed similar dynamics, both positive and authoritarian, in similar settings in Central America, Peru, and the US.

Faith-based Community Organizing (FBCO, 1990s, Work Continues Today): A Multiracial, Working-Class Neighborhood in the United States[8]

Several dozen lay leaders convene one evening in a church basement, recruited from Catholic parishes, historic African American and liberal white Protestant churches, Jewish synagogues, multiracial evangelical churches, and a local Islamic mosque. They come from working-class neighborhoods, poor districts downtown, and comfortable suburbs. Tonight the gathering is in Denver but it could be happening in any US city—faith-based organizing like this occurs in nearly every state, mostly under the auspices of networks called Faith in Action; the Industrial Areas Foundation; Direct Action, Research, and Training (DART); and Gamaliel; or in a more secular mode by People's Action.[9] Together, the group includes many recent

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[7] For background on the original dynamism of *comunidades eclesiales de base*, best sources are José Marins, *CEBs e pequenas comunidades eclesiais* (Brasília, DF: CNBB, 2009) and José Marins, Teolide María Trevisan, and Carolee Chanona, *Comunidade Eclesial de Base: foco de evangelização e libertação* (São Paulo: Paulinas, 1980).

[8] On faith-based (that is, broad-based, congregation-based, faith-rooted) community organizing, see Aaron Stauffer, *Listening to the Spirit: The Radical Social Gospel, Sacred Value, and Broad-Based Community Organizing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024); Brian Stiltner, "Community Organizing for Democratic Renewal: The Significance of Jacques Maritain's Support for Saul Alinsky and His Methods," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue no. 1 (2024): 146–168, doi.org/10.55476/001c.117001; Jack Delehanty and Michelle Oyakawa, "Building a Collective Moral Imaginary: Personalist Culture and Social Performance in Faith-Based Community Organizing," *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 6 no. 2 (2018): 266–295; and Wood, *Faith in Action*.

[9] Indeed, a quite similar story could be told from settings in El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Rwanda, and Eastern Europe, as well as very recently in Honduras and Ghana,

immigrants (some legal, some undocumented, mostly from Latin America) and is remarkably multiracial (in the reified categories of American culture, perhaps 40–50 percent Latino/Hispanic, 25 percent white, 15 percent African American, others a mix of immigrants from southeast Asia and people from Native American or multiracial backgrounds). That is important today in the severely segregated organizational and political life in the US: among all civic or political settings in the country, perhaps only in the labor movement do people gather in such a multihued setting of different ethnicities and races. The multifaith character of the group also matters greatly, because building bonds across spiritual traditions helps strengthen the social fabric.

We are here to plan a "public action" to persuade the mayor and City Council to commit to a series of measures improving the quality of life in poor, working-class, and middle-class communities across the city. The proposed measures include more effective and less aggressive policing, along with additional funding for public schools. All the leading roles will be played by volunteer leaders from the churches, synagogue, and mosque (and in a few cases from public schools). The ground has been prepared via a "listening campaign"—an organizing process consisting of hundreds or thousands of "one-to-ones" or "relational meetings" between volunteer leaders and organizers and their family members, friends, neighbors, and co-religionists. These sessions are intended to explore concerns, fears, and hopes for their neighborhoods and communities. The issues to be addressed at the public action have emerged from these meetings.

Still more careful listening happens here today: small groups discuss their hopes and fears for the public action next week; first-time leaders describe excitement at being "up-front" and facing a thousand or more people, and their fear of letting the organization and their colleagues down. A key speaker tells the story of her son's mistreatment at the hands of aggressive police officers and negligent school administrators—a powerful story that will highlight and "frame" the public action next week, helping to create moral pressure on political leaders to commit to action on new policy. Organizers help

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and soon in México: Faith in Action International—the newest effort to take this model globally—now organizes in all those settings. See Victor Thasiah, "Prophetic Pedagogy: Critically Engaging Public Officials in Rwanda," *Studies in World Christianity* 23, no. 3 (2017): 257–280 and Stacy Keogh and Richard L. Wood, "The Rebirth of Catholic Collective Action in Central America," in *Social Compass* 60, no. 2 (2013): 289–307. Gamaliel has organized in South Africa and the IAF has longstanding organizing in the United Kingdom, and more recently in Berlin and Australia; see Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life*, ed. Kenneth Wald, David Leege, and Richard L. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

craft that story as a structured narrative effective and true. The whole group discusses strategy and the details of turning out participants. A local policing expert describes alternative approaches to law enforcement in low-income neighborhoods. Everyone listens, intent on finding solutions for their communities.

At the end, we pray together for the Spirit to illuminate the minds of elected leaders next week and open their hearts to the stories we will tell and the needs of these communities; and for our own strength and courage in confronting them with our demands for change. A priest finishes our prayer with a closing benediction, offered in a way accessible to Jews, Muslims, Protestants, and the secularly-minded (done in Spanish, translated simultaneously into English by a gifted immigrant translator). We exit late in the evening. The night air is filled with participants' excitement to be taking action together, and we talk animatedly about getting friends and church members to attend next week. The sounds of urban life surround us as we climb into our cars under a night sky, music thumping from passing traffic and police sirens blaring.

US Regional Gathering for World Meetings of Popular Movements (2017): Central Valley of California

The Central Valley of California is one of the world's most fertile agricultural regions. About fifty miles wide, nearly five hundred miles long and lying at the foot of the vast Sierra Nevada with snow-capped peaks rising up to 4,200 meters above sea level, the Valley enjoys remarkably rich soil and abundant water (prior to climate change impacts), allowing it to produce nearly half of the nation's nuts, vegetables, and fruit. It is also the epicenter of vast social inequality: sprawling corporate agribusiness and private landowners control the best land and have historically exploited migrant laborers living in poor conditions and paid well below the standard minimum wage. Although conditions and wages have improved via union and legal battles, migrant workers and other impoverished residents continue to struggle with California's high cost of living, barriers to healthcare, exploitative labor relations, and the dehumanizing sense of being socially invisible.

This was the setting for a Vatican-sponsored gathering of about six hundred leaders from US civil society and grassroots social movements in February 2017, a regional session of the broader "World Meetings of Popular Movements" under Pope Francis's sponsorship (which has held global meetings in Bolivia in 2015 and

Rome in 2014 and 2016).[10] The gatherings are expressions of Catholic social teaching and principles of subsidiarity; they have been denounced by certain nominally Catholic organizations such as The American Society for Tradition, Family, and Property.[11] Each was the occasion for deep listening within the Catholic tradition and in dialogue with other religious and secular organizations. This author was a participant-observer at the gathering in Modesto, sponsored by the Vatican in partnership with Faith in Action and its affiliate PICO-California; the Catholic Campaign for Human Development of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops; and the Catholic Diocese of Stockton (in which Modesto is located).

Participants were young and old and came from diverse backgrounds: from prominent church leaders and leading scholars and writers to highly trained organizers, laborers, and grassroots movement leaders from marginalized communities across the US, Mexico, and Canada. Many participants from this latter group had limited education.

The flow of the event combined three elements: i) short talks by church authorities regarding particular aspects of church teaching and by civil society experts regarding particular issues; ii) listening and reflection sessions in small groups of about twenty-five people, followed by quick report-outs in the full group (and archiving of key points in small group discussions); and iii) shared prayer, singing, and worship.

Church leaders addressing the gathering included four high-ranking prelates: Cardinal Peter Turkson (Ghana), then the head of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development (key sponsor of this event); Archbishop (now-Cardinal) Joseph Tobin (Newark, NJ); Cardinal Blase Cupich (Chicago); Fr. Michael Czerny, then the Vatican's lead person on immigrants and refugees, now the Cardinal head of the Dicastery; Juan Grabois, a longtime pastoral collaborator with Pope Francis from his decades of work in Argentina; Archbishop

[10] On the World Meetings, see popularmovements.org/. For an authoritative report on the first gathering, see "The Strength of the Excluded: World Meeting of Popular Movements at the Vatican," by now-Cardinal Michael Czerny, SJ, and Paolo Foglizzo, www.thinkingfaith.org/sites/default/files/pdf/20150129_1.pdf.

[11] On the ASTFP, see www.tfp.org/radical-catholic-movements-gather-modesto-california-must-disrupt/. Such denunciations generally have criticized the inclusion of non-Catholic movements in the World Meetings, as well as the Meetings' focus on issues the objectors view as outside core Catholic tradition. However, in a tradition such as Catholicism that insists (rightly in this author's view) on both i) the relevance of its teachings for all areas of human life, and ii) a public stance in dialogue with the contemporary world, such objections—although frequently raised in the name of "tradition"—reflect narrow sectarian positions within Catholicism and would undercut not only synodality but the broad Catholic tradition itself.

José Gómez of Los Angeles, CA; and two bishops: Oscar Cantú (Las Cruces, NM, on the US-Mexico border and now of San Jose, CA) and Sheldon Fabre (Louisville, KY)—and Pope Francis himself via a video message from Rome.

Other speakers included prominent activist Heather McGhee, who discussed access to housing and work; john powell, who spoke on the dynamics of racism in America and building social belonging across divisions; and Naomi Klein, who led a conversation on the power of movements to change public policy on climate change and environmental protection. Additional, more grassroots leaders spoke on housing access, Indigenous and immigrant rights, and ecological issues disproportionally impacting communities of color. Intense listening occurred to all ecclesial and lay experts, and intense dialogue with some.

The listening-and-reflection sessions were dynamic and efficient, mostly led by skilled lay faith-based community organizers (see vignette 2 above). This researcher participated in many, floating between different small groups to get a broad "flavor" of these discussions. Some broke up into pairs of people to do brief one-to-ones (also called "relational meetings"), others divided into "cohorts" of five to seven people for focused discussion. In either case, they then re-gathered for discussion within the group of about twenty-five, with facilitators keeping those sessions participative and encouraging all to "really hear" each other's stories and points of views, and "really see" one another.

The resulting stories—many describing the high human costs of poverty and exclusion in America—were often passionate and sometimes heart-breaking. Many were told in a tone of anger at injustice, leavened with hope for something better to come. The latter often drew on a sense of God walking with them as they and others in their movements confronted injustices *together*, drawing courage from one another and sustenance from their faith. These were first-person stories of suffering, struggle, and fear; but also of perseverance and hope.

The overall tone and tenor of the event was shaped by Catholic Mass offered each morning in a nearby chapel; public prayer to start each day; and music and enthusiastic singing at various points. Throughout—in keynote talks, small-group reflections, homilies at Mass—*stories* and listening to stories were central to the flow of the gathering.

Listening among Lay Ecclesial Leaders, Movement Organizers, Scholars, and Priests: The Synod on Synodality (San Francisco, February 2023)

The "Prophetic Communities" gathering took place on the campus of the University of San Francisco, a prestigious Jesuit university, and brought together scholars and church leaders with "organic intellectuals" from within labor organizing, immigrant organizing, environmental organizing, faith-based community organizing, and other forms of grassroots democratic work.[12] Most of the latter were professional organizers, many but not all of them lay Catholics. Others were Catholic religious sisters, Catholic clergy, or leaders within another faith tradition or secular democratic culture. The gathering was sponsored by Network: A Social Justice Lobby, the Jesuits West province of the Society of Jesus, and the Inter-Community Peace & Justice Center of Seattle (a collaboration of several women's religious orders).

From the outside, listening in this setting looked much like at the Modesto gathering (vignette 3 above). But in the small groups, the tenor of discussions reflected the high educational status of most participants: some with doctoral degrees in theology, the social sciences, or humanities; some with other advanced theological degrees; some with professional degrees (MD, JD, MBA); others with master's or bachelor's degrees across a variety of disciplines. Certainly some held less formal education, but many of these appeared to come from strong backgrounds in Catholic formation or (like many of those in Modesto) simply brought a great deal of intelligence and experience to the discussions.

As a result, these listening sessions were more conceptual and less story-based than the other settings above. But careful listening was still central. Concerns were a little more arms-length, emphasizing empathy for those suffering injustice and concern for local ecosystems

[12] The notion of "organic intellectuals" comes from leftist Italian organizer Antonio Gramsci, who originally based the concept on the interpretive work of common priests in rural Italy and used it to describe the intellectual figures within social movements who interpret history and politics in service to the movement; see Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks Volumes 1 & 2* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). The concept has also been appropriated by right-wing libertarians, both to critique the left—see Bradley Thomas, "Antonio Gramsci: The Godfather of Cultural Marxism," in *FEE Stories* (Foundation for Economic Freedom, 2019)—and describe their own work in social movements. For a good discussion of the concept, see Vicki Birchfield and Annette Freyberg-Inan, "Organic Intellectuals and Counter-Hegemonic Politics in the Age of Globalisation," in *Critical Theories, International Relations, and the Anti-Globalisation Movement*, ed. C. Eschle and B. Maiguashca (New York: Routledge, 2004), 154–173.

impacted by climate change. Participants also discussed their love for the Catholic Church and concern for its current state in the US, with some leaders seemingly determined to narrow its focus to a limited set of personal moral issues rather than its historic broad concern for humanity in its personal, community, and societal complexity.

These sessions were also marked by careful listening, and occasionally by stories told passionately—including personal stories of the efficacy of organizing as a tool for implementing Catholic teaching. Advanced concepts like "subsidiarity" came up repeatedly, a way to argue for laypeople's initiative in reforming the world. Periodically these sessions intended for attentive listening were reduced to intellectual debates between two people, with other marginalized. But that occurred rarely, which was rather remarkable considering the tendency of intellectuals to default into such debates devoid of active listening.

The *substance* of the gathering—called "Prophetic Communities: Organizing as an Expression of Catholic Social Thought"—was successfully synthesized into a document titled "Synodal Synthesis Report."[13] That report was shared with Catholic Church leaders as an input to the overall process of ecclesial listening within the Synod on Synodality—both the official listening by bishops and unofficial listening of the sponsoring religious communities and faith-based organizations.

OVERVIEW: LISTENING AS FAITHFUL WITNESS AND OPTION FOR THE MARGINALIZED

Four vignettes from quite different settings in which the Catholic Church in the Américas has engaged in significant "listening practices" built on relational organizing (these from the US and México but with parallels in the CEBs of Latin América; in the faith-based organizing projects in the UK, Central America, Haiti, Africa, Germany, Eastern Europe, and Australia; and in certain Catholic academic gatherings worldwide that emphasize deep dialogue). Four dynamic ecclesial experiences in which the church already has extensive experience of listening: sometimes to dedicated practicing Catholics, sometimes to secular voices and voices from other religions, and sometimes to persons alienated from their childhood Catholicism.

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[13] Maureen O'Connell and Joseph Fleming, *Prophetic Communities: Organizing as an Expression of Catholic Social Thought—Synodal Synthesis Report* (San Francisco: University of San Francisco, 2023), issuu.com/ipjc/docs/prophetic_communities-synodal_synthesis_report_202?fr=sY2NlNzY0Nzc5MzA.

Note how all four cases, in different ways, give priority to the voices of those currently marginalized by society (and, in some cases, marginalized within the church as well). The practice of listening and the model of relational organizing have been most systematically developed within faith-based organizing, but all four cases engage in both. Listening has mattered at times throughout church history: in the governance of religious orders and monasteries,[14] settings of spiritual direction and communal life, gatherings of Catholic scholars and ecclesial leaders (though of course in some periods all these have been taken over by models of authority that suppress attentive listening). One insight the church has gained from its long pastoral experience, articulated clearly by Pope Francis in recent years, is that the best listening practices incorporate a kind of faithful witness to the Church's "option for the poor": listening that pays attention to the profound suffering that occurs amid human struggles for dignity and land, housing, and work (the 3Ts in Spanish: "tierra, techo, trabajo"—the central memo of the World Meetings of Popular Movements), but also witnessing the joy and hope marginalized communities experience when they come together in those struggles and find their church sharing in them. That joy and hope has transformed many Catholic leaders in recent decades, and perhaps throughout history, as written about regarding his own life by Pedro Casaldáliga, the 1960s bishop in the Brazilian backcountry.[15] Contemporary Catholic thought broadens this to an "option for the marginalized" more generally, building on the insight that those excluded from power often see dynamics and realities missed by those close to power—in which the "marginalized" include anyone unjustly denied full voice and participation: women in settings where male authority dominates, racialized or indigenized people in settings of white supremacy, poor workers and the unemployed where capitalist interests rule. But people privileged in one setting may be marginalized in another—for example, priests in a diocese run by an autocratic bishop. Crucially, in any of these settings, attentive listening can involve no pollyannish or condescending posture on the part of church leaders; to be authentic, it must represent a church truly attending to the witness of the faithful and in turn truly witnessing their struggles.

At the same time, these practices must not deify the marginalized. In different ways, each of these settings remains open to expert opinion from civil society and authoritative wisdom from the Catholic

[14] The word "Listen" is the first word in the Rule of Saint Benedict, which has influenced nearly all subsequent church governance and in some sense all subsequent European history; my thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this connection.

[15] Pedro Casaldáliga, *Yo creo en la justicia y en la esperanza* (Rio de Janeiro: Desclée de Brouwer, 1975).

tradition, seeking insight for constructing meaning and a more humane society wherever it can be found. All are clear: the option for the marginalized does not mean that the marginalized have all the answers or are always right. Also, like all things human, these listening practices can also be abused—either embracing the distortions of power (as noted in vignette 1 above, but potentially true in all of them); by turning the marginalized into objects of idolatry such that *only* their views matter; or turning the option for the poor into a rigid ideology rather than a fundamental resource for listening and decision-making—alongside other resources such as secular expertise, authoritative wisdom, and collective discernment.

But at their best, the listening practices witnessed in these four settings reflect a dual role of the church: on one hand permanently discerning its own way and teaching in light of sacred Scripture, the signs of the times, its own deep traditions, and the best secular knowledge available; on the other hand as a catalyst in civil society: encouraging participation from a variety of stakeholders, soliciting authentic voice from all sources of insight, and proposing solutions to societal challenges.[16] The first dimension of this ecclesial vocation strives to empower the faithful to live the Gospel in their daily lives, families, and communities. The second dimension strives to evangelize the wider structures of society, reforming them in ways that embody the Gospel vision of humanity as beloved community. Through such work, the church strives to broaden and deepen the experience of human dignity here and now, and channel that experience into concrete work to reform society in the service of everyday people—that is, to advance what I have elsewhere called "ethical democracy": a public life that reflects the diversity and pluralism of society; democratic institutions that successfully allow people effective voice and vote in decisions that govern them; economic arrangements that grant all realistic opportunity to a dignified life (typically via economic markets allowed to function but regulated reasonably by public officials); and a culture of accountability that insists on all of that.[17]

By bearing witness to human dignity *and* ethical democracy, these listening practices thus are in continuity with the deep Catholic

[16] The dual role of the church laid out here differs from the traditional "listening/teaching church" distinction, in which teaching represents the external ecclesial role striving to instruct the wider society. This traditional framing fails to accurately capture the actual role of the church in the pluralistic setting of the contemporary world, as well as the way internal and external practices can enrich and cross-fertilize one another.

[17] For in-depth discussion of ethical democracy, see Wood, *Faith in Action*; Wood and Fulton, *A Shared Future*; and especially Markofski, *Good News for Common Goods*.

tradition of societal solidarity—and reject both a liberal "therapeutic culture" of narcissistic individualism and the neoliberal economic order that leaves persons to the not-so-tender mercies of libertarian economic markets.

New work by Christian social ethicist Aaron Stauffer analyzes listening practices in faith-based community organizing, finding there:[18] i) a form of practical politics that places sacred values at the center of addressing societal challenges, and ii) a recognition of the sacred value of "the other."[19] Stauffer's core argument—relational organizing represents a form of "social practical reasoning" that when done well constitutes a process of listening to the Spirit—dovetails deeply with the synodal ideal of "listening in the Spirit." Stauffer thus renders an understanding of relational organizing that captures its close relationship to Francis's theological language of "encounter." The following section builds towards a deeper understanding of that connection.

A Theological and Sociological Framework for a Listening Church

Given the diversity of these ecclesial listening settings—across decades, geographic settings, classes, and educational levels—how can we synthesize insights for a more deeply listening, synodal church in the vision of Pope Francis? The remainder of this essay reflects analytically on those experiences in a mode simultaneously sociological and theological, striving to offer a framework for understanding what is fundamentally happening in these settings. I will draw on categories of analysis from Catholicism in Latin America, democratic social theory, and Catholic and Protestant political theology. Methodologically, in beginning from experience via the vignettes of Catholic listening practices in (mostly) marginalized communities in Latin America and the US, I broadly follow Gustavo Gutiérrez's approach of critical reflection on praxis in light of the Gospels and Catholic teaching, which in turn has affinities

[18] See Aaron Stauffer's *Listening to the Spirit: The Radical Social Gospel, Sacred Value, and Broad-Based Community Organizing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[19] Aaron Stauffer's *Listening to the Spirit* arrived to me just as this article was being submitted, so I do not engage with it fully here. Especially valuable are Stauffer's accounts (55–69) of: i) the role of "agitation" within relational meetings and listening campaigns, and ii) the link between relational organizing and liturgy. On the intersection between relational organizing and liturgy, see also Larry Gordon, "Reverence and Democratic Practice," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 21, no. 3 (2024): 229–247.

with the inductive methodology of the social gospel tradition in American Christianity.[20]

Although it is impossible to present detailed ethnographic evidence in a short essay, broadly speaking we can say that these listening processes embody a number of core values that have emerged in church teaching in recent decades: solidarity and *acompañamiento*; political work for justice as "the institutional path of charity," linked to commitment to the common good and a politics of the common life; and Catholicism as "public religion."

Perhaps most fundamentally, each of the four settings displays *solidarity in action*: not simply verbal expressions of concern, care, or empathy for those who suffer in the world, but a clarity of commitment and analysis to taking action in solidarity with those suffering injustice or marginalization as a result of the workings of social power. Notably, this solidarity is not "charity": the important and sometimes noble acts of "giving" that almost never change the real situation of the marginalized, and too often condescend to them. Rather, this solidarity gathers the marginalized and those supporting them to reflect on their experience and struggles and begin to transform their world:[21]

> [Solidarity] is above all a question of interdependence, sensed as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world, in its economic, cultural, political, and religious elements, and accepted as a moral category. When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a "virtue," is solidarity . . . a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good. . . . This determination is based on the solid conviction that what is hindering full development is that desire for profit and that thirst for power already mentioned. (Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, no. 38)

Solidarity is enacted even when, as in San Francisco above, those gathering come from relatively more privileged backgrounds—scholars, priests, professional organizers—and do so from within

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[20] See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), and *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013 [1983]); and Stauffer, *Listening in the Spirit*, 3–16.

[21] The concept of solidarity was central to Pope John Paul II's thinking, forming an important part of at least three major encyclicals: *Laborem Exercens*, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html); *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html; and *Centesimus Annus*, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html.

social relationships with the marginalized and attempt to embody their views. Such relationships offer at least the possibility of political and ecclesial accountability to the realities of "the underside of history" and an intellectual, theological, ecclesial, and political "view from below" as called for by a careful understanding of the church's "option for the poor."[22] In other words, this is *listening in solidarity*—an important ecclesial learning in the global church developing from decades of rich ecclesial experience of grassroots pastoral work among the poor in Latin America.

Note, too, how all of this draws on and reflects Pope Benedict XVI's emphasis in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) on "the institutional path of charity," i.e., the reform of social structures and policies through institutional action, including politics and economics.[23]

A second crucial theme also originating in the Latin American ecclesial experience emerges from examining these case studies. In each, albeit to differing degrees, ecclesial listening occurs from within a stance of *acompañamiento* ("accompaniment" in English, but it sounds better and carries specific implications in Spanish and Portuguese).[24] This is the church "walking with" the People of God, especially in their marginalization and suffering, and hearing from them about their experience. Again, such *acompañamiento* does not determine the correct solution to every societal problem, but as the church formulates its position regarding such solutions, it refracts the church's vision through the lens of the world of the marginalized to assure that proposed solutions address their concerns and uphold their dignity.

Recent writings in political theology illuminate two additional key dynamics within these four ecclesial listening venues. First, work by

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[22] On the underside of history, the view from (the societal) "below," and the option for the poor, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004); Simon C. Kim, *An Immigration of Theology: Theology of Context as the Theological Method of Virgilio Elizondo and Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012); and Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, eds., *Expanding the View: Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

[23] See Daniel K. Finn, ed., *The Moral Dynamics of Economic Life: An Extension and Critique of "Caritas in Veritate"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[24] For discussions of accompaniment, see my discussion below (drawing on Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995]) as well as Robert Lassalle-Klein, "Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People: The Contextual Christology of Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2009): 347–376; and Jon Sobrino, SJ, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002) and *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

Whelan and Tran draws on the writings and public utterances of the early twentieth century sociologist W. E. B. Dubois (US), and the martyred and recently canonized St. Oscar Romero (El Salvador) to elaborate a concept of *coalitional solidarity*.[25] This concept identifies the ways different sectors or layers of society sometimes generate a sufficient sense of shared identity and struggle to deepen democracy by effectively making claims on government or society in the name of the marginalized (for Dubois, the formerly enslaved African Americans who had been promised equal status during the American Civil War but were rapidly re-marginalized by the Jim Crow South and segregated North; for Romero, the Salvadoran *campesinos* driven to the most marginal lands or into landlessness and desperate wage labor).

To various degrees, our four case studies exhibit the church's role in launching processes with promise to advance coalitional solidarity. This is perhaps least developed in the *comunidad ecclesial de base* case from México; there, because all participants (except this researcher) came from almost identical social origins in *mestizo* or Indigenous rural Guerrero state and became urban migrants working in the informal labor sector and shared residence in a marginalized *colonia* in a ravine far from the city center. They are almost the definition of a single-class marginalized community. Thus, it is hard to identify a "coalitional" dimension to their impressive solidarity (except perhaps when this author occasionally brought more elite groups to reflect with and learn from this CEB). But CEBs sometimes generate coalitional solidarity, as when in Nicaragua in the 1970s or Brazil under the dictatorship CEBs sometimes convened laborers, *campesinos*, and sympathetic bourgeoisie (in Brazil, across racial lines) into coalitions that undergirded the struggle against Somoza or the military dictatorship; or when in Peru in recent decades CEBs brought together Indigenous and *mestizo* urban dwellers in *pueblos jóvenes* with middle-class professionals to defend the interests of marginal communities.

Coalitional solidarity is more clearly displayed in the other three cases:

Faith-based community organizing and the labor union movement represent the two fields that most consistently and successfully mobilize people across divides of religion, "race"/ethnicity, immigrant status, and socioeconomic status/class. In a society as segregated as the US—and in which it has become acceptable in some settings to

[25] Matthew Whelan and Jonathan Tran, "Looking Up and Looking Out: Du Bois, Romero, and Democratic Solidarity," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 21, no. 3 (2024): 246–268.

demonize others on the basis of these categories—this represents an important democratic achievement.[26] The field has become all the more crucial amid the current antidemocratic climate of polarization in the US, since it pulls people into broadly political (but generally non-partisan) settings of public action and into electoral mobilization efforts to defend democratic institutions.

The World Meeting of Popular Movements regional convening likewise drew people across these lines of social difference. Furthermore, it successfully convened a vast range of social movements, from addressing climate change and protecting Indigenous rights to opposing white supremacy, from promoting living wage campaigns, opposing mass incarceration and excessive police force to advocating for public education reform and immigrant rights. Notable in this setting was that organizers did *not* rely on a "rainbow coalition" strategy, whereby organizers imagine that groups will support one another simply out of their mutual interest in gaining power. Instead, the gathering drew on the convenors' rich experience of relational organizing to create processes of listening and reflection, along with moments of shared prayer, singing, and worship. These practices constitute the kind of "bridging cultural practices" that researchers have argued offer the cultural glue that can hold together highly diverse coalitions—i.e., foster coalitional solidarity and allow it to survive through inevitable conflict and periodic political disappointment.[27]

Finally, while the Prophetic Communities synodal gathering in San Francisco was less racially and religiously diverse than the other settings, it still exhibited impressive coalitional solidarity by convening university-based scholars, community-based activists and organizers, and church-based thought leaders—and treating all of them as thought partners in the spirit of Gramsci's organic intellectuals. The gathering began to construct a long-term coalition of democratically-focused thought leaders capable of sustained "thinking with" both the church and democratic movements.

The second insight from political theology illuminated by these four cases arises from recent critiques of the concept of "the common good" that has long undergirded Catholic social teaching across

[26] See Wood and Fulton, *A Shared Future*, and Brad R. Fulton and Richard L. Wood, "Interfaith Organizing: Emerging Theological and Organizational Challenges," *International Journal of Public Theology* 6 (2012): 1–23.

[27] Ruth Braunstein, Brad R. Fulton, and Richard L. Wood, "The Role of Bridging Cultural Practices in Racially and Socioeconomically Diverse Civic Organizations," in *American Sociological Review* 79, no. 4 (2014): 705–725, doi:10.1177/0003122414538966.

centuries.[28] Luke Bretherton notes the critique to which any coherent notion of common good has been subjected, due to the postmodern proliferation of different understandings of the good life, community, and the goals toward which humanity can and should aspire.[29] In its place, he suggests a focus on "a politics of the common life" as a way to advance a shared democratic polity in which all can participate and benefit without assuming or imposing any one notion of the good society. A politics of the common good focuses on the substance of issues, about which people are expected to converge on a shared understanding of what is good. A politics of the common life focuses instead on the *process* of reaching provisional agreement: even as people may differ regarding what is ultimately best in society, such a politics strives to formulate provisional steps forward upon which people can agree despite their differences. Jonathan Tran makes a crucial contribution in this direction by articulating a form of anti-racist and intersectional politics rooted not in racial identity but rather in political economy.[30]

The CEB in México might have benefitted from such an understanding: though at times they impressively and intuitively lived out such politics by eschewing political differences in favor of shared political work to get potable water and sewage lines built into their neighborhood, at other times they ran up sharply against their contradictory understandings of the good for their community. Sometimes differences were partisan, at other times they were centered on ideology regarding gender and the family, and at still other times centered on how to treat their aggressively proselytizing Pentecostal neighbors (whom they saw as anti-Catholic, in the sharp religious tensions of the time). Coming from villages in which solidarity was based on shared social status and views on such issues, these recent urban migrants struggled to conceive how they might sustain solidarity amid such sharply differing views. Partly as a result, this CEB sometimes struggled to stay together, periodically dissolving (implicitly, by simply not meeting) and having to re-form. The concept

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[28] Rhys Williams, "Public Religion and Hegemony: Contesting the Language of the Common Good," in *The Power of Religious Publics*, ed. William Swatos and James K. Wellman (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999), 169–186.

[29] See Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy* and *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

[30] See Jonathan Tran, *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). On the common good: I do not advocate shedding the language of "common good" central to Catholic thought and authoritative papal teaching for generations. Rather, supplementing it with a strong commitment to a politics of common life can enable appropriate Catholic advocacy for the common good within polities that disagree deeply on what the common good actually entails.

of a politics of common life, in which neighbors suspend some areas of difference in favor of shared work for a shared future within a common society, might have helped them.

Though the concept of "common good" was often invoked in the other three settings—and I doubt anyone present there had ever heard of "a politics of common life"—these sessions were structured by a common-life politics capable of suspending differences in favor of constructing a shared societal future. Faith-based organizing, the Modesto WMPM gathering, and the synodal gatherings like Prophetic Communities all include people committed to a range of views: political ideologies; racial ideologies; feminist versus patriarchal views on the family and gender relations; gender and sexual identities; and varying commitments to or critiques of "the American dream," free markets, and a host of other potential objects of contention. But the ethos underlying these settings, and the disciplined organizing practices the event organizers strove to adopt, fostered a process of listening to one another that largely suspended ideological contention.

Finally, from democratic theory and the sociology of religion, the concept of "public religion" elaborated by José Casanova provides a framework for seeing the similarities and differences across these four cases.[31] They exemplify what we might call dynamic public Catholicism: groups that bring Catholic ethical and pro-social commitments and orientations into the public sphere. All four cases—whether the particular group is all Catholic (the CEB), heavily Catholic (Prophetic Communities), predominantly Catholic but with large participation from other religious and secular traditions (the WMPM), or extremely religiously diverse (FBCO)—draw inspiration from Catholic traditions dating back to the origins of modern Catholic social teaching in *Rerum Novarum* (1891), historical Catholic labor activists, and Catholic Action and its descendants.

The concept of "the public sphere" requires clarification, as common usage of the phrase has obscured its meaning in ways that undermine its analytic utility. The public sphere is not simply anywhere people gather (sporting events, say). Rather, the public sphere exists wherever people gather to consider together their social situations, public policies, the direction society should go, and how to get there. Sometimes such settings are quite civil; at other times they involve political conflict. Thus, the public sphere has both dialogical (dialogue-based) and agonic (conflict-based) dimension; both are critical for sustaining a robust democratic life.[32]

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[31] See Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.

[32] An important distinction between two versions of such conflict: in an *agonic* public setting, rivals compete for influence while treating one another as holding legitimately different positions and respecting the dignity of the other; in an *antagonistic* public

Casanova draws on the political scientist Alfred Stepan to argue that the public sphere exists across three levels of society: the state (all government settings, including the bureaucracies of governing), political society (associations oriented toward influencing or conquering government power but not part of the state—examples include business associations, labor associations, corporate lobbyists, political parties, etc.), and civil society (associations not directly political, but where people engage in discussion of public issues).

An important contribution of public Catholicism to a world where all authority is suspect is that it brings into the public sphere—at all three levels—an appreciation for the legitimate exercise of authority. At its best, and despite appearances to the contrary in some settings, Catholicism is not an authoritarian tradition. Rather, it is an authoritative tradition in the sense that it simultaneously embraces the need for legitimate decision-making power to reside in accountable hands and the need for human persons to hold authority over their own actions and consciences.[33] This allows us to see how all our settings of Catholic listening represent a dynamic form of public Catholicism.

Typically, CEBs exist primarily at the level of civil society. They discuss their communities and reflect on their political realities in light of the Gospel and Catholic teaching. They are not, however, centered on conquering political power. Of course, they can become mobilizing structures for political involvement, but they typically are centered on listening to Scripture and one another while reflecting on the realities within their own communities, and how those realities can be improved.

Faith-based community organizing represents public Catholicism oriented much more strongly toward the political society level of the public sphere: These groups actively seek to shape public policy and political decision-making in the hope of making them conform more closely to the visions of thriving communities carried in Catholic social teaching, the Jewish ethical tradition, African-American "social Christianity," the Protestant "social Gospel," Islamic jurisprudence, and democratic humanism. They strive to remain non-partisan, though that has become more difficult today in highly polarized or authoritarian settings, including the US and El Salvador. They thus fall at the boundary between civil and political society, "reaching up" to

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setting, at least one rival treats the other as an illegitimate political actor and seeks to undermine their public dignity. Dialogue and agonic public spheres form the foundation of political democracies; antagonistic public settings can undermine and ultimately destroy democracy, especially in the hands of authoritarians and autocrats.

[33] See Dillon, *Postliberal Catholicism*, and Jerome P. Baggett, *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

pressure political society and the state to better deliver on the promises of democracy for marginalized communities.

The WMPM and Prophetic Communities gatherings lay somewhere between those two orientations: clearly hoping to create conditions for more vigorous Catholic engagement in the public arena, working solidly in civil society but with hopes of shaping Catholicism to have a broader and deeper influence on political society and public issues broadly understood. In both these settings, we also see the authoritative dimension of Catholicism reflected: both academic experts and church leaders are accorded respect and voice to offer authoritative knowledge (from academic expertise) and authoritative guidance (from senior leaders of the ecclesial community). Thus, a listening church is neither a "democratic" church in the political sense nor a rudderless collectivity; it is the Body of Christ in listening mode, with ecclesial leaders discerning the church's future in dialogue with the faithful.

SUMMARY DISCUSSION: LISTENING AS ACCOMPANIMENT AND ENCOUNTER

Theologian Roberto Goizueta draws on liberationist theological insights to develop a "theology of accompaniment" rooted in the realities of Hispanics/Latinos living in the US.[34] Noting the minority status and generally low economic status of Hispanics in the US (though with *much* variation, including significant wealth), he argues for such a theology to start from the "underside of history" as seen in the powerlessness, oppression, and societal neglect that confront low-income Hispanic communities. This draws on and reflects the deep commitments developed by Latin American theologians in recent decades, as well as the discussion above regarding public Catholicism.

But Goizueta makes an additional move important for our contemporary moment of sheer crassness and ugliness in public life within many societies around the globe. Against a narrow and ideologically-hued concept of "social justice" sometimes invoked by sectors of the contemporary political left or political right and used as a bludgeon with which to beat up one's opponents (as much as they might deserve that for the injustices they perpetuate), Goizueta argues for a commitment to "beauty *and* justice" as the proper standard against which to assess anything claiming to represent a social justice movement and an embodiment of the Gospel-mandated preferential option for the poor. That is, any movement claiming to represent Gospel values and the ethic of Jesus must proceed in ways that assert social power to back Christianity's demand for social justice, and must

[34] Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus*.

also embody human relations centered on beauty and human dignity, rather than *simply* the drive for power.

In the Catholic tradition, such a stance must ultimately be embodied in liturgy—that is, in the Mass and other settings in which the Catholic community comes together as the People of God. Good liturgy draws together, in a setting shaped by beautiful architecture and music, the broad experience of the faithful living in the world—personal, familial, social, political, and economic—and offers all that up in the context of God's love for humanity and creation. Through encounter with the Word (both scriptural and homiletic) and the sacraments (most paradigmatically the Eucharist), the faithful reflect on their experience, come to construct and understand its deeper meanings, and allow it to be valued and/or judged in light of values that transcend their own experience. From that dynamic arises both the spiritual journey of the faithful and the sense of holiness that infuses good liturgy.[35]

Finally, the most crucial theological category for interpreting the centrality of the listening practices analyzed here comes from Pope Francis. In several of his authoritative statements regarding the church's way of proceeding amidst the deep divisions of contemporary life, he invokes the language of "encounter" to signify two or more persons meeting in a way that embodies "human fraternity" and "social friendship" (see *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 5, 6, 99, 154, 232). Broadly speaking, encounter relates to two strands of philosophical, social, and political thought.[36] The first, represented in thinking from Cicero to Max Weber and Isaiah Berlin, recognizes the inevitability of conflict in human relationships and the challenge of channeling it in peaceful directions. The second, most prominently from Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Buber, approaches dialogue not merely or primarily as a rational exchange of arguments but also as an encounter of whole persons embedded in different histories and cultures. While Gadamer envisions the possibility of a kind of synthesis—a "fusion of horizons"—Buber draws on the Jewish tradition to emphasize the integrity of the other ("Thou") in their transcendent individuality and thus separateness. Francis appears to draw on these lines of thought,

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[35] On faith-based community organizing, its core listening practices, and their relationship to liturgy, see Larry Gordon, "Reverence and Democratic Practice." Space limitations preclude addressing the ways in which liturgy can instead reinforce the extant workings of societal power by some groups against others—itself an important topic.

[36] This paragraph draws extensively from Thomas Banchoff, "Catholic Social Teaching: Journeying Together," *The Tablet* (September 23, 2023): 4–5 and "Abrahamic Dialogue in the Shadow of War," *Commonweal* (February 16, 2024), www.commonwealmagazine.org/interfaith-dialogue-israel-hamas-francis-abraham-al-azhar.

refracted through his Jesuit formation in the way of proceeding of Ignatius of Loyola. Encounter also can represent a deeper, more realistic and experiential alternative to Jurgen Habermas's concept of "ideal speech situation," which underlies much thinking regarding the democratic public sphere and theory in the last forty years.[37] In all these dimensions, Francis's concept of encounter can offer theological grounding for our analysis of listening.

In Francis's thinking, a culture of encounter is a social and political space in which we fully acknowledge human differences and the inevitable conflicts they entail, yet nevertheless seek to develop points of agreement, pursue common projects, and learn from others' experience. Francis first called for a culture of encounter as archbishop of Buenos Aires (1998–2013), in a city and country marked by deep social and political divisions. From there the concept became central in the Latin American bishops meetings at Aparecida, Brazil in 2007 and ultimately in Francis's authoritative papal writing: his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* mentions "encounter" forty-nine times and "culture of encounter" seven times. He writes, "To speak of a 'culture of encounter' means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone" (no. 216).

To see the listening practices of CEBs, faith-based organizing, and the other sites analyzed here as versions of encounter challenges participants to deepen even the careful listening practices they have developed until now, engaging them with a renewed sense of the humanity of the other person and their distinct background and experience. It also challenges those who train faith-based organizers or CEB *animadores* and *promotores* to form these future artisans of ecclesial listening processes in ways attuned to a culture of encounter.

Francis also describes the ethos such encounters can embody, and links them to spiritual experience:

> Today more than ever we need men and women who, on the basis of their experience of accompanying others, are familiar with processes which call for prudence, understanding, patience, and docility to the Spirit. . . . We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening . . . is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. (no. 171)

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[37] Key conceptual resources include "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), and Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

Thus, understanding and engaging in the kinds of listening practices analyzed here will require new learning—even *metanoia*—on the part of all of us responsible for formation of future Catholic leaders, whether in university, ecclesial, or other settings. The ongoing synodal process that will form the future of the church can learn from its long experience in CEBs, faith-based organizing, and the other case studies examined here how to listen to *all dimensions* of the world's joys and struggles. Ministry must certainly address the individual sinfulness, brokenness, and lack of meaning in contemporary lives, but must also engage with the social factors that constrain people's lives and sometimes drive individual failings. A synodal church can learn to draw on its prior experience to truly "hear" the political and economic struggles that make contemporary life so difficult for many and accompany people in their efforts to address those challenges.

CONCLUSION: LISTENING TO FORM MISSIONARY DISCIPLES

This article calls for more dynamic forms of public Catholicism rooted in the kinds of listening practices seen in the four case studies—embracing both a deep Catholic ethic of human dignity and solidarity as well as the legitimacy of ecclesial, intellectual, and civil authority that serves human communities and ethical democracy. Such arrangements might begin to constitute something like the politics of a common life and ethical democracy discussed above.

The church serves the world in myriad ways, not least through shaping human actors capable of reforming cultural, political, and economic institutions so that they better serve humanity. The types of listening practices analyzed here offer promise for the church's ever more vigorous involvement in shaping a humane world. But ultimately their more fundamental purpose lies in shaping a church that thrives into the future. For both roles, the church needs to form "missionary disciples" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 24, 40, 120–121): fully humanized persons capable of renewing both church and world, illuminated by the Gospel and the rich Catholic intellectual tradition.

Such missionary disciples must surely embody the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. But they must just as surely embody what Saint John Paul II called the modern Christian virtue of solidarity—a "firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good" (*Laborem Exercens*, no. 38)—and carry that virtue into the world as missionary disciples. They will do so more truly to the extent that they are formed by a church that embodies solidarity in her action in the world, politics of the common life, and listening to the faithful. JM

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