

Academic Listening Practices and Synodality: Reflections from a Study of World Youth Days

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Abstract: In order to analyze the possible contribution of academic listening practices to the synodal process, this article offers a reflexive analysis of two social science studies of World Youth Days. The first investigation is a historical work carried out between 2017 and 2020 on John Paul II's World Youth Days, based on archives and testimonies collected in seven different countries. The second is a sociological and anthropological study carried out in July-August 2023 on the occasion of the WYD in Lisbon: as part of a delegation of pilgrims, the author experienced the pilgrimage in Portugal among the young people and their chaplains, while carrying out research work. At the crossroads of epistemological reflection and life review, the paper presents the opportunities and risks of such empirical research from the viewpoints of the researcher, respondents, and Catholic institution. While highlighting misunderstandings that can arise, the article emphasizes the mutual enrichment academic listening practices in a church setting can bring. If the researcher and researched agree to let go of their rigidities, their companionship can purify both faith and science by desacralizing what should not be sacred.

MOST OF THE PASSENGERS ON THE BUS ARE BETWEEN seventeen and thirty years old. What they have in common is a fifteen-hour journey from Bordeaux (south-western France) to Portugal, where they will participate in the Thirty-Seventh World Youth Day (WYD). As the bus approaches the Spanish border, and after several religious and secular songs have already been sung, one of the young priests accompanying the delegation begins an ice-breaking activity. He asks those studying literature to raise their hands and introduce themselves, then does the same with those studying science, medicine, law, those who already have a job or are looking for one. At the end, he points out that there are two specific individuals on the bus, whom he jokingly refers to as “spies,” highly recognizable because they are older than average: a journalist from a Christian radio station, who has come to cover the WYD, and myself. Invited to speak at the microphone, I explain that I am here as a “participant observer,” being a professor of modern history at Bordeaux, who has studied John Paul II's WYDs and who

would like to analyze those of Pope Francis, through the edition that will take place in Lisbon. I am interested not only in the organization of the event, but also in the identity of its participants; in fact, I would like to interview them. I finish my impromptu speech by thanking the heads of the delegation who agreed to include me in the pilgrimage.

This anecdote illustrates the ambivalence with which academic listening is perceived within Catholicism. In this paper, I would like to analyze the opportunities and risks of social science methods for a synodal church, which Pope Francis defined with these words:

A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening “is more than simply hearing.” It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth,” in order to know what he “says to the Churches.”¹

As a result, this article does not present the data collected during my WYDs surveys. The reader will not find detailed information about the preparation and execution of World Youth Days, nor about the profile of the people who organize and participate in it. I invite those interested to refer to my previous publications on WYDs, which deal with three topics concentrically embedded: the first is WYD itself, as a mega-event² part of the globalization process³ and the history of international relations.⁴ The second is a study of WYDs as they shed light on the Catholic Church as a system,⁵ providing a glimpse of its

¹ Pope Francis, “Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops,” October 17, 2015, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

² Charles Mercier, *L'Église, les jeunes, et la mondialisation: une histoire des JMJ* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2020).

³ Charles Mercier, “Religion and the Contemporary Phase of Globalization: Insights from a Study of John Paul II’s World Youth Days,” *Journal of World History* 33, no. 2 (June 2022): 1–30.

⁴ Charles Mercier, “Les Journées mondiales de la jeunesse, objet d’une nouvelle histoire diplomatique,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Pierre Renouvin* 53, no. 2 (2021): 189–95, doi.org/10.3917/bipr1.053.0189; Charles Mercier, “Un internationalisme catholique à la fin de la guerre froide. Les Journées mondiales de la jeunesse (1984–1991),” *Revue d’histoire* 153, no. 1 (2022): 105–119, doi.org/10.3917/vin.153.0105.

⁵ Charles Mercier, “Institution versus Charism? The Emmanuel Community, the Catholic Church, and John Paul II’s World Youth Days,” *PentecoStudies* 19, no. 2 (November 9, 2020): 152–169, doi.org/10.1558/pent.40169.

protagonists, whether ordinary faithful, bishops,⁶ or pope,⁷ its concrete workings and adaptations in the face of contemporary issues such as the place of women,⁸ inclusion, cultural and religious diversity.⁹ The third topic, the broadest, is the changing relationship between youth and religion in a context of globalization and individualization of beliefs. WYDs are an excellent observation post to better grasp these dynamics.¹⁰

In order to analyze the possible contribution of academic listening practices to the synodal process, this article takes an unusual route for me, out of my academic comfort zone. The aim is not to present the results of research, but reflect on the methods used, going beyond a purely epistemological approach. More than just a critical study of my

⁶ Charles Mercier, “Les évêques canadiens et la Journée mondiale de la jeunesse de 2002 : essai d’histoire transnationale et politique du catholicisme,” *Recherches sociographiques* 58, no. 3 (2017): 603–627, doi.org/10.7202/1043467ar; Charles Mercier, “Les Journées mondiales de la jeunesse de Paris,” in Jean-Marie Lustiger: *entre crises et recompositions catholiques, 1954–2007*, ed. Denis Pelletier and Benoît Pellistrandi (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2022), 199–214; Charles Mercier, “La Conférence des évêques de France et les Journées mondiales de la jeunesse de 1997,” in *Cent ans de gouvernement de l’Église catholique en France : De l’Assemblée des cardinaux et archevêques à la Conférence des évêques (1919–2019)*, ed. Valentin Favrie, Christian Sorrel, and Charles Mercier (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2022), 239–254, doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.163400.

⁷ Charles Mercier, “Jean-Paul II et les Journées mondiales de la jeunesse,” *Études* 7–8 (2020): 75–85, doi.org/10.3917/etu.4273.0075; Charles Mercier, “Fenomen Światowych Dni Młodzieży,” in *Jan Paweł II—Miara Wielkości Człowieka*, ed. Dominiki Żukowskiej-Gardzińskiej (Varsovie: Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2020), 309–321.

⁸ Charles Mercier, “Breaking through the Stained-Glass Ceiling during John Paul II’s Pontificate? Women, Feminism, and World Youth Days,” *Journal of Modern and Contemporary Christianity* 2, no. 1 (2023): 115–136, doi.org/10.30687/JoMaCC/2785-6046/2023/01/005.

⁹ Charles Mercier, “Les Journées mondiales de la jeunesse de Paris en 1997 : quel rapport avec le catholicisme d’identité ?,” in *Catholicisme et Identité. Regards croisés sur le catholicisme français contemporain*, ed. Bruno Dumons and Frédéric Gugelot (Paris: Karthala, 2017), 193–209; Charles Mercier, “La ‘religion culturelle’ en France et au Québec : quelques réflexions à partir de l’étude des Journées mondiales de la jeunesse,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 52, no. 3 (2023): 340–357, doi.org/10.1177/00084298221122456.

¹⁰ Charles Mercier, “Les papes et les jeunes : un essai de mise en perspective historique,” in *Entendre et proposer l’Évangile avec les jeunes. Actes du IX^e colloque international de l’ISPC, 12–15 Février 2019*, ed. Isabelle Morel, Enzo Biemmi, and François-Xavier Amherdt (Paris: Cerf, 2020), 137–169; Charles Mercier, “Les Journées mondiales de la jeunesse comme dispositifs de transmission religieuse (1985–2019),” *Histoire de l’éducation* 155 (2021): 47–67; Charles Mercier, Jayeel Cornelio, and Jean-Philippe Warren, “Young People and Religious Actors in a Globalized World. Introduction,” *Social Compass* 71, no. 1 (2024): 3–25, doi.org/10.1177/00377686241240693.

scientific approach, this article proceeds from a kind of life review, inspired in particular by Ignatian spirituality, which consists in paying attention to spiritual movements in oneself and others, through a contemplative state of mind.¹¹ This approach leads me to formulate the thesis that the collaboration between social scientists and the protagonists of the Synod can purify both religion and science, and also open a space for spiritual experiences.

CONTEXT, OBJECTIVES, AND LISTENING PROTOCOL

The academic listening practices discussed in this paper were carried out in the context of two studies on WYDs, held every two or three years since their creation in 1984. The first is a historical study of the eight editions organized during John Paul II's pontificate,¹² conducted between 2015 and 2019. This included the collection of some fifty testimonies in seven different countries. The second study is the above-mentioned sociological and anthropological study carried out in July-August 2023 on the occasion of the Lisbon WYD: as part of a delegation of pilgrims, I experienced the event in Portugal among the young people and their chaplains, to whom I was able to listen in formal interviews as well as when they spoke in public or during group conversations.

In the French public academic context, this state-funded research could not be religiously-oriented. It must use secular methods to produce new scientific knowledge. In order to establish their legitimacy in the academic sphere, French social scientists of religion have clearly marked their independence from their object of study by practicing science for science's sake, not science for pastoral action.¹³ That said, a religious motivation implicitly underpinned my work: between the ages of nineteen and twenty-four, I had taken part in three World Youth Days (Paris 1997, Rome 2000, and Toronto 2002). The Paris WYD in particular was a "place of fulfillment," which played a decisive role in the next stage of my life. Looking back on this experience, both personal and collective, and turning it into a story, was one source of motivation for launching my investigation. As a historian, however, I have endeavored to distance myself from this personal interest, in order to listen to the witnesses with a critical ear.

¹¹ Yves Vende, "La relecture de vie, une pratique ancienne. L'examen de vie chez Jésus, Socrate, et Confucius," *Christus* 277, no. 1 (January 2023): 108–116.

¹² Roma (1984), Roma (1985), Buenos Aires (1987), Santiago de Compostela (1989), Czestochowa (1991), Denver (1993), Manila (1995), Paris (1997), Rome (2000), and Toronto (2002).

¹³ Émile Poulat, "Aux origines du 'Groupe de sociologie des religions' et de ses archives," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 136 (2006): 25–37.

In my research about John Paul II's WYD, the listening protocol was part of what is known as oral history. Oral history is used to collect the life stories of those who do not write down their memories, but also find information not provided by written sources (such as the meaning actors give to their actions or some details of their daily life), approach non-institutional memory, or confirm or refute certain hypotheses.¹⁴ Oral history also aims at grasping the complexity and density of human relationships. The fifty interviews I collected were preceded by documentation work based on the internet, biographical dictionaries and, where possible, publications and archives. As the French historian Philippe Joutard writes, "Having some prior knowledge of what makes up the essence of a life is a first form of respect for one's interlocutor."¹⁵ During the interview, this groundwork makes it possible to reach a certain level of precision more quickly, without the witness needing to retrace his entire itinerary. In this way, he can concentrate on those aspects of his life that left no trace. The fact of arriving with this information, which the witness himself has sometimes forgotten, also enables him to remember the past better. Contact with fragments of archives brings back buried memories. It also helps avoid conscious or unconscious reconstructions, reassuring speeches and the "wooden language" expertly used by some clergymen. The interview is semi-directive, i.e., follows a questionnaire from which it is possible to deviate according to the dynamics of the conversation. The conversation is recorded if the interlocutor has no objections. After the interview, this recording allows me to listen again to key passages, complete my notes, and transcribe certain words that will be used in the scientific publication, according to their relevance to the research question and established plan. The words of the witness are thus reduced to a few extracts, confronted with other words or documents that may confirm or relativize them. Speeches are also interpreted according to conceptual frameworks that are not necessarily those of the witness. For example, I put into perspective the words of Henrietta de Villa, who coordinated the 1995 Manila WYD and later became the Philippine ambassador to the Holy See, with gender studies of women's empowerment strategies in a Catholic context. I also compared her trajectory with that of an American nun,

¹⁴ Florence Descamps, *L'historien, l'archiviste, et le magnétophone: de la constitution de la source orale à son exploitation* (Paris: Comité pour l'histoire économique et financière de la France, 2001).

¹⁵ Philippe Joutard, *Ces voix qui nous viennent du passé* (Paris: Hachette, 1983), 228. [Translation, mine]

Sister Mary Ann Walsh, who had been in charge of communications for the 1993 Denver WYD, to identify similarities and differences.¹⁶

For the Lisbon WYD study, the listening protocol was a little different. Before starting the interview, I knew nothing about the brief lives of the young faithful or priests I was going to interview. Through a poll commissioned from a specialized institute,¹⁷ and other surveys published in the press,¹⁸ I had gathered information on French eighteen- to thirty-year-olds, young Catholics, and WYD participants, but had no precise biographical data. The interviews were therefore more exploratory: I took the time to listen to the childhood and youth stories of the young people I was interviewing, the reasons why they had signed up for WYD, their hopes and fears, how they were living the experience, their view of the world and the church. The long bus journeys, not only from Bordeaux to Lisbon but throughout the entire stay, waits, and walks were ideal opportunities for interviews. I took notes or recorded, depending on the situation. In addition to these formal interviews, I also listened to the words spoken formally (sermons, teachings, speaking into the microphone on the bus), or informally (small talk, conversations in which I found myself involved, or verbalizations of conflicts). Without being in a permanent state of alertness, I tried to be in a receptive state, and in the evening, I took note of all the day's significant facts and remarks.

In both cases, my method was secular. I must admit, however, that as far as the fieldwork in Portugal is concerned, I was inspired by the religious fervor of the event; I had an intense spiritual life because of my participation in the group's religious activities and tried to create links between my scientific research and faith during personal times of prayer. However, I did not explicitly integrate spiritual practices such as *Lectio Divina* into my research, as Catherine Sexton did in her study of elderly nuns.¹⁹

¹⁶ Mercier, "Breaking through the Stained-Glass Ceiling?"

¹⁷ Kantar Public poll for LACES (University of Bordeaux) and GSRL with the support of the Institut universitaire de France, conducted from June 14 to 16, 2023 among a sample of 1,000 young people aged between 18 and 30, representative of the 18–30 age group in France, veriangroup.com/hubfs/FR/Rapport-des-jeunes-%C3%A0-la-la%C3%AFcit%C3%A9.pdf?hsLang=fr.

¹⁸ Including a survey of WYD participants in the French Catholic daily newspaper *La Croix*. See www.la-croix.com/Religion/JMJ-jeunes-catholiques-fervents-contre-courant-notre-sondage-exclusif-2023-05-25-1201268810.

¹⁹ Catherine Sexton, "Practical Theology Method as Contemplative Enquiry: From Holy Listening to Sacred Reading and Shared Horizons," *Practical Theology* 12, no. 1 (2019): 44–57 doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2019.1575042.

REACTIONS OF INDIVIDUALS INTERVIEWED

I would now like to turn to the reactions of the interviewees to this academic listening approach, which took different forms, ranging from mistrust and incomprehension to recognition and gratitude. Some of the interviewees' reactions changed over the course of the research process.

For my historical research, most of the players seemed happy to be asked for an interview, sometimes seeing it as an opportunity to recount memories important to them, which could be passed on via a publication. Some confided in me that they had not yet found an attentive ear ready to listen to their experience. For example, one of the local organizers of the 1993 Denver WYD wrote to me: "You are the first person in 25 years to ask me about my experience or reflections on the event, although the diocese has done print and video retrospectives since." After the event, he had been rather abruptly dismissed by the archdiocese of Denver and felt he had not been thanked for the immense energy expended in setting up the event: "Was there professional reward for my participation or recognition of the role I played? No." In his case, the listening I offered him a posteriori had a substitute function, remedying the feeling of not being listened to by the Catholic institution. On the other hand, some of the people I approached declined or did not follow up my interview proposals. Not everyone involved in WYD wants to be listened to by an academic, especially those for whom the experience was painful, ended badly, or was insignificant.

I encountered less of this kind of resistance during my sociological research at WYD 2023. Almost all the young people, priests, and nuns I approached agreed to talk to me; the fact that I was immersed in the event with them gradually helped to break down any resistance or fears. Some of them, however, checked whether I was Catholic before telling me about their experience. From a "spy" who aroused a certain mistrust, and in whose presence you had to be on your guard, I gradually became a pilgrim among others you could talk to and confide in. I heard several young pilgrims, who had set off without any friends, tell me with great simplicity about their fear of not being able to form bonds because they were introverts, and of finding themselves isolated as a result. Others confided in me their fear of breaking down because of fatigue and lack of sleep. Some priests confessed to me that they were distraught by the turn of events: having come to supervise young people, who were in fact living their lives on their own, in groups that came and went without regulation, they found themselves unable to play their role as chaplains as they had imagined it. Another priest told me that WYD was a physical and psychological

test for him. A nun told me about the subaltern experiences she had had at previous WYDs, where the young seminarians and priests monopolized the floor, without giving her a chance to be heard by the young people. In a festive event, at times swirling and noisy, my proposal to lend an attentive ear to everyone's stories seems to have met a need, as if there was an expectation of listening not fully taken care of by the organization.

What about the reaction of interviewees when they discovered the scientific publication in which their words were used and interpreted? Out of ethical consideration, participants whom I quoted were sent copies of book chapters or articles ahead of publication. Most of the time, I received no response; perhaps because, for the reasons mentioned above, they did not fully recognize themselves in the final write-up, in which their words were segmented and confronted with other sources of information. A French priest involved in the organization of the 1997 Paris WYD told me how interesting it had been to read my "well-documented" book on the WYD,²⁰ while at the same time disputing certain phrases concerning his role in the organization chart. The traces available in the archives, and the conclusions I arrived at after cross-checking and confronting the various testimonies gathered, did not match his memories. Here we see the tension between memory and history, as highlighted by Paul Ricoeur:

Memory has the advantage of recognizing the past as having been, even though it is no longer; history has the power to widen the gaze in space and time, the strength of criticism in terms of testimony, explanation, and understanding, the rhetorical mastery of the text, and above all, the exercise of fairness with regard to the competing claims of memories that are wounded and sometimes blind to the misfortune of others.²¹

REACTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS

Having discussed the reactions of the interviewees, I would now like to turn to the reaction of members of the Catholic hierarchy to the publications resulting from these academic listening practices. In France, following the publication of my book, I received several very positive letters from bishops involved in the permanent council of the French Bishops' Conference. One of them wrote:

²⁰ Mercier, *L'Église, les jeunes, et la mondialisation*.

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, "L'écriture de l'histoire et la représentation du passé," *Annales* 55, no. 4 (2000): 747, doi.org/10.3406/ahess.2000.279877. [Translation mine]

It is fascinating to see an event you have lived through analyzed by the varied methods of contemporary history. It is nice to be able, at certain moments, for no other reason than to come together for the Kingdom, since it is there nearby, but it is important to be aware that such events involve human relationships, social and ecclesial constructs, requiring the dedication of a few not always paid back!²²

Following the publication of a specific study on the role of the French Bishops' Conference in the organization of the 1997 Paris World Youth Day,²³ Father Bernard Ardura, President of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences from 2009 to 2023, also gave a favorable assessment:

A peaceful and balanced analysis of the Paris WYD showed how a personal initiative by the Archbishop of Paris, which may initially have offended some of his confreres, could be welcomed by the CEF [*Conférence des évêques de France*—French Bishops' Conference] and implemented thanks to a joint effort in which the episcopal collegiality was clearly involved.²⁴

By contrast, in the Vatican my publications received a cooler reception. After I sent in one of my articles comparing the preparation and running of the World Youth Days in Toronto (2002) and Paris (1997), I was criticized for evoking conflicts and interpreting them in terms of power, whereas in the church “only service exists.” I was invited to a discussion in Rome, where my interlocutors expressed their incomprehension, while at the same time finding me an extenuating circumstance: I was French, and therefore imbued with a secular vision of the world forged by *laïcité*. I replied that, in my opinion, it was not credible to present the preparation of the WYDs as a harmonious process, in which the views of the many protagonists would immediately converge towards the common goal: this idealized story was not faithful to the complexity of reality, nor did it help the protagonists understand the stakes involved in organizing an event of this dimension. Pope Francis himself had said: “Human life is structured on oppositions. This is something that also happens in the Church. Tensions don't necessarily have to be resolved or

²² [Translation mine].

²³ Mercier, “La Conférence des évêques de France et les Journées mondiales de la jeunesse de 1997.”

²⁴ Bernard Ardura, “Conclusion,” in *Cent ans de gouvernement de l'Église catholique en France*, 255–265, doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.163400.

homologated.”²⁵ At the end of my Roman sojourn, my interlocutors and I tried to take a step toward each other, in an attempt to understand our respective viewpoints, rooted in cultures having different relationships to religion.

RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

This Roman discussion raises questions about the opportunities and risks of scientific listening in a church setting. Beyond research on the WYDs, these questions are also raised by investigations carried out by academics and experts who have sought to understand the dynamics of abusive behavior within Catholicism, sometimes at the request of the Catholic hierarchy itself.²⁶ As part of their investigations, commissions on historical sexual abuse have engaged in listening exercises with victims, offenders, and those in positions of authority, and these commissions employed secular frameworks to analyze and interpret the testimonies collected. In such investigations, the church is treated as an institution like any other, with its internal power dynamics and conflicts, organizational strengths and weaknesses.

It seems to me that this approach raises no ecclesiological problems. Within Catholicism, it has become mainstream to distinguish between “the person of the Church and its personnel,”²⁷ between what the church is called to be and the reality of the morals of its members. Vatican II recognized the complex nature of the church as both a hierarchically organized society and mystical body. From a theological perspective, the relativizing dynamics of the social sciences make it possible to “desacralize” what does not need to be holy, fight against the essentialization of cultural elements, and “flush out a few deceptions,” to use the words of historian Alain Cabantous.²⁸ Critical and empirical approaches also make it possible to take the Incarnation seriously: the organization of WYD is based on human beings, with their qualities and flaws, and is part of dynamics that concern the whole social body and from which the church is not exempt, even if it may have conceived itself as a “perfect society” with

²⁵ Interview with Antonio Spadaro, quoted by Sandro Magister on his blog (November 14, 2016), chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1351414.html. [Translation mine]

²⁶ For example, for France, the report of the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church, set up in February 2019 by the Bishops of France, and whose final report is available online (www.ciase.fr/rapport-final/). This report has caused some misunderstanding in the Vatican, and its authors have still not been received by Pope Francis.

²⁷ Jacques Maritain, *De l'Église du Christ : la personne de l'Église et son personnel* (Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1970).

²⁸ Alain Cabantous, “Le vent souffle où il veut,” in *L'historien et la foi*, ed. Jean Delumeau (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 34.

specific rules.²⁹ Awareness of this fact can lead to greater realism and pastoral effectiveness.

What is more problematic from a faith perspective is the sociological treatment of religious experience as expressed by the participants. To study spiritual emotion secularly, a fortiori when it underpins a way of seeing the world, is it not to saw off the branch on which we are looking at the stars? By putting the experience of WYD pilgrims through the mill of the social sciences, do we not run the risk of trading in a feeling of fulfillment for a rational pleasure that is rewarding, but ultimately desiccating? For example, the experience of jubilation expressed by WYD participants when they find themselves immersed in a large crowd, at once multicultural and united by the same faith, can be analyzed in the same way Émile Durkheim wrote about the gatherings of traditional Australian societies, after long periods of dispersion.³⁰ For both aborigines and WYD pilgrims, joy can be explained as a physical phenomenon caused by the coalescence of individuals and as a psychological consequence of the reunion of an ordinarily dispersed group. On this view, the Pope is the totemic figure who makes the gathering and its emotional consequences possible. This narrative gives rise to the intellectual pleasure of explanation, yet it is not entirely satisfactory for the believer, or the pilgrim, because it is reductionist. As Gabriel Le Bras, a pioneer of the sociology of religion in France, once wrote: “One must have the loyalty, the intelligence, when one claims to be a member of a religious society, to exclude a natural explanation of the supranatural.”³¹ Critical listening to religious phenomena can lead a researcher to develop an instrumental relationship with what has constituted a space of gratuity in his own existence and that of millions of other people.

ENTERING INTO CONVERSATION

It seems to me that this challenge can be overcome. The way Canadian sociologist Raymond Lemieux analyzes John Paul II's trip to Canada in 1985 is inspiring from this point of view. His mobilization of concepts from the social sciences enables him to

²⁹ Roland Minnerath, “Face à l’État, réémergence de l’Église ‘société parfaite,’” *Société, droit, et religion* 6, no. 1 (2016): 9–19, doi.org/10.3917/sdr.006.0009.

³⁰ Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994), 308–312.

³¹ Gabriel Le Bras, “Réflexions sur les différences entre sociologie scientifique et sociologie pastorale,” *Archives de sociologie des religions* 8 (1959): 17–18. [Translation mine]

distance himself from the emotional discourse of the participants. But at the same time, Lemieux is aware of the limits of “rational tools, insofar as these tools do not themselves include their own critique.”³² Scientific discourse need not be sacralized, since it is socially constructed too.³³ Taking the believers’ experience of communion seriously, and to some extent participating in it, opens up a new type of understanding initially closed to Lemieux. This approach can be found in certain currents in the psychology of religion, which apprehend spiritual experience as a legitimate means of exploring existence, rather than an illusion to be conquered by triumphant reason: “It’s a passive, receptive mode of knowledge, without desire, that is to say, one that doesn’t strive but lets it happen. Contemplative, not active knowledge.”³⁴

This approach is also present in anthropology, when facts are interpreted within the framework in which they are experienced. This requires the ethnologist to question his or her “rationality” in order to take “beliefs” seriously, even if it means finding himself or herself transformed and putting himself or herself in uncomfortable situations.³⁵ Edith (1921–2016) and Victor (1920–1983) Turner are two typical figures of anthropologists “contaminated” by their object of study. For this couple of British Marxist academics, observing African ritual experience provoked a spiritual transformation that led them to convert to Catholicism, and include their religious experience in their anthropological work. In the field of practical theology, this experience of displacement and “conversion” of social science methods was recounted by Catherine Sexton, who finds herself evangelized by the elderly nuns she interviews as part of an empirical research project:

I experienced the sisters as ministering to me at the heart of the research process, . . . through their word and their gift. The sisters, as participants, made at least two specific contributions to the research process, as opposed to the research content: to the “conversion” of my

³² Raymond Lemieux, “Charisme, Mass-Media, et religion populaire: le voyage du pape au Canada,” *Social Compass* 34, no. 1 (1987): 29.

³³ An idea also put forward by American sociologist Robert Wuthnow in “Science and the Sacred,” in *The Sacred in a Secular Age*, ed. Phillip E. Hammond (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 194.

³⁴ Réginald Richard, *Religion de l’adolescence, adolescence de la religion : vers une psychologie de la religion de l’adolescence* (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1985), 75. [Translation mine]

³⁵ See, in particular, Abdellah Hammoudi’s account of his pilgrimage to Mecca as he sought to emancipate himself from the Muslim religion in which he had been raised (*Une saison à La Mecque : récit de pèlerinage* [Paris: Seuil, 2005]).

method to the service of God and secondly to my own journey of conversion.³⁶

I have experienced the same kind of dynamic in my investigations of WYDs, especially the one in Lisbon. The young people I interviewed transformed me. The simplicity and depth of the way they bore witness to God's action in their lives lifted me spiritually and awakened an inner dynamism. They gave me great joy and a sense of fulfillment. It seemed to me that grace was at work in this academic listening activity. Whereas, before leaving for Lisbon, I had been afraid of being like an old bull in a China shop, I discovered I could find a tailored position in the group.

Beyond this personal experience, I also discovered that scientific studies of WYD did not have a disenchanting effect, as I had first feared, but could, on the contrary, be an opportunity for the believer who listens carefully to hear the breath of the Spirit. First of all, it is striking to note the gap between the relative poverty of the means mobilized during the preparations, the limitations and problems of the organizers, and the extraordinarily positive impact of the event on the lives of many people. In a historical or sociological account of the WYDs, one can find a "background music" which sounds like the Gospel passage of the "five loaves and two fishes." With limited resources, and disciples who were "poor guys," the Lord managed to feed a large crowd. Contrary to Gabriel Le Bras's assertion, it does not seem to me that the secular explanation of a phenomenon prevents a supernatural reading of events.

Because it has been conducted on a global scale, the WYD survey also reveals regularities, regardless of cultural context or time, which can be understood as signs of the action of a God who transcends borders. Listening to testimonies from the four corners of the globe, I was struck by the convergence of discourses describing similar spiritual experiences even though cultural contexts differed profoundly and people did not know each other: for example, young people from different countries expressed the same feeling of experiencing a comforting anticipation of the afterlife, a kind of "transfiguration" that fleetingly unveiled something which could be called the "Kingdom of God." I heard or read very similar words from a young Pole who attended the Czestochowa WYD in 1991, a young Quebecer who attended the Toronto WYD in 2002, and a French Jesuit who attended the Lisbon WYD in 2023. In each of their discourses, I found a feeling of connection with transcendence, a perception of the beauty of the world, the experience of profound peace and joy, the

³⁶ Sexton, "Practical Theology Method as Contemplative Enquiry," 51.

feeling of being integrated into a harmonious whole that transcended them without crushing their singularity. This universality was not uniformity, but was expressed in different words according to each person's particular cultural roots and personality.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this reflection, it seems to me that academic listening practices can enable the Catholic Church to take a step back from the synodal exercise. Indeed, the social sciences reveal power relations and processes of domination the faithful and clergy often deny. But just because there is a process of consultation that begins at the grassroots does not mean that the question of power does not arise. Religious listening practices can be instrumentalized to promote, more or less consciously, a conservative or liberal agenda or to assert one's own views. Ensuring the conditions for genuine deliberation whose outcome is not known in advance, requires a real letting go, which is not at all obvious in a cultural context that favors control. The social sciences can help not only to move away from a somewhat romantic vision of the synodal process,³⁷ but also moderate the hopes that a new, more horizontal and inclusive style of governance would make the Catholic Church desirable again. By situating religious attitudes within broader social dynamics, the social sciences can increase Catholic leaders' awareness of the importance of external causes: the church's ability to attract people is far from dependent on its organization, policies, or communications alone. Cultural, political, and economic factors also matter, and over these the church has little control. In short, the social sciences can protect the Catholic Church from a form of self-referentiality in which God's place is taken by ideologies, strategies, or methodologies.

If social science practices can enrich the synodal church, the reverse is also true. By calling into question the distinction between the faithful people and the magisterium, synodality has something to offer academics, reminding them that they do not hold a monopoly on knowledge, built through the confrontation of viewpoints and experiences. To quote the French philosopher Bruno Latour, social scientists cannot "sit on high" or "occupy the viewpoint of nowhere, that of God."³⁸ Synodality invites epistemological humility. It leans more on the side of interdisciplinarity, in which each person studies the same object from his or her specific roots before comparing the

³⁷ *Métamorphoses de la synodalité : de Vatican II au pape François* (Paris: Artège, 2023).

³⁸ Bruno Latour, *Changer de société, refaire de la sociologie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014), 49.

results, than on the side of transdisciplinarity or metadisciplinarity, in which various roles are played by the same person, rising above the usual categories. To paraphrase the Apostle Paul,³⁹ the theologian cannot say to the sociologist, “I do not need you,” and the historian cannot say to the witnesses, “I do not need you.”

To conclude this paper, I would like to emphasize the mutual enrichment that academic listening practices in a church setting can bring. If those conducting the survey and those being surveyed agree to let go of their rigidities, and listen to each other in depth, putting aside their ready-made interpretation keys, these practices can be an opportunity to experience a form of “overflow,”⁴⁰ or “pilgrimage,” to use words frequently used by Pope Francis, notably during his meeting with young academics in Lisbon on August 3, 2023:

To be a pilgrim literally means to put aside our daily routine and choose to set out on a different path, moving away from our comfort zone towards a new horizon of meaning. The notion of “pilgrimage” nicely describes our human condition for, like pilgrims, we find ourselves facing great questions that have no simple or immediate answers, but challenge us to continue the journey, to rise above ourselves and to press beyond the here and now.⁴¹

It seems to me that the Catholic Church should not be afraid of being studied and listened to in secular ways. Non-theologian academics are not spies, but human beings on their own journey. This kind of companionship can purify both faith and science, desacralizing what should not be sacred, and allowing us to be surprised by the action of the Spirit.⁴² **M**

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³⁹ 1 Cor 12:21.

⁴⁰ François and Austen Ivereigh, *Un temps pour changer* (Paris: Flammarion, 2020), 120–121.

⁴¹ Available at www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/august/documents/20230803-portogallo-universitari.html.

⁴² I would like to thank Alexis Artaud de la Ferrière, Anna Rowlands, and all the participants in the “Listening Practices in Global Catholicism” conference for providing constructive feedback on the first draft of this paper and encouraging me to deepen my reflection thanks to their own presentations.

including *L'Église, les jeunes, et la mondialisation : une histoire des JMJ* (2020). Mercier received his PhD in history from Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne University in 2011.