

Asking to Listen: Engaging Social Scientific Methods as a Listening Practice in Global Catholicism

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Abstract: Asking enables listening. This paper explores how the practice of asking, when enacted as an intentional social scientific process, can facilitate the synodal value of listening across the global Catholic Church. Drawing upon social science methodologies and evidence, it demonstrates that effective listening is not merely passive reception but proactive invitation to engage diverse or silenced perspectives. Systematic asking incorporates everyday people and experiences otherwise overlooked and creates space for difficult topics. Seeing listening as a practice of asking underscores the value of setting rules for engagement that promote a posture of reception that fosters trust and openness through humility, curiosity, and willingness to step into worlds different from one's own. Embracing this mutual approach can prompt a more inclusive synodal process, enhancing the church's ability to engage meaningfully with all in its midst.

The multi-year journey of the Synod on Synodality in the global Catholic Church reverberates at its core a foundational principle: *listening*. The value of listening—and listening to *all*—undergirds Pope Francis's call for a more synodal church, attentive to a plurality of voices whose formal status in the church does not lend itself to involvement in decision-making. Listening yields voice. Access. Perspective. Challenge. Change.

So, too, is listening foundational to the work of sociologists, including myself—whose deep investment in studying diverse manifestations of Catholicism in everyday lives, identities, and structures requires adequate tools to surface idiosyncratic perspectives. Sociologically, listening well lends credibility, depth, a careful balance of representativeness, distinctiveness, and built-in accountability such that studies are done not in isolation but in dialogue through a shared process of growing knowledge.

Here, I name a central difference between the stated *value* of listening (as extolled through the multi-year Synodal process) and the intentional *practice* of listening (as reified in the work of empirical

social scientists): *asking*. Systematic listening, it turns out, requires asking. Drawing upon decades of study touching upon myriad facets of lived Catholicism, I outlay fifteen dimensions to listening that center a more active and invitational posture of *asking*, methodically. Where listening is the desired end, asking is a means to that end. Social science lends a methodology for asking.

ASKING TO HEAR

But first: a story. Among my many quests to listen, sociologically, I led a team of sociologists in asking how US residents think about the issue of abortion.¹ It is a topic that dominates headlines and for which statistics abound. It is also a topic that, it turns out, not many people talk about in-depth. Mostly because no one asks them. Or because talking—and asking—about the issue feels risky. Listening does not happen without the asking.

One of our interviewees was Ricardo (a pseudonym). Dawning a denim jacket and hair combed into a wave, 48-year-old Ricardo first told us his name was “Richard.” “When I started getting into the job market, I used ‘Richard’” so I wouldn’t be stuck working in, like, some factory or whatever, you know?” While at the car shop a day prior, the second-generation Colombian Californian was told he did not “look like a Ricardo”—“What does that even mean?” Discrimination, for Ricardo, feels commonplace.

Being “positive” and “nice to people” feels foundational to Ricardo, as does family and concern for the environment. His dad—a “very proud American”—migrated to flee violence, secure a better job, and “find a new life.” Growing up in an immigrant family meant “tr[ying] to be as American as we could”:

I played baseball—Little League—and all that kind of stuff. My parents tried to understand baseball. I remember one instance, we went to a California Angels game and my dad was like, “Oh, they just scored a touchdown!” and I’m like “No, they hit a homerun.” So, you know, they tried.²

Attending Catholic Mass as a kid was more of a bribe-based exchange, rewarded with ice cream from Dad because “Mom was into it.” Ricardo is agnostic today, seeing souls as “energy” but uncertain where they go once they leave their bodies. He is “pretty open-

¹ Tricia C. Bruce, *How Americans Understand Abortion* (Notre Dame, IN: McGrath Institute, 2020).

² Ricardo is one of 217 interviewees included in the 2020 National Study of Abortion Attitudes. See Bruce, *How Americans Understand Abortion*.

minded” and wants people to “just live their lives, you know, not based on some type of religious doctrine type of thing.”

Asking about abortion, “It’s kind of dividing people,” Ricardo says. He is put off by politicians who “try to push their religious doctrine on people.” Prayer is “good”; to “force prayer” is not. Attempts to regulate behavior, in general, feel “scary.” “People have different viewpoints . . . I think it’s just ignorance, that’s all.”

But it is not that he—or anyone, Ricardo says—would “want” abortion or “enjoy getting it done.” “It’s a traumatic thing.” Such was the case for himself, when his former girlfriend sought an abortion two decades ago. Her epilepsy “was something that could have carried on . . . that’s what the doctors had told her at the time—so it was better not to have the child. And so, we got an abortion.” “I don’t think [anyone’s] like ‘Yeah, I want to get an abortion!’” He bristles at the false assumptions of a “pro-choice” label:

Of course I’m pro-choice. But I’m also pro-life. Like, I’m not anti-life! So, I think that’s—I don’t know, I don’t know the word to use. But saying you’re “pro-choice” doesn’t mean you’re not pro-life. It just doesn’t make sense to me. It’s just the wrong wording. And I get it—it’s a political thing to make people think, like, “Oh, if you’re pro-choice, you’re not for life.” Which is not true.

Ricardo was one of 217 Americans whom we asked to think out loud about the issue of abortion. What did the word itself conjure? What earliest memories of an encounter with it come to mind? Who and what connects with some of the different associations and meanings abortion introduces? None of this is captured well in happenstance conversations. First and foremost: “happenstance” conversations about many topics—especially contentious ones—do not tend to happen. People have learned not to ask and not to share, including many Catholics and others connected with the Catholic Church.

What becomes evident from the practice of social science is that thorough “listening” is preconditioned on asking. Listening is in fact a *practice of asking*: it is not merely a passive act of waiting for information or receiving it once it does. Listening compels a more dynamic, active, and interactive process of invitation, query, and reciprocity.

By asking, social scientific approaches to listening, moreover, do something other forms of listening do not: invite an empirical look at a full range of viewpoints, surfacing potential disagreement and moral positions that challenge those emerging from other sources. Put another way: listening in social science can bring the “is” into conversation with the “ought.” The facts are the same, either way; social science surfaces and shares them.

ASKING AS A “STRANGER”

Many needed forms of listening rely upon established, trusted relationships. People are more inclined to share and be vulnerable when they perceive the person with whom they speak to also be willing to share and be vulnerable.

With the exception of some social scientific methodologies (such as ethnography), however, this is *not* the kind of listening and relationship upon which social science relies. This positions it uniquely and distinctively as less relationship-conditioned and relationship-building and more about the specific moment of interaction. That interaction, furthermore, may be the only exchange the researcher and research participant have—quite literally, a once-in-a-lifetime, fleeting exchange.

For this reason, the kind of intentional listening amplified by social science is in some ways akin to classic social theorist Georg Simmel’s concept of “The Stranger.”³ Known for his use of dyads and character prototypes by which to understand the world and people in it, Simmel speaks of “the stranger” as occupying a special kind of position in society. The stranger is both in and out, near and far, part of “us” and part of “them.” As Simmel writes:

In spite of being inorganically appended to it, the stranger is yet an organic member of the group. Its uniform life includes the specific conditions of this element. Only we do not know how to designate the peculiar unity of this position other than by saying that it is composed of certain measures of nearness and distance. Although some quantities of them characterize all relationships, a special proportion and reciprocal tension produce the particular, formal relation to the “stranger.”⁴

Simmel posits that “to be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation; it is a specific form of interaction.”⁵ An interaction with a stranger lends a reflection on what makes us distinctively us and another distinctively another. An interaction with a stranger, too, puts up a natural barrier: we do not “know” them, and they do not “know” us.

An interview—such as that with Ricardo and so many across other projects—positions a social scientist as stranger in interaction with a research participant as stranger: self as other and other as self. Social scientists carry a responsibility to recognize themselves in what they

³ Georg Simmel, “The Stranger,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 402–408.

⁴ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 408.

⁵ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 402.

do, while also creating distance from self by a focus on an unknown other.

Simmel's idea of the stranger also rings true in the social scientific goal of listening to ordinary people. It is not merely those voices at the margins that are too often exempted from a broader understanding of social issues and social life: *it's the vast majority of everyday voices*. "Stranger" connotes not the famous, appointed, or spokesperson but, quite simply, a person whose merit in the conversation takes root in their very humanity as themselves, whoever and whatever that might be. All are—or can be—strangers.

Toward this end, the promise of confidentiality is key. Unlike public interactions or formal pronouncements or even informal conversations among family, colleagues, and friends, social science methodologies prioritize the ability to share freely, in confidence. Ideas do not even need to be fully thought out; this form of listening captures people where and how they are in that moment. It is designed to avoid performative dialogue, public accountability, or the norms of other types of listening linked back to one's own name and identity.

The duality exemplified in Simmel's construct of the stranger is not wholly unlike what the global Catholic Church positions itself to do via the synodal process: invite and ask ordinary people to speak and share within the vast global expanse of a shared faith tradition.⁶

A synodal approach to listening positions the church to welcome and integrate diverse voices of "strangers" who, together, form its common community. Organic, grassroots initiatives necessarily balance with structured intentionality and deliberate frameworks to facilitate meaningful listening.

THE PRACTICE OF ASKING

What does this look like in practice? The remainder of this paper draws upon examples excerpted from confidential interviews across a variety of topical arena touching the experience of Catholicism locally and globally. It highlights how ordinary people—positioned as "strangers"—speak about listening in the course of being asked about another social issue. It gleans from this fifteen characteristics of listening predicated on asking. I name and illustrate each with one or more confidential interview excerpts.⁷

⁶ In contrast to Simmel's notion of "the stranger," however, a theological perspective would affirm the baptized as "all members of one body" and therefore *not* strangers.

⁷ Interview excerpts are compiled from a variety of sociological projects I and my teams have led, including: Tricia C. Bruce, *How Americans Understand Abortion*; Tricia C. Bruce, *Called to Contribute* (www.calledtocontribute.org); Tricia C. Bruce, *The National Study of Catholic Priests: Insights from In-Depth Interviews* (Washington,

The practice of asking assumes a posture of humility and withholds judgment. It is curious and seeks to learn. It enters as a guest, open to different experiences and perspectives without leaping to evaluation. It welcomes the risk of discomfort and embodies humility, recognizing limitations, and valuing different perspectives. We hear this in confidential interviews with priests, for example, who share their own experiences of authentic listening through asking, vulnerability, and non-judgment:

When I'm assigned to a new parish, within the first year I set up home gatherings where people can invite others, and we sit down and share. And I hear some of their stories. And I do a lot of listening. Get to know their situations, their stories. . . . I'll usually ask them, "What do they want me to pay attention to?" And not depend upon somebody that comes at you right away and sizes up every situation . . . but to really come at it as a learner. . . . I'm not presumptuous that I know where I should lead them.

I honestly think it has to be authentic listening across the board. And when you are who you are and you're real about yourself, your gifts, but also your brokenness. Again, whether you're a bishop, priest, or laity, and people realize that you're striving to do your best, to be your best, to help them find God—I think that that's the key to it all. People are willing to listen when they know that you really are trying to be yourself and care and you just want what's best for others and your own journey, you know? I think that that's it—the authenticity and the true, compassionate listening, even if you can't fix it.

I think sometimes people just want to be heard and really seen. The model for me is the story of the woman caught in adultery where Jesus . . . and this is what I try to do as a priest . . . Jesus entered her circle of pain, right? And he didn't automatically point a finger and say, "No, you shouldn't." At first, he turned to everybody else and made them, kind of like, "Hey look at yourself, be real to yourself first before you throw any stones." And then he went to that woman and got to her level and let her know his love first. And then once she felt it and knew it was real, then she was able to be lifted up to where he wanted her to be. And she could hear, "Go and sin no more." Whereas if it first started out with, "You're a sinner, stop it." It's not going to change anybody. It's going to close them off to church. But I think if they know they're loved and listened to, respected for who they are, broken and all, then they'll be able to rise to where God wants them to be. And I think that's what the priest should do.

The practice of asking sees another as person first. It recognizes the humanity in each person, prioritizing raw humanness over agendas. It knows people by name, inviting validation by acknowledging individuals' unique identities and experiences. An interviewee speaks here to the need for validation as a precondition to asking and listening about the topic of abortion:

It's so toxic. I can't even imagine, like, "Hey, let's get together and have a picnic and bring both sides together, and everybody bring a potluck!" . . . People use that as an opportunity to come with agendas. They can't help it. It's frustrating to me that you can't just have an open mind, you know? I'd be willing to listen. . . . I would hope that that could happen . . . where both sides can openly share their stories around a campfire. . . . And when you have that thought, you can either hold up a card and say, "I never thought about it." . . . I'm actually gonna think about that.

The practice of asking takes people seriously. It values others' perspectives and experiences, treating them with seriousness and respect, even when they differ. Two women speak to this in confidential interviews, reasserting the need to respect different backgrounds and vantage points:

I pray the church just believes women. You know, not to co-opt that #MeToo movement. It's kind of this similar vein, like, believe women, believe survivors. Listen to their stories, and take them seriously. I would say that.

I think it's time for us to step back and listen to what our sisters have to say. Not that they think with one voice on it. I mean, women obviously have a wide range of opinions, but I think their opinions are formed from a different place and I think that is something to which men need to listen.

The practice of asking invites radical honesty. It fosters rapport through directness and sincerity. It is not afraid of the unknown and does not take the easy way out. It embraces the potential discomfort of honesty. Here, a priest discloses in a confidential interview his desire to share more openly with his bishop:

I think just by listening, if [bishops] would just listen to us, you know, I mean there's a lot of experience. And, you know, coming with an open mind, rather than just having your mind made up already. That would help a lot. And the bishop being honest with his clergy about stuff. . . . But also trying to trust that the spirit is present in the whole community.

The practice of asking acknowledges vantage point and positionality. It recognizes and anticipates different perspectives and positions—in those asked and those asking. It holds and values unique viewpoints and experiences. It values and validates the perspectives of those marginalized or dismissed, recognizing the richness of what they add. A confidential interview with a young person captures this sentiment, referring to their interactions with older adults:

I get that a lot—like, “Oh, you’re young . . . what do you know about this? You don’t know anything.” And it’s like, yes, I understand you’re older. That does not mean that you know everything. It just means that you have a bit more experience, which is fine. Claim your experience. You are older, but I’m younger, which means I’m also open. Have a more open mind than you. Cause you’ve been stuck in your traditional values for so long. I’m more open to seeing things differently.

The practice of asking enters worlds different from one’s own. It steps into experiences and beliefs that differ, bridging to empathy and connection. It sees value in the perspective of the “other.” Here, a young interviewee speaks to the value of listening to those in a “different world”:

I think just listening, and being open to hearing beliefs that are completely different from your own—but also hearing about why people have those beliefs. Because I feel like a lot of the times . . . like for gay rights, like, a lot of my friends are gay. And it’s like for you, you may not know a gay person period. And so you have this completely different world. We’re living in completely different worlds. And I think just understanding that and us giving them grace and them giving us grace.

The practice of asking invites experiential accounts—including those not usually (or perhaps ever) shared. It encourages sharing personal stories apart from judgment, recognizing the importance of lived experience in understanding complex issues. It makes space for secrets and controversy. Several interviewees reiterate the value of sharing lived experiences with others:

I think they really just need to sit with us, and, and no one is doing that yet. . . . Can you just bring women—and just hear their stories, or, you know, study it? . . . If anyone really just sat and listened. . . . Please hear us; the Spirit is moving. . . . Sure, I’m one little person, but within a group of people, just being able to share that.

It’s good for somebody to listen to you about some things that you have concerns about. Especially because I’ve been through it.

I do think it's like, feeling listened to, I mean, it's like . . . It's been a hard, hard journey. . . . I've spent a lot of time not saying my piece because of the strictures of my position.

The practice of asking requires a deliberate pause. It makes time for reflection and space for meaningful consideration. It necessarily stops all else to ask and hear. It makes time. A confidential interview with a priest illustrates this as a dynamic of bishops' willingness to listen:

I know some priests in this diocese who have said that [our bishop] has listened. . . . Anybody who calls and says, "Can I speak with the bishop?" He'll make time. So that encourages me. . . . I mean, it may never be an informal, like, "Bishop, can I talk to you for a minute, because I'm just going through a hard time type of thing." . . . But I think if you called and said, "I need to talk to you," I believe that he would do so. . . . I think that he does seem to say, "I'll listen."

The practice of asking walks alongside people in a moment of accompaniment. It joins—ever so temporarily—another on their journey, attentive to what that journey looks and feels like. It sits with both the oppressed and the oppressor. The theme of accompaniment arises in confidential interviews with priests:

Accompaniment is much more of a sense of your arm around somebody's shoulder, you know, and quite physically walking with them. . . . Too many people experience it: there's somebody waving their finger at you telling you what to do, or what you didn't do. And there's a big difference—in the challenges with the pastor who's waving his finger. And that's how people experience it. They don't experience the arm around the shoulder. . . . There's a sense of just kind of listening and being with that is often missing.

It's having spoken to victims, and to listen to the painful. Listen, and be present. Expressing sorrow and regret and assistance. And then also having to sit down with perpetrators. Both.

The practice of asking leads with respect and welcome more than shame and exclusion. It does not belittle but sees dignity in another. Interviewees point to this characteristic of welcome and respect in authentic listening:

It's really easy to belittle young people and be very patronizing. So I think just listening, hearing what young people have to say. I feel like it's easy for older people to like not just take with a grain of salt but completely overlook what young people say. So I think listening

honestly and candidly are very important. And just like leaving, leaving your premonitions at the door.

Father came up, and I told him that I was very upset about, you know, I can't have kids now. Father's approach, because he is an older priest, he sits down and he talks to you. You could tell that, it's like you were being scolded, you know, because you're not supposed to have birth control or anything like that. . . . So I just kinda felt like I was being scolded the entire time that Father was sitting up there. I mean he may have been listening to me, but his eyes were telling a different story, so that—it was hurtful, because I wanted to have kids, but I couldn't, and it still hurts.

The practice of asking rebuilds a foundation for trust and credibility. It lays the groundwork for trust through authentic listening. It lets people be heard. It fosters a more cohesive and resilient community. An interview with a priest reiterates asking and listening as foundational to trust:

I find myself having to defend more and more the hierarchy and making those distinctions and a variety of things because it's gotten to the point where nobody wants to listen to a hierarchy at all. They've lost that credibility . . . I don't think it's affected the way people have seen me as a priest. I think more and more do see me as an agent of healing. But I had to earn that trust first.

The practice of asking opens pathways for silence, apology, and healing. It rethinks and reconstructs meanings and relationships. It attends to wounds otherwise unspoken and unattended. Priests speak to this as a dynamic of moving through crisis and healing:

I think the church, when we are in crisis, we tend to want to respond and say many words. And I will tell you that—at least this victim—he does not want many words. He wants to have a place where he feels like he can be loved by God . . . an open line of communication. I make sure that he knows that he can speak to me at any time. And I think we just have to love them, acknowledge that this was horrible. In many times, it's enough to even just listen.

Just listening to them. Listening is part of what they feel like they—nobody listened to their story. And because nobody listened to their story, they don't trust anyone anymore. . . . Healing has been listening to their story every time they talk about it. . . . You just listen to them even though—painful as it may be, because some words are very . . . Even though those conversations are very difficult, and painful as it may be, I've always been—just listening has been part of my conversation with them.

We just basically need a healer right now. Just somebody to come in and listen to us. Somebody to say, hey, I get that, you know, you guys are hurting. And I'm just here to just kind of help everybody heal. . . . That healing is going to be a long process by its nature, and he's not going to be performing miracles, but he's not going to be doing anything to prevent the healing from happening.

The practice of asking listens more than it speaks—because not asking risks harm. So, too, does asking and then *not* listening. Confidential interviews surface how disagreement and polarization can disrupt listening:

I don't say anything because there's no point. If you're gonna blurt that out to me and not even consider that maybe I have a different point of view then there's no point in engaging because I already know you're not gonna listen.

I used to think there was some overlap but I feel like the polarization is just so extreme now, I just can't even like, again it's really people are not listening and have a conversation they just want to scream . . . I just feel like it's just a waste of . . . I mean all of the protests, I just see what comes out of it, like, nothing came out of it, okay? I don't see any talking or solutions or help.

I am just a priest that really believes we need this listening. That's what's going to help heal. That's what's going to restore the credibility. But if you're not even willing to meet with these people? And sit down to acknowledge their pain? Well, you're only adding to their trauma! You're not helping to heal it! Now granted, some are so angry because of what has happened. It's hard to hear. But at the same time, we gotta listen. We gotta do that. And so that's why in accompanying people—I'm walking with the people, [asking:] What do you need? How can we support you? But again, it was also practice. How do we put this into practice?

The practice of asking has tolerance for ambiguity. It offers the opportunity to complicate and contradict. It explores along the spectrum rather than only at the edges. Asking and listening picks up on contradictions and change, as heard from interviewees:

I guess my perspective has matured, as I've talked to people and as I've learned and explored and read.

As I got older and I met other types of people and I was exposed to other people who didn't have a family like I had, and how their life in their circumstances led them down different roads that really made it more difficult for them. And I just understood how and why people could choose that route and I made the commitment not to make a

judgement against it. So the first step—so, to not judge someone for that and keeping an open mind. And once I was able to have an open mind and to listen to their experiences and ideas then my ideas changed.

The practice of asking listens to hear. It does not listen merely to respond. A young person speaks to this in a confidential interview:

I feel like if they're listening, they're not listening to respond, they're listening to hear. . . . Like they let me talk. And like maybe they'll ask questions more or like ask for clarification on something or ask me to, to expand on something if they don't understand what I'm saying. . . . To me, that shows like they're actually willing to have a conversation because one, they're letting me talk, but two, they're actively engaging in the conversation and they're letting, they're showing—they're trying to understand what I'm saying. And three, like actually giving the media that I consume a chance to maybe help them understand the topic better.

Through all examples and empirical insights is a common chorus of appreciation for being asked as a road to listening, echoed in this interviewee's words: "Thank you for listening to me. To be listened to—that alone is a gift."

CONCLUSION

Social science offers valuable tools for enacting listening as a practice of asking, a skill that can aid the global Catholic Church through the synod process and beyond. Listening is not passive, but active: invited and attained with intentionality such as that exemplified in the tools of social science.

Such a practice bridges "stranger" to "knowledge" by eliciting and valuing the everyday person and everyday experience. It facilitates listening to difficult topics people typically avoid. It provides for plurality as much as representation, extending beyond the loudest voices. It leads with a posture of reception, listening with the intent to understand rather than respond. This approach, akin to the concept of "welcome" without instant affirmation, can create spaces where all feel heard and valued, fostering trust and openness.

Ultimately, effective listening necessitates the practice of asking. Listening is not only receptive; the invitation to listen compels the responsibility to ask. It involves a proactive stance, recognizing the transformative potential of listening and committing to share or act upon insights gained. A responsibility to listen goes beyond hearing and into responding, validating, and integrating diverse experiences and perspectives. Listening can heal, validate, and build trust.

By embracing listening as a dynamic and transformative practice informed by social science, the Catholic Church can better navigate the challenges of the contemporary world, fostering a more inclusive, compassionate, and resilient community. The insights from social science and the voices of everyday individuals within the church are essential to understanding and enhancing the practice of asking in global Catholicism. **M**

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