

Research-Backed Practices to Engage Youth in a Vibrant Catholic Church: The Case for Implementing Sacred Listening Practices

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Abstract: This article explores the theological and practical implications of Sacred Listening, a concept developed in response to the Synod on Synodality initiated by Pope Francis. The Synod emphasizes the church's call to a more relational and participatory ecclesial life, rooted in listening, dialogue, and accompaniment. Sacred Listening is proposed as a theologically grounded practice designed to rebuild trust and foster deeper connections within the faith community, particularly in a low-trust environment. Drawing on the theological principles of *Imago Dei*, as well as contemporary social science research, the article presents Sacred Listening as a means to move beyond traditional modes of institutional authority toward relational trust and authentic engagement. The article further introduces practical tools that operationalize these principles, providing concrete strategies for religious leaders to engage with their communities more effectively. This work contributes to the ongoing theological discourse on synodality and offers a framework for creating a more inclusive and responsive church in today's complex social landscape.

The Synod on Synodality, as initiated by Pope Francis, represents a pivotal moment in the life of the church, calling for a renewed emphasis on listening, dialogue, and participatory engagement. Synodality is not merely an administrative or structural innovation but embodies a profound theological shift towards a church that listens deeply to the voices of all its members, especially those traditionally marginalized or overlooked.¹ This theological shift is grounded in the recognition of the inherent dignity of every person, as articulated in the doctrine of *Imago Dei*, and demands a corresponding transformation in how the

¹ See International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*.

church interacts with the faithful.²

This article introduces and develops a theory of “Sacred Listening,” a concept constructed in response to the ecclesial and societal challenges highlighted by the synodal process. Sacred Listening, as theorized here, is rooted in the theological imperatives of synodality and informed by contemporary research in social science. It proposes a model of relational engagement that seeks to rebuild trust and foster deeper connections within the faith community. By synthesizing theological insights with empirical findings, this theory offers a framework for creating practical tools—referred to as Sacred Listening Tools—designed to facilitate more effective and empathetic pastoral care.

The theory of Sacred Listening is predicated on the need for the church to move beyond solely using traditional modes of authority and communication, which often rely only or mainly on institutional credibility, and embrace instead approaches that prioritize relational trust and authentic engagement.³ In a context where institutional trust is increasingly fragile, particularly among younger generations, Sacred Listening offers a means to re-establish meaningful relationships and ensure that the church’s pastoral outreach is both theologically sound and responsive to contemporary realities.⁴

This essay will explore the theoretical underpinnings of Sacred Listening, drawing on key theological principles such as *Imago Dei*, as well as insights from social science research on trust, authority, and relational dynamics. It will further demonstrate how this theory can be operationalized through the development of Sacred Listening Tools, which are practical applications intended to enhance the church’s capacity to engage with its members in a manner consistent with the synodal vision. By doing so, this work aims to contribute to the ongoing theological discourse on synodality and offer concrete strategies for pastoral leaders seeking to navigate the complexities of ministry in a low-trust environment.

LOW-TRUST TOOLS: A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO MINISTRY

In the context of the church’s synodal journey, the need for effective ministry strategies that resonate with contemporary

² See Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*), nos. 40–44.

³ Bradford E. Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience: Ecclesiology for a Dialogical Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016).

⁴ Lydia Saad, “Historically Low Faith in US Institutions Continues,” *Gallup*, July 6, 2023; 2021 *Edelman Trust Barometer*, www.edelman.com/trust/2021-trust-barometer.

challenges is increasingly evident. Pope Francis has underscored the significance of accompaniment—engaging with the faithful in their spiritual journeys—as a core element of the church’s pastoral mission. This emphasis on accompaniment—deeply rooted in the principles of listening, dialogue, and participation—compels the church to reconsider and adopt more relational and less hierarchical modes of engagement.

The pervasive decline in trust toward institutional entities, including religious institutions, necessitates a paradigmatic shift from traditional models of authority toward approaches that prioritize authentic, interpersonal relationships. Empirical research indicates that younger generations, in particular, exhibit a preference for leaders who engage relationally rather than those who rely predominantly on institutional authority.⁵ This trend highlights the critical importance of developing “low-trust tools”—strategies that build trust through relational engagement rather than the exertion of institutional power.

The efficacy of these low-trust tools is underpinned by frameworks such as the Developmental Relationships Framework from Search Institute⁶ and the concept of Relational Authority developed by the co-authors at Springtide Research Institute.⁷ The Developmental Relationships Framework delineates essential elements that contribute to trust-building and individual growth, including the expression of care, the challenge to grow, the provision of support, the sharing of power, and the expansion of possibilities.⁸ Concurrently, the concept of Relational Authority, as explored in the research conducted by the co-authors at Springtide Research Institute, posits that authority within ministry contexts for young people in the 21st century is not merely conferred by position but must be earned through consistent and

⁵ Pew Research Center, *The Age Gap in Religion Around the World* (Research Report, Pew Research Center, June 13, 2018); *2021 Edelman Trust Barometer*.

⁶ Founded in 1958, Search Institute is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing research-based insights and resources to foster positive youth development and strengthen communities. It focuses on identifying and promoting developmental assets that help young people succeed in school, work, and life. Its widely recognized and published framework of 40 Developmental Assets has been instrumental in guiding communities, schools, and organizations in creating supportive environments that enhance young people’s growth and resilience.

⁷ Springtide Research Institute is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization founded by Lasallian Educational and Research Initiatives in Minnesota as an expression of the Christian Brothers of De La Salle. Their mission is to provide social scientific research to better understand the experiences of young people.

⁸ Kent Pekel, Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Amy K. Syvertsen, Peter C. Scales, Theresa K. Sullivan, and Jenna Sethi, “Finding the Fluoride: Examining How and Why Developmental Relationships Are the Active Ingredient in Interventions That Work,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 88, no. 5 (2018): 493–504, doi.org/10.1037/ort0000333.

authentic relational engagement.⁹

As we proceed to examine these frameworks, it becomes evident that the church can equip itself with methodologies that not only address the current deficit in trust but also actively cultivate genuine engagement and participation. These relational tools are indispensable for fostering within the church a culture congruent with the principles of synodality and Pope Francis's vision for a more inclusive and dialogical church.

The subsequent section will explore the theoretical foundations that underlie these relational approaches, analyzing how they can be systematically integrated into the church's ministry to effectively address challenges posed by the contemporary context.

The Need for Relational Trust

Distinct from institutional trust, relational trust is built through personal interactions where consistency, empathy, and transparency are evident. Studies show that when young people perceive leaders as genuinely caring and relatable, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with them.¹⁰ This shift towards relational trust over institutional trust reflects the broader societal trend away from hierarchical structures and towards more horizontal, community-oriented relationships.¹¹

The growing emphasis on relational trust as a cornerstone of effective ministry in the twenty-first century is not just a theoretical shift but is supported by concrete frameworks that provide actionable guidance for building and maintaining such trust. One of the most robust and applicable of these frameworks is the Developmental Relationships Framework, which offers a detailed approach to fostering relational trust within the church. This framework not only aligns with the broader societal shift towards more personal and community-oriented relationships but also provides the church with

⁹ Springtide Research Institute, *The State of Religion and Young People 2020: Relational Authority* (Springtide Research Institute, 2020).

¹⁰ Steven C. Argue and Tyler S. Greenway, "Empathy with Emerging Generations as a Foundation for Ministry," *Christian Education Journal* 17, no. 1 (2020): 110–129, doi.org/10.1177/0739891319899666; Richard E. Boyatzis, Terry Brizz, and Lindsey N. Godwin, "The Effect of Religious Leaders' Emotional and Social Competencies on Improving Parish Vibrancy," *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 18, no. 2 (2010): 192–206, doi.org/10.1177/1548051810369676; Jodi G. Hunt, "And Then There Was Zoom: A Catholic Theological Examination on the Development of Digital Youth Ministry," *Religions* 11, no. 11 (2020): 565–565, doi.org/10.3390/rel11110565.

¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001); Hartmut Rosa, *Uncontrollability of the World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).

practical tools to implement in its mission to engage meaningfully with young people.

The Developmental Relationships Framework

Developed by the Search Institute, the Developmental Relationships Framework provides a well-researched foundation for understanding how to build relational trust. This framework identifies five essential elements that contribute to the well-being and growth of young people: expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities. These elements are crucial for rebuilding trust with young people, as they demonstrate that their voices and experiences are valued within the faith community.¹²

The principles of the Developmental Relationships Framework can be effectively applied within the church context to create an environment where young people feel valued, supported, and empowered. In a special issue of *Religions* focused on Catholic Youth and Young Adult Ministry, Chris Miller, a Catholic educator and psychologist, argues that Developmental Relationships is one of the most promising pathways forward for the Catholic Church, writing that “the most essential element to effective ministry is the development of relationships or what is referred to as relational ministry.”¹³

This framework’s emphasis on mutual respect and shared power aligns with Catholic social teaching, particularly the church’s commitment to the dignity of every person and the preferential option for the poor, as highlighted in *Gaudium et Spes*.

Relational Authority: Building Trust through Authentic Engagement

Alongside the Developmental Relationships Framework, the concept of Relational Authority, developed through research at Springtide Research Institute, plays a crucial role in Sacred Listening Practices. Relational Authority shifts the focus from traditional hierarchical authority to authority earned through consistent, authentic relationships.

¹² Pekel, Roehlkepartain, Syvertsen, Scales, Sullivan, and Sethi, “Finding the Fluoride”; Junlei Li and Megan M. Julian, “Developmental Relationships as the Active Ingredient: A Unifying Working Hypothesis of ‘What Works’ Across Intervention Settings,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 82, no. 2 (2012): 157–166.

¹³ C. Miller, “The Sexual Abuse Crisis in the US, Its Effect on Catholic Youth Ministry, and a Way Forward Through Relational Ministry Utilizing the Developmental Relationships Framework,” *Religions* 11, no. 11 (2020): 572, doi.org/10.3390/rel11110572.

This concept is built on several key components. Deep, active listening forms the foundation, showing that leaders genuinely value the voices and experiences of young people, aligning with the church's call for accompaniment. Transparency in interactions, particularly around the complexities of faith, helps demystify leadership, making it more accessible and relatable. Integrity is essential, as young people are more likely to trust leaders who consistently align their actions with their words, thereby reinforcing their credibility. Demonstrating genuine care for individuals as unique persons deepens relational bonds, reflecting the Catholic emphasis on the inherent dignity of every person. Finally, while expertise remains important, it is shared humbly and used to empower rather than dominate, further strengthening relational authority.

In the contemporary Catholic landscape, there is a growing recognition of the vital role accompaniment plays in fostering meaningful engagement and trust with young people. As the youth of today distrust social institutions, the church is challenged to rethink its approaches to ministry, moving beyond traditional models of instruction and catechesis towards a more relational, dialogical, and accompaniment-centered approach.¹⁴

Recent research has highlighted the need for a spirituality of youth ministry that emphasizes not just the transmission of doctrine, but the creation of sacred spaces where young people can encounter the divine in a profound and transformative way.¹⁵ The principles of Relational Authority align closely with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) framework in *Listen, Teach, Send*, which emphasizes the church's mission of accompaniment through deep listening, teaching, and guiding young people on their faith journey.¹⁶ The focus on active listening within Relational Authority directly supports the *Listen, Teach, Send* framework's call for a ministry rooted in authentic engagement and empathy, ensuring that the voices of young people are not only heard but valued.

Transparency, integrity, and care, as outlined in Relational Authority, resonate with the church's broader teachings on human dignity and the need for pastoral leaders to embody Christ-like compassion in all their interactions. The framework's emphasis on humble expertise aligns with the church's call for a servant leadership

¹⁴ Tracey Lamont, "Ministry with Young Adults: Toward a New Ecclesiological Imagination," *Religions* 11, no. 11 (2020): 570, doi.org/10.3390/rel11110570.

¹⁵ Michael Hryniuk, "Creating Space for God: Toward a Spirituality of Youth Ministry," *Religious Education* 100, no. 2 (2005): 139–156, doi.org/10.1080/00344080590932445.

¹⁶ USCCB, *National Pastoral Framework for Youth and Young Adult Ministry: Listen, Teach, Send* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020).

model, where authority is exercised not through domination but service and empowerment of the faithful. Together, these elements reinforce the church's mission to foster a community of trust, where young people are supported in their spiritual growth and feel genuinely connected to the church's life and mission.

Integrating Frameworks for Effective Ministry

The combination of the Developmental Relationships Framework and Relational Authority offers a robust approach to ministry in a low-trust world. While the Developmental Relationships Framework provides the structural elements needed to build trust, Relational Authority ensures that this trust is rooted in authentic, consistent, and empathetic engagement. For example, when a youth minister uses practices informed by both frameworks, they might begin by actively listening to the concerns of a young person, thereby establishing relational trust. Through this process, the minister expresses care and provides support (Developmental Relationships Framework), while also demonstrating transparency and integrity (Relational Authority). This integrated approach not only fosters trust but also empowers young people to take an active role in their spiritual journey.

Catholic Perspectives on Relational Ministry

The importance of relational ministry is deeply embedded in Catholic teaching. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* underscores the dignity of every person and the church's role in fostering community through authentic relationships.¹⁷ The Synod on Synodality further emphasizes the church's commitment to listening, dialogue, and participation, essential components of both the Developmental Relationships Framework and Relational Authority. By integrating these frameworks, the church can more effectively engage with young people in a way that is both relationally and theologically sound. This approach not only addresses the immediate challenges of ministering in a low-trust environment but also aligns with the broader mission of the church to accompany individuals on their faith journeys with empathy, respect, and care.

In the following sections, we will explore how these frameworks and a theological underpinning can be applied in practice through Sacred Listening, offering concrete examples and strategies for religious leaders seeking to rebuild trust in their communities. However, before we get to practical application it is important to

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1878.

understand the corresponding theological foundations of listening that can help guide a relational ministerial response through the development and utilization of low-trust tools in a Catholic context.

Theological Foundations of Listening: A Synodal Approach

As the church seeks to engage more effectively with young people and navigate the challenges of ministering in a low-trust environment, it is essential to ground these efforts in a robust theological framework. The previous discussion highlighted the importance of relational ministry, drawing on the Developmental Relationships Framework and the concept of Relational Authority to build trust and foster authentic connections. However, to fully realize the potential of these frameworks within a Catholic context, it is crucial to explore the corresponding theological foundations of listening.

As a theological practice, listening is not merely a tool for effective ministry but a profound expression of the church's mission to uphold the dignity of every person and accompany individuals on their spiritual journeys. The Synod on Synodality places listening at the heart of the church's life, emphasizing dialogue and participation as key elements of a more relational and participatory ecclesial community. This section will delve into the moral and theological significance of listening within the church, examining how it aligns with Catholic teachings on human dignity, justice, and communal discernment.

Moral Theology and the Dignity of the Person

Moral theology within the Catholic tradition upholds the inherent dignity of every human being, rooted in the theological doctrine of *Imago Dei*—the belief that all individuals are created in the image and likeness of God.¹⁸ This core tenet affirms that every person deserves to be treated with respect, empathy, and care, which are essential elements of authentic Christian ministry. In this context, listening is more than a practical skill; it is a theological act that acknowledges and honors the divine image in each individual.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphasizes that respect for human dignity is foundational to all social and moral teaching, calling the church to be attentive to the needs and concerns of the faithful.¹⁹ This theological grounding compels the church to create spaces where individuals feel valued and heard, fostering an environment of mutual

¹⁸ Charles E. Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1700.

respect and understanding. Listening becomes a means of manifesting the church's commitment to the dignity of every person, as it allows for the voices of the marginalized, disenfranchised, and youth to be recognized and affirmed within the faith community.

Listening as a Moral Practice in Synodality

The concept of synodality, as articulated by Pope Francis, extends beyond structural reforms within the church and represents a deeper moral practice rooted in communal discernment and the collective pursuit of truth. The International Theological Commission defines synodality as “the action of the Spirit in the communion of the Body of Christ and in the missionary journey of the People of God.”²⁰ Central to this journey is the practice of listening, which enables the church to discern God's will through the lived experiences of the faithful.

In this synodal context, listening is an essential component of moral theology because it facilitates genuine dialogue and participation within the church. It requires an openness to the perspectives and experiences of others, particularly those who have been marginalized or whose voices have been historically silenced. By engaging in deep and intentional listening, the church not only fulfills its moral obligation to accompany the faithful but also strengthens its communal bonds and fosters a more inclusive ecclesial life.

This approach aligns with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which called for the church to be attentive to “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” of all people, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted.²¹ Listening, therefore, is integral to the church's mission of solidarity and justice, as it ensures that every member of the community is heard and their experiences inform the church's moral and pastoral responses.

Theological Implications of Listening for Justice and Participation

Moral theology also emphasizes the virtue of justice, which involves giving each person their due—not only in material terms but also in ensuring that their spiritual and emotional needs are met. Within the church, justice requires that individuals are not only heard but that their voices contribute meaningfully to the life of the community. Listening, therefore, becomes an act of justice, as it

²⁰ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 46.

²¹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1.

provides individuals the opportunity to share their experiences, challenges, and hopes, and participate actively in the church's mission.

The Synod on Synodality's focus on listening as a form of participation reflects the church's broader commitment to justice. Listening prioritizes every person's contribution to the church's moral and spiritual life, recognizing that true justice within the church involves a relational dynamic where all members are engaged and their voices respected. This perspective reinforces the idea that listening is not just a pastoral tool but a moral imperative that enables the church to live out its commitment to justice and solidarity.

The theological foundations of listening, as explored in this section, align closely with the broader vision of the Synod on Synodality for a more inclusive and participatory church. By framing listening as a practice that embodies the principles of *Imago Dei* and justice, the church can more effectively engage with young people and those who feel alienated or unheard. This approach revitalizes the church's moral witness and ensures that its pastoral practices are grounded in the rich tradition of moral theology.

In this context, listening is not merely a passive act but an active engagement that reflects the church's commitment to accompaniment, solidarity, and justice. By embracing the theological principles of listening, the church can create a more vibrant and inclusive faith community that truly reflects the divine love and compassion at the heart of the Gospel.

As we move forward in this discussion, the next section will introduce a theory of sacred listening, building on these theological foundations to offer a practical framework for ministry in a low-trust world. By understanding and applying the theology of listening, religious leaders can develop strategies that not only address the challenges of the contemporary church but also foster deeper, more meaningful relationships within their communities.

TOWARD A THEORY OF SACRED LISTENING

Building on the foundations established in the previous discussions, this section proposes a theory of Sacred Listening as an essential component of relational ministry. As emphasized in previous sections, relational trust is critical, and the church should consider adopting tools that resonate with contemporary challenges, particularly in the context of synodality. Sacred Listening emerges as a pivotal practice within this framework, transcending mere conversation to embody a profound commitment to valuing and engaging with each person's spiritual journey.

Sacred Listening is not simply a psychological technique or a

communication strategy; it is a theologically-grounded practice that reflects the church's mission of accompaniment, as outlined by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*. This document calls the church to proclaim the Gospel through accompaniment and encounter which is deeply personal, a call that resonates with the principles of Sacred Listening. Further, Pope Francis calls for an accompaniment rooted in listening and dialogue not bound by time. By integrating theological principles with insights from psychology, communication, and sociology, Sacred Listening fosters the deep, empathetic connections necessary for building trust and facilitating the kind of spiritual growth called for in the context of a listening church. This practice is framed through three key components—*Imago Dei*, Alignment, and Pattern Recognition—which together form the bedrock of relational ministry in a low-trust environment.

Imago Dei

The concept of *Imago Dei* serves as the theological foundation for Sacred Listening.²² This doctrine compels the church to approach every interaction with reverence and respect, recognizing the divine presence in each person. As Pope John Paul II emphasized in *Redemptor Hominis*, the recognition of humanity's dignity as created in the image of God is fundamental to the mission of the church.²³ Sacred Listening, therefore, involves more than just hearing words; it requires an intentional commitment to understanding the deeper spiritual and emotional dimensions of the individual's experience.

This theological grounding is essential for fostering a sense of belonging within faith communities. This recognition that runs throughout Catholic teaching, but particularly expressed in the works of Pope Francis, necessitates that the church actively engage the faith narratives of individuals, affirming their identity and place within the community. In this context, Sacred Listening becomes a crucial element in faith formation, where being truly heard can lead to moments of profound spiritual insight and transformation, fulfilling the church's mission of accompaniment.

The psychological and sociological literature further supports this approach. Research shows that when individuals feel their identity and

²² While a full exploration of *Imago Dei* is beyond the scope of this article, the authors have found the foundational concept informative for the development of Sacred Listening in part because of its ability to transcend denominational contexts. For more information, see Ryan S. Peterson, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2016).

²³ See John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (Encyclical Letter on the Redeemer of Man), no. 7.

experiences are valued, it significantly enhances their relational satisfaction and well-being.²⁴ By grounding Sacred Listening in *Imago Dei*, the church not only affirms the individual's dignity but also fosters the relational trust essential for effective ministry.

Alignment

The concept of Alignment, which involves harmonizing with the speaker both emotionally and cognitively, draws from both theological and psychological foundations. In the context of pastoral care, alignment is about entering into the experiences of the other, reflecting Christ's empathetic engagement with humanity. Saint Thomas Aquinas's principle of synderesis—the innate ability to align with the good and true—provides a theological basis for this practice.²⁵ This principle underscores the importance of aligning our actions and thoughts with God's will, which in pastoral care translates to aligning ourselves with the needs and experiences of those we serve.

From a psychological perspective, alignment is supported by theories of perceived responsiveness and active listening. Studies demonstrate that when listeners respond in ways that make the speaker feel understood and valued, it enhances relational satisfaction and fosters deeper connections.²⁶ This body of research emphasizes the importance of active listening as a means of creating an empathetic and non-judgmental environment, which is crucial for effective pastoral care in a modern context.

In Sacred Listening, alignment is not just a psychological tool but a sacred practice. By aligning with the speaker's emotional and spiritual state, the listener embodies the church's call to be a compassionate presence in the lives of others, as modeled by Christ. This approach enhances the relational bonds necessary for community building and spiritual growth, as discussed in the "Low-Trust Tools"

²⁴ Harry T. Reis, Margaret S. Clark, and John G. Holmes, "Perceived Partner Responsiveness as an Organizing Construct in the Study of Intimacy and Closeness," in *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*, ed. D. J. Mashek and A. P. Aron (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 201–225.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 94, a. 1.

²⁶ Hiroaki Kawamichi, Kazufumi Yoshihara, Akihiro T. Sasaki, Sho K. Sugawara, Hiroki C. Tanabe, Ryoji Shinohara, Yuka Sugisawa, Kentaro Tokutake, Yukiko Mochizuki, Tokio Anme, and Norihiro Sadato, "Perceiving Active Listening Activates the Reward System and Improves the Impression of Relevant Experiences," *Social Neuroscience* 10, no. 1 (2015): 16–26, doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2014.954732; Carl R. Rogers and Richard E. Farson, *Active Listening* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1957); Harry Weger, Gina Castle Bell, Elizabeth M. Minei, and Melissa C. Robinson, "The Relative Effectiveness of Active Listening in Initial Interactions," *International Journal of Listening* 28, no. 1 (2014): 13–31, doi:10.1080/10904018.2013.813234.

section. Pope Francis highlights this in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where he calls for a church that is “bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets,” fully engaging with the realities of those it serves.²⁷

Pattern Recognition

Pattern recognition in Sacred Listening involves identifying recurring themes and dynamics within conversations, which can provide deeper insights into the individual’s spiritual journey and the broader cultural context influencing their beliefs and behaviors. This component is crucial for understanding how personal experiences are shaped by larger social, cultural, and historical forces.

Theologically, this practice is rooted in the Catholic tradition of discernment. Saint Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* emphasize the importance of recognizing patterns of consolation and desolation in the spiritual life, guiding individuals toward a deeper understanding of God’s will.²⁸ In Sacred Listening, pattern recognition helps the listener discern underlying spiritual currents in a person’s narrative, allowing for more meaningful and empathetic engagement.

Sociologically, pattern recognition aligns with the use of narrative therapy and social learning theory, where understanding the broader context of an individual’s story can lead to more effective pastoral care. Recognizing patterns in conversations enables the listener to provide appropriate support and guidance, enhancing the individual’s ability to navigate their faith journey.²⁹ This approach is essential for the church’s mission, as it helps identify not only individual needs but also broader trends that may be affecting the faith community as a whole.

This holistic approach, which integrates theological discernment with sociological and psychological tools, allows for a deeper engagement with the speaker’s experiences. By understanding the patterns in an individual’s life, the church can better accompany them on their spiritual journey, reinforcing the themes explored in both the “Low-Trust Tools” and “Sacred Listening and Moral Theology” sections.

²⁷ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 49.

²⁸ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. George E. Ganss, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1991).

²⁹ Mark H. Butler, Jacob D. Gossner, Connor C. Barham, Madeline C. Hansen-Bethea, and Misha D. Crawford, “Discerning Motivational Interviewing through a Spiritual Lens: Discovering a Christian MI Archetype and Native MI Language,” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 47, no. 3 (2021): 767–784, doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12472.

Faith Formation and Sacred Listening

Faith formation is deeply rooted in human experience and profoundly influenced by interactions within the community. Sacred Listening, when grounded in the principles of *Imago Dei*, Alignment, and Pattern Recognition, becomes a powerful tool for nurturing faith and facilitating spiritual growth. This practice not only affirms the dignity of the individual but also fosters the deep, empathetic connections essential for building a trusting and inclusive church community.

Pope Francis has emphasized the need for the church to be a place where every person feels heard, respected, and valued—where their stories are taken seriously, and the community is committed to walking with them on their spiritual journey.³⁰ Sacred Listening, therefore, is not merely a pastoral tool but a theological imperative. It calls the church to be fully present to the needs and experiences of its members, fulfilling its mission of accompaniment and embodying the principles of synodality. As the church moves forward in its synodal journey, Sacred Listening practices offer a concrete way to operationalize the vision of a more inclusive and participatory church, where every voice is valued, and every person's dignity is upheld.

Sacred Listening practices can play a crucial role in faith formation. By integrating theological principles with psychological, communication, and sociological insights, these practices demonstrate their transformative power in nurturing faith, enhancing spiritual well-being, and strengthening communal bonds. Through such meaningful interaction, the church can effectively engage with its members, creating a community that truly reflects the divine love and compassion that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

SACRED LISTENING IN PRACTICE

In an era marked by growing skepticism toward institutions, particularly among younger generations, the church faces the critical challenge of fostering meaningful connections that resonate with contemporary spiritual needs. The Synod on Synodality calls the church to a renewed commitment to listening, dialogue, and accompaniment—key elements that require more than superficial engagement. In response to this challenge, we have developed the theory of Sacred Listening above. In this section, we explore what Sacred Listening Theory looks like in practice.

Unlike traditional “high-trust tools” that rely on presumed

³⁰ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 136–138.

institutional authority, these practices acknowledge and address the prevailing skepticism, particularly among younger generations, who seek authenticity and relational depth. By employing these “low-trust tools,” pastoral leaders can facilitate focused and impartial listening, encouraging individuals to share their stories and experiences in ways that lead to deeper spiritual growth and a renewed sense of belonging within the church.

Through Sacred Listening Practices, the church can effectively operate within a low-trust environment, rebuilding trust and fostering deeper connections within its communities. These tools are not merely functional; they are a concrete manifestation of the church’s theological mission, bridging the gap between theological reflection and actionable ministry. They ensure that the church’s mission remains relevant and impactful in today’s world by embodying the principles of synodality—listening, accompanying, and discerning together in a spirit of communion.

In the sections that follow, we will take a deep look at one specific Sacred Listening Practice—Mapping Trusted Relationships—to illustrate how these principles come together in a practical example. This exploration will demonstrate how the theoretical components of Sacred Listening are operationalized, offering a tangible model for how the church can engage meaningfully with individuals in a low-trust context, thus living out the call to be a more listening and responsive church.

Mapping Trusted Relationships

The “Mapping Trusted Relationships” exercise provides a concrete example of how the theoretical components of Sacred Listening—*Imago Dei*, alignment, and pattern recognition—can be operationalized in a pastoral context.³¹ This tool is especially relevant in the context of the Synod on Synodality, as it embodies the church’s commitment to becoming a more listening, responsive community, particularly in environments where trust in institutions is fragile.

Furthermore, the exercise is an embodiment of the church’s mission of justice, as it ensures that all voices, especially those of the young and marginalized, are given due attention. Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* reminds us that justice requires listening to one another as a fundamental aspect of our commitment to the common good.³² This exercise operationalizes this commitment by

³¹ This activity will be described briefly in these pages. The full exercise can be accessed at www.futureoffaith.org/sacredlisteningtools.

³² Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Encyclical Letter on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth), no. 54.

creating a structured process through which young people can articulate their trusted relationships and spiritual experiences, offering the church a tangible means of fulfilling its mission of justice.

Overview

The “Mapping Trusted Relationships” exercise is an interactive activity designed with three phases to help participants identify and reflect on the key individuals in their lives who play significant roles in their daily interactions, trust circles, and faith conversations. By using simple shapes and prompts, participants map out their social and spiritual connections, providing a visual representation of their relational landscape. This exercise not only fosters self-awareness and personal reflection but also encourages open dialogue about the integration of faith in everyday relationships. Through guided discussions and follow-up, the activity aims to deepen connections, build a supportive community, and empower participants to explore and expand their spiritual lives within a trusted network.

The exercise begins with the “Intentions” phase. Here the facilitator begins by establishing a sacred space, acknowledging each participant as inherently sacred and a reflection of the divine, setting the stage for deep, respectful engagement. This sacred space is not just a physical environment but a relational one, grounded in the understanding that each person’s voice deserves to be heard with empathy and reverence. The purpose of the exercise is then shared, emphasizing that it involves mapping significant relationships and spiritual interactions through simple shapes and words. To deepen the sense of sacredness, the facilitator may introduce a ritual, such as a poem, meditation, or prayer, that resonates with the group’s cultural or spiritual background.

Second, in the “Ask and Record” phase, participants are provided with materials like index cards and writing utensils. They are instructed to draw shapes on the cards—circles for people they talk to daily, squares for those they trust with secrets, and triangles for those they discuss faith with. Numeric and textual prompts are added to capture details about their relationships and spiritual practices. Participants then flip the card to write down a faith-related conversation topic they would like to explore. Finally, they are encouraged to reflect on the exercise and note any insights or feelings about their relationships.

Lastly, in the “Explore and Follow-Up” phase, participants engage in a group discussion or individual reflection to share insights from the exercise, guided by questions about their relationships and faith life. The facilitator collects and organizes the responses to identify

patterns and plan follow-up interactions. Regular check-ins are scheduled to reinforce Sacred Listening practices and track any changes in participants' conversations about faith. Additionally, efforts are made to scale relationships by connecting participants with others who can help them grow spiritually, potentially through events, new groups, or personal introductions based on shared interests.

The "Mapping Trusted Relationships" tool translates the abstract components of Sacred Listening into a practical exercise designed to build trust in a low-trust environment. Here's how each component is operationalized:

Imago Dei: This component is woven throughout the exercise as it establishes that every participant is valued, and their experiences are sacred. By framing the activity within the understanding that each individual is made in the image of God, the exercise fosters an environment where participants feel their voices are respected and their dignity is upheld. This theological grounding ensures that the act of listening is not merely a procedural task but a sacred responsibility.

Alignment: The exercise involves guiding participants to map out their trusted relationships, using simple shapes on notecards to represent different types of connections (e.g., daily interactions, those trusted with secrets, and those with whom they discuss faith). This step aligns the participants' internal experiences with external expressions, creating a visual representation of their social and spiritual networks. By doing so, the exercise helps participants and pastoral leaders align their understanding of these relationships with the broader context of the participant's faith journey. The act of mapping is not just about categorization; it is about aligning the participants' inner worlds with the church's pastoral outreach, ensuring that pastoral care is tailored to the actual lived experiences of individuals.

Pattern Recognition: Once the relationships are mapped, the exercise moves into a phase of guided reflection, where patterns and themes within the participants' relational networks are identified and explored. This is where the concept of Pattern Recognition becomes crucial. By analyzing these patterns, pastoral leaders can discern commonalities in the types of relationships most influential in the participants' spiritual lives. This understanding allows the church to respond more effectively to the needs of young people, recognizing the broader social contexts that shape their faith journeys. Pattern Recognition in this context also allows ministry leaders to identify areas where trust is strong and where it may need to be rebuilt, providing actionable insights that go beyond individual encounters.

The "Mapping Trusted Relationships" exercise is not just a tool for pastoral care; it is a response to Pope Francis's call for a synodal church—one that listens, engages, and responds to the faithful, particularly in a world where trust in institutions is diminishing. This

tool exemplifies how the church can move beyond traditional, high-trust methods of engagement and adopt practices better suited to the current context of skepticism and disaffiliation. By focusing on the relational dynamics within a young person's life, the exercise helps the church accompany its members more effectively, ensuring that pastoral care is rooted in genuine understanding and respect for individual experiences.

Moreover, this practice aligns with the broader goals of the Synod on Synodality, which seeks to transform the church into a community more attentive to the voices of all its members, especially those who feel disconnected or marginalized. The exercise provides a practical example of how the church can operationalize its commitment to listening, not just as a temporary measure during the synodal process but as an ongoing practice that sustains its mission in a low-trust environment.

CONCLUSION

The Sacred Listening Theory and exercise outlined in this article are not just a response to the declining trust in religious institutions; they are a direct and practical extension of the vision set forth by the Synod on Synodality. This synodal journey, called forth by Pope Francis, challenges the church to engage more deeply with its members through listening, dialogue, and a commitment to accompaniment. Sacred Listening Practices operationalize this call, providing concrete tools that translate the theological principles of synodality into actionable ministry practices.

In the context of the Synod on Synodality, the church is invited to move beyond traditional methods of engagement, which often rely on institutional authority, and adopt a more relational approach that meets the needs of contemporary society. Sacred Listening Practices are designed to build trust in a low-trust environment by prioritizing authentic, empathetic engagement over institutional power. They embody the church's mission to accompany all its members, especially the young and those who feel marginalized or disconnected.

These practices are deeply rooted in the theological principles of *Imago Dei* and justice, reflecting the church's commitment to recognizing the inherent dignity of every person. By integrating these principles into its pastoral practices, the church not only enhances its moral witness but also ensures that it remains relevant and responsive to the needs of its members. Sacred Listening thus becomes a vital means by which the church can fulfill its synodal mission of becoming a more inclusive and participatory community.

Moreover, Sacred Listening Practices represent a dynamic and

evolving approach to ministry, that requires continuous adaptation and responsiveness. As the church listens more deeply to the voices of its members, it must also be prepared to act on what it hears, fostering a cycle of listening, learning, and growth. This reciprocal model is essential for rebuilding trust and fostering a deeper sense of belonging within the faith community.

Sacred Listening is not just a tool for ministry; but a tangible expression of the synodal church that Pope Francis envisions—a church that listens, accompanies, and engages with the realities of its people. By embracing these practices, the church can more effectively carry out its mission in today’s world, fostering meaningful relationships that reflect the true essence of the Gospel. Through Sacred Listening, the church becomes a living embodiment of the synodal path, journeying together with its members in faith, hope, and love. **M**

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