

Epilogue: Listening and the Moral Life

Alexis Artaud de La Ferrière

Abstract: The Synod on Synodality placed the concept of “listening” at its core. Throughout the four-year process of the synod, people have agonized over who was listening to whom, on what terms, and to what end. The aim of this epilogue is to reflect on the moral implications of listening. I argue that we have the capacity to engage in listening at various levels of depth—that is, the degree to which the listener is decentered from him or herself, entering into a relationship with the other, and ultimately with Christ. I describe three gradually deepening levels of listening: *intentional listening*, which constitutes a simple act of acknowledging and curiously learning about the other; *recognitive listening*, wherein understanding of the other occurs; and *caritative listening*, a practice of free self-giving in a kenotic move which transforms listening into an authentically Christian practice.

Whatever else was at stake over the course of the Synod on Synodality, one central issue was the notion of “listening.” Throughout the four-year process of the Synod, people agonized over who was listening to whom, on what terms, and to what end. Proponents of synodality argued that it should be received as “an authentic ethic of listening which seeks to learn from and engage all of the members of the community in honesty and charity.”¹ Critics, however, were skeptical, especially when it came to the preparatory “listening phase” of the synod. They were concerned that the focus on “horizontal” listening within the church should not undermine its capacity for “vertical” listening. Thus, for example, Tracey Rowlands warned that “one can so hypostasize the Church as separate from Christ—as, perhaps, a ‘people of God’ made transparent through sociological analysis—that she degrades into a voluntary and even purely human association with a merely historical connection to a putative founder.”² The articles in

¹ Mario Cardinal Grech, “Message to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,” November 18, 2021, www.usccb.org/resources/ENG_Video-Message%20to%20the%20USCCB.pdf.

² Angela Franks, “Christ as the Way of Synodality,” *The Thomist* 87, no. 2 (2023): 257, doi.org/10.1353/tho.2023.0008.

this special issue deal with specific aspects of this debate: the place of the Holy Spirit in synodal listening and discernment, the efficacy of “conversation in the spirit” methodology, the relationship between sociology and theology, the theological relevance of listening to people at the margins, as well as practical reflections on experiences of listening practices at all levels of the church. All of these contribute to a richer understanding of the potential risks and rewards of becoming a more synodal church.

My aim in this epilogue is to offer an initial reflection on the moral implications of listening as a practice and disposition. Starting from a basic sensory account, I argue that we have the capacity to engage in listening at various levels of depth—that is, the degree to which the listener is decentered from him or herself, entering into a relationship with the other, and ultimately with Christ. I describe three gradually deepening levels of listening: *intentional listening*, which constitutes a simple act of acknowledging and curiously learning about the other; *recognitive listening*, wherein understanding of the other occurs; and *caritative listening*, a practice of free self-giving in a kenotic move which transforms listening into an authentically Christian practice.

What follows is not meant to constitute a theology of synodal listening; my immediate concern in these pages is restricted to “listening” as horizontal and intersubjective relationship between human persons. I do not venture so far as to consider “the relationship between listening to the Word of God attested to in Scripture, the reception of Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church, and the prophetic reading of the signs of the times,”³ questions at the heart of the synodal process and treated in various ways by the preceding articles. This choice of focus is not to diminish the importance of such thicker theological questions or of vertical listening in general.⁴ Rather, I want to articulate why we should also consider the simple act of horizontal listening as a legitimate topic of Christian inquiry into the moral life.

THREE LEVELS OF LISTENING

Listening is closely associated with sense-perception, and yet richer and more complex than the mere fact of acquiring information about the external world through sensory organs. Listening is not equivalent to what occurs during a hearing test, where a patient wears

³ *Synthesis Report of the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, no. I.2.f.

⁴ See Thomas G. Dalzell, “Eucharist, Communion, and Orthopraxis in the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2013): 103–122, doi.org/10.1177/00211400124726.

headphones and is instructed to push a button when they hear an auditory stimulus. At the same time, I do not mean by “listening” something so broad that it is synonymous with acquiring knowledge about the world.

In everyday language, “listening” evokes auditory sense-perception. Listening is done by means of hearing and is usually distinguished as a specific type of the latter when we hear purposefully or with intent, commit our attention closely to something with the express purpose of hearing that thing. Let us call this *intentional listening*, both in the sense that it is done deliberately and corresponds to a mental state with intentionality, i.e., a mental state with content, or is about something. To illustrate this first, basic notion of listening, imagine the following example. I am sitting on my terrace on a sunny afternoon reading a book, completely unaware of the soundscape constantly resonating against my eardrums. In some real physical sense, I am hearing all sorts of sounds, but not listening to any of them. Then, something changes. At some point, perhaps because my mind wanders momentarily from the words on the page, I notice a particular sound that may have been present all the while or have suddenly appeared—say a chaffinch’s song. Now I am *listening* to that song, heeding it, appreciating it, perhaps getting up to look out for a small spot of orange-pink breast feathers in the dark green of the hedgerow. Like Samuel in the temple, my consciousness and actions are now awake and directed outwardly towards the source of that sound.

This sort of intentional listening describes a very basic capacity, easily recognizable in ourselves and certain other, non-human animals. It evokes both our embodiedness and ability to be attentive to and curious about the world. But it falls short of a moral practice in the sense of an activity through which we embody a virtue. “Listening” can also mean something more morally profound: a deeper notion we might call *recognitive listening*. On this account, the act of listening is associated with our capacity to learn about and understand something or someone external to ourselves. This assumes a capacity for deliberately paying heed to something through our auditory sense-perception, as in intentional listening. However, something additional is also taking place: I am not only externally focusing my attention on a particular sound, but mentally recognizing that thing or person, either because I have some pre-existing knowledge which allows me to pick it out of its environment and understand something of its essence. Or perhaps because, through the act of listening, I am able to learn something about it that gives rise to understanding. Alternatively, both may be present: pre-existing knowledge may be complemented by new knowledge learnt through listening, which gives rise to a deeper level of understanding.

To return to our birdsong example: perhaps when my mind drifts away from my book and I first notice the chaffinch song, I was not previously aware of what a chaffinch sounds like. I notice a series of notes, but do not recognize the song and do not know what kind of bird sings like that. So, I focus on the song—maybe I notice that the notes are descending, then I perceive a flourish at the end of each phrase. If I were very perceptive, the song might evoke in me the image of a bowler running to deliver a cricket ball, as some ornithologists describe it. During this time, I am also looking out for the source of the song—and suddenly I catch a glimpse of the chaffinch in the hedge. I am no longer just focused on an external noise in the air. I have come to understand that this song is of a particular bird, and my mind has recognized the chaffinch's being, perhaps not profoundly, but certainly in such a way that I am now listening to *that* bird and understand something about *that* creature of which I was previously ignorant.

How much we can understand (or what kind of understanding we can expect) through listening will depend on what or whom we are listening to. My understanding of the chaffinch by listening to its song will penetrate deeper than my understanding of a quartz watch by listening to it tick. My understanding of another person will potentially be much greater still, assuming certain conditions for recognitive listening are met. Joseph Beatty, for example, argues that the “fundamental project [of listening] is *understanding* the other and so achieving a kind of fidelity to the meaning or intention of the other.”⁵ This is possible with another human person in a way that is not with a quartz watch because the latter expresses neither meaning nor intention (although it arguably conveys or reflects a limited range of meaning and intention from the person who designed it). In some sense, the chaffinch does express meaning or intention not readily accessible to my understanding in the way another person's meanings and intentions are. Recognitive listening is most fully present when it occurs intersubjectively, between two persons who share a common language.

A third notion is one I will call *caritative listening*. This describes the act of listening to another person with the deliberate intent that the other person might be heard and feel they are listened to. For example, say that my wife comes home one day visibly upset. As she is someone I love, this is distressing for me, and I will want to know what upset her. Wanting to gain this knowledge leads me down the path to intentional listening; I want to direct my attention towards my wife. Perhaps, this will also lead me to a form of recognitive listening; I do

⁵ Joseph Beatty, “Good Listening,” *Educational Theory* 49, no. 3 (1999): 282.

not merely want to extract information from my wife, I want to understand her subjective experience of the supposed event. Note that these two instances of listening are both directed toward myself as an end. *I* want to know so that *I* will understand. In the case of recognitive listening, I am somewhat displaced in the sense that I am seeking understanding of another person's inner life, but this is still directed toward an end within myself. This is not to say that these are necessarily ignoble or selfish intentions. It may be that I genuinely want to understand what happened out of love for my wife; one of love's manifestations is a desire to know and understand the beloved better. I may intend my act of listening as an instrumental means to helping my wife; maybe I have previous knowledge about an existing dispute with a neighbor and judge I would be well positioned to preempt further distress to my wife if I can learn about the most recent incident and discuss it with the neighbor (of course, my judgement regarding the helpfulness of my action might be mistaken!). Regardless, the point is that these intentions will not be sufficient to lead me to caritative listening.

In order for that to occur, my intention must be to give my wife an opportunity to be listened to. Whereas the crux of intentional and recognitive listening lies in the internal experience of the listener who notices, learns, and understands something about the thing or person to which/whom they are listening, the constitutive end of caritative listening is centered on the other's experience. This implies a more radical decentering of the self—the aim is not to effect a change in oneself but to participate in a change in the other (although the listener is also necessarily changed by the very act of decentering). Even though caritative listening is sustained by the listener, its salient experience belongs to the other, who feels they are being properly recognized through the listening act, where their meaning or intention is being understood by the listener. In that sense, caritative listening is a gift freely given by the listener—a kenosis wherein the listener empties him or herself for the sake of the other.

At the beginning of my text, I wrote that the act of listening ultimately brings us into a deeper relationship with Christ. This Christological dimension of listening was also highlighted by the authors of the *Synthesis Report* following the first session of the synod: "Placing Jesus at the center of our lives requires some degree of self-emptying. In this perspective, providing a listening ear means being willing to 'decenter' oneself in order to leave space for the other."⁶ Charlotte Brontë expresses this in other terms through the voice of Rochester when her brooding hero confesses to Jane Eyre that

⁶ *Synthesis Report*, no. III.16.c.

he can speak to her “almost as freely as if I were writing my thoughts in a diary” because he feels Jane listens to him “with no malevolent scorn of indiscretion, but with a kind of innate sympathy; not the less comforting and encouraging because it is very unobtrusive in its manifestations.”⁷ What Rochester perceives here is no mere passive receptiveness in Jane. It is a disposition, which develops in her and gradually comes to characterize her identity in the novel. Here and elsewhere, Jane actively practices a form of surrender and self-denial through which she ultimately gains freedom and mastery over her world, thereby reconciling any apparent tension between her Christ-like and proto-feminist qualities.

As with other kinds of gift-giving, caritative listening does not always succeed. It can go wrong in several ways. First, the listening party may engage someone in a listening relation but not genuinely intend or have the capacity to properly recognize the other person. The most obvious way in which this could happen is where the listening party is insincere in their intent and wanting to deceive the person to whom they are listening. For example, a seducer may want to lull the object of their desire into a false sense of intimacy by posing as someone with whom secrets can be shared, “and then in the course of the telling to fool them” as admits the amoral Johannes in Kierkegaard’s examination of the aesthetic stage preceding the ethical stage of life.⁸ In such a scenario, caritative listening is a sham; the listening act is not intended for the benefit of the other but as a means of gaining dominancy over the other and extracting pleasure from them. Importantly in such a scenario, the seduced party may feel as though they have been listened to and genuinely recognized by the seducer, but in fact they are mistaken. A less obvious way in which caritative listening can fail is where the listener is not intentionally deceitful but mistaken about their own intentions or capacities. There is a passage in chapter III of *Emma* in which the eponymous heroine feels she can show “no greater kindness than in listening” to her young protégée, Harriet. However, throughout much of the novel, Emma is ever misunderstanding and ignoring Harriet’s true character and wishes, preferring to impose her own ill-conceived match-making schemes rather than to recognize the young woman’s true love for the tenant farmer Robert Martin, of whom Emma disapproves. Again, in this instance Harriet may well feel she is being listened to by Emma (and probably is to a greater degree than in the previous scenario involving the deceitful seducer) but, unbeknownst to her, Emma

⁷ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, Project Gutenberg, March, 1998, www.gutenberg.org/files/1260/1260-h/1260-h.htm.

⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 370.

cannot at this stage in the novel truly listen to Harriet because she is so focused on her own schemes and fancies. Importantly, both of these instances of infelicitous caritative listening can be described as moral failings in which the listener is either unwilling or unable to decenter themselves in a kenotic move for the good of the other.

Thus, we have identified three levels of listening: *intentional*, *recognitive*, and *caritative*. In each case, the listener engages in the same basic act of paying heed to something or someone in the external world—they all require conscious externalization of one's attention and decentering of the self. What differentiates the three types of listening is the degree of decentering they imply and the specific end towards which they are oriented. Intentional listening implies a greater degree of decentering than recognitive listening because in the latter, one is not only conscious of an external phenomenon, but makes a deliberate effort to understand the other. When that other is a person with whom we share a common language, that understanding can potentially be much deeper so that recognitive listening is really only fully accomplished as an intersubjective act. In turn, caritative listening implies a greater degree of decentering than recognitive listening because caritative listening is oriented towards an end situated within the other person (in this case it can only be another human person): they might know they are heard, and have the experience of being listened to.

These levels of listening should be thought of as ideal-types or mental images. I do not suppose real people go about their day, assessing their environment and choosing to “switch on” a particular type of listening according to what the situation demands. The fact that one of these types of listening may be engaged at a particular time does not necessarily preclude that another is also concomitantly engaged—and people need not consciously be aware of different types of listening, nor think explicitly about the concept of listening at all to successfully perform a listening act. We do make a conscious effort in the direction and manner in which we listen; but to a large extent, if listening is genuinely occurring, we will not be thinking about the act itself but that thing or person to which we are paying heed. Indeed, if I am overly concerned about *whether* I am in fact listening and *what sort* of listening I am doing, then I am probably so caught up in my own interiority that I am not really listening at all. As ever, the risk of engaging in moral theory is that it could displace rather than sustain moral action. **M**

Alexis Artaud de La Ferrière is lecturer in sociology at Royal Holloway College, University of London and associate researcher at the *Groupe Sociétés Religions Laïcités* (EPHE/CNRS) in Paris.