

Synod and Communication: an intergenerational look

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Thank you for the honor to provide an intervention regarding communication within our synodal process, from an intergenerational perspective.

I'd like to first offer some observations on the communication methodology which is being encouraged in the synodal process, and then my observations on how this methodology is being appreciated differently across generations.

The preparatory document for the Synod on Synodality introduces us immediately to two key communication elements: the concepts of “walking together” and “listening to the Holy Spirit.”

In my work to support dioceses and SIGNIS in preparing listening sessions, I realized that implementing these two concepts would require a disciplined and intentional approach. From my experience, having grown up in the United States, I have learned that “listening with the heart,” as Pope Francis has described it, is not commonplace. Too often we approach a conversation as an opportunity in which I must convince the other that my opinion or perspective is persuasive and should be primary. While this approach may work well in a court of law, in the public forum it has devolved into an environment in which opinions are prioritized over facts and reality. But that is a topic for another day!

As I worked with others to develop a listening process that honors the innate human dignity of each person who would engage in the synodal process, we found models both ancient and relatively recent. Most especially, I found of value the experience of indigenous people of North America and their use of a “talking stick,” and in the principles of restorative justice, which focus on people and relationships impacted, rather than rules that were broken. Both emphasize what can be described as “active listening” and encourage a communal discernment.

Of course, synodality is also very ancient in the Church. Yet I must acknowledge that in my observation of the synods which have occurred in my lifetime, and those which I have read about, I found the described processes and procedures do not emphasize active listening or an appreciation for the movement of the Holy Spirit. Instead, they appear to mirror a medieval appreciation of a hierarchical decision making. That may have been appropriate for those synods, but we are being asked to engage in a different kind of process for this synod, something unfamiliar to many.

Participants in the listening sessions in which I assisted were given instructions that each person had an equal amount of time to speak, and no one would respond to others' words. Instead, we would listen, actively and intentional, to one another. No one could dominate the conversation or attempt to present their intervention as superior to others.

The second element of the synodal process, which brings the Holy Spirit into the center of our listening, was honored in the listening sessions we created by our careful consideration of the "fundamental question" presented in the preparatory document: "A synodal Church, in announcing the Gospel, 'journeys together:' How is this 'journeying together' happening today in your particular Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our 'journeying together?'" (Vademecum, No. 5.3)

While I appreciate the work of the Synod Office in delving into that fundamental question and providing ten thematic nuclei, the organizing groups with whom I worked determined a more "neutral" and very simple prompt could be more inviting to those who are labeled as on the periphery of our Church and society.

We encouraged people to share an experience they had with the Church that shaped them. And we asked them the question: What is the Spirit asking of us?

Very simple, very direct. The response was humbling and inspiring. People spoke in a personal manner and in a way which clearly indicated they have a fundamental appreciation of the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Our communication method honored the dignity of each participant and their understanding of their relationship with God and with the Church. It created a safe place for them to convey their hopes and fears.

Our friends who are catechists would also recognize that this method builds on the experiences of these adults. I may be pointing out the obvious, but I want to make the connection clear: current best practices regarding adult faith formation align with this expression of the synodal process.

Younger people – and by that I mean individuals approximately 40 years old or younger – especially responded deeply to this method. I observed that younger people had fewer filters through which they spoke.

What do I mean by that?

In general, younger participants spoke more often on their personal encounters and personal growth, both spiritually and professionally. This was especially true in the sessions offered through SIGNIS.

I offer a theory that those of us who are older have been conditioned by our cultures, both secular and in the Church. While we marvel at young people who are willing to be prophetic, we, their elders, have been formed in a church in which those who hold

positions of power, whether they are ordained or otherwise, have opinions that matter more than our own. I consider this one symptom of the clericalism in our Church.

The young people who participated in the listening sessions with me, however, did not seem to be cowed. One young person's words exemplify what I mean: "We have to speak truth without fear of rulers or politicians... to be the voice of the voiceless."

SIGNIS members from Africa, Latin America, Europe and the Pacific regions joined the listening sessions held in the summer of 2022. Approximately 90 people were involved.

There was a consistent call for SIGNIS to increase the opportunities for training and formation of Catholic communicators, both from older and younger participants. I also heard a prophetic voice in each session, urging us to have more diversity in our leadership. Explicitly cited was the need to expand the roles available to women, young people, and lay men in our organization.

Here are some direct quotes from the younger participants:

"Make a space for people to talk about their experiences – people are eager to speak."

"Listen to others."

"My cry and plea is to bring in more young people. We are the leaders of today!"

Participants noted the power of media and how that power can be used for the common good, in promoting peace, saving lives, protecting the environment and honoring the dignity of each human person. They believe their SIGNIS membership enables them to be more effective in their use of media.

Over and over, they asked for the resources and the explicit blessing of the Church to engage in social media as a means of evangelizing.

Those who identified as journalists spoke of the need to provide a voice for the voiceless and to bring a message of deep Christian hope to those who suffer. They expressed this in different ways, but a common theme was the recognition that journalism must be a peace-making endeavor, which of course is a core element of SIGNIS' mission. Again, some direct quotes from our younger participants:

"The Spirit is calling us to accept our differences – and use that to embrace our similarities. We belong together."

"We are called to show our differences and respect and honor one another."

"Our brothers are sacred ground."

"All voices carry the truth, not just the privileged voices."

This means "the Spirit is asking for bravery," one young person said. "Listening with our hearts require us to support the ones who need us the most."

These comments remind me of what Pope Francis told the Catholic Press Association in 2020. He said, “We need media capable of building bridges, defending life and breaking down the walls, visible and invisible, that prevent sincere dialogue and truthful communication between individuals and communities.”

It was edifying to hear our young SIGNIS members affirm the Holy Father’s challenge to bring about communion, through participation in our mission as Catholics. That is, indeed, the synodal path before us.