



Catholic Commentaries

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LISTEN UP WITH AN OPEN HEART

(January 31, 2022)

Long ago, St. Francis de Sales wrote about how “the heart and ears talk to each other” (*Introduction to the Devout Life*, III:21). Last week, Pope Francis published a [message](#) entitled “Listening with the ear of the heart” (for World Communications Day 2022).

The namesakes seem to have an odd sense of anatomy! But their metaphorical grasp on the make-up of human beings invites further consideration in terms of our interactions with one another.



Nowadays, those interactions are characterized, more often than not, by arguing. It seems endemic to politics, education, even religion. It appears inevitable, for whenever two or three are gathered, perspectives will clash.

The rhetorical trope of heart and ears talking to each other points to the experiential truth that what we hear makes an impact on us. The saint uses the image to advise being on guard against “foul words” spoken by supposed friends, whether as false flattery or suggestive immorality. The pope adopts the image, instead, to prompt us to listen more.

On the one hand, his message acknowledges that communications today are hampered by too much speaking. Amid the polemics of social-political debate and an “infodemic” in the digital world, we find it hard to know whom and what to believe. As a result, we end up with greater polarization or increased indifference.

On the other hand, relationships also suffer from too little listening. We often engage in a “duologue” in which we are “waiting for the other person to finish speaking in order to impose our point of view.” As a result, we end up speaking past one another rather than conversing with each other.

In both cases, the pope writes, the real handicap to communication comes from within, from “an interior deafness worse than the physical one.” When ear and heart don’t speak to each other, listening becomes a lost art.

To resolve this interpersonal and social impasse, Pope Francis exhorts us not only to listen, but to listen well: “It is only by paying attention,” he writes, “to *whom* we listen, to *what* we listen, and to *how* we listen that we can grow in the art of communicating, the heart of which is not a theory or a technique, but the ‘openness of heart that makes closeness possible.’”



Nowhere are these three focuses needed more than in the journey toward synodality, which will soon be implemented in the archdiocese by way of various listening sessions.

Listening well starts with the “who.” It concerns our perception of the one with whom we are interacting. If we presume the other to be in opposition to us, or if we consider the other to be ignorant or mistaken, it makes listening to them a challenge, if not an impossibility. We will have already predetermined the need to counter or correct whatever they say.

But if we first decide, in our hearts, that the “other” shares that same image of God that dignifies all of us, then the interaction changes. Acknowledging the communion as brothers and sisters in the Lord that precedes our conversation, we are more likely to engage rather than enrage.

Listening well proceeds with the “what.” With mindsets predisposed to logical analysis, we seek clarity and strive for truth. We favor outcomes over processes. Consequently, we have little interest in mere opinions and will be quick to object to contradictions.

But if we open the ears of our heart, we can learn where people are coming from, what they value, what matters to them. Morality necessarily makes clear the difference between right and wrong. But reality cannot always be reduced to binary thinking. Life is messy! When our hearts lead us to hear differing perspectives as just that -- different, not necessarily better or worse -- we put ourselves in a better position to bring about the clarity that we all need.

And listening well flourishes with the “how.” With our increasing busyness, time appears to be at a premium. Conversations without end, like meetings for the sake of meetings, seem to serve no purpose. In a world of information overload, patience easily wears thin.

But if we so choose, we can accept the “martyrdom of patience” it takes to listen. It’s neither easy nor expedient. It requires humility in the abnegation of our own interests. It calls for a commitment to the other person more than to the confrontation of our differences. When we “let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19), we practice Christian charity – which is always time well spent.

Charity comes from the human heart, transformed by the outpouring of the Sacred Heart. So, too, our communion in the Church depends on anatomy – in communications transformed by listening with the ear of our hearts.

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AT SEASON'S END, RESURRECTION AWAITS

(November 7, 2022)

“It breaks your heart. It’s designed to break your heart.”

So says former baseball commissioner Bart Giammati, in a [classic essay](#) about our national pastime

He reminds us that a season begins in the spring, when nature emerges new again, then blossoms in the summer; but with the darkness of fall, “just when the days are all twilight, when you need it most, it stops.”

The season fosters an illusion that there is something abiding, something enduring amid the corrosive course of life. It elicits hope until the very last out. But then it ends, as it did for Phillies’ fans on Saturday night.

Win or lose, the end comes every year. It’s meant to break your heart.



It’s true. (*Everything* is true of baseball.) And it’s life. Its end can break our hearts.

That’s why the [Gospel story](#) proclaimed on what should have been the day of game seven of this year’s World Series matters even more.

What’s going on there is not simply an academic debate between Jesus and the Sadducees. As a group, they deny the resurrection; for them, there is no real life after this one. Their question about seven husbands and one wife tries to show the absurdity of thinking that this life continues beyond death.

In one sense, they are correct: this life does not continue unabated beyond the boundary of death. Where they go afoul, however, is in thinking that this life is all there is.

Jesus insists there is a next life, a resurrected life beyond our familiar experiences here and now. The reason: because the Almighty is “not God of the dead but of the living.” After all, if death brings human existence to its end, then God would have no one to be God for, and they would have no reason to believe in God.

Jesus preaches convincingly that God is God of the living.

Jesus proves it personally when He, Himself, is raised from the dead.

Jesus promises boldly that “to (God) all are alive.”

But none of that matters unless fans of faith actually believe it. It makes a difference only when we can say that this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this God and Father of Jesus, is OUR God, too.

That faith remains the key to our existential game. When we decide, now, to embrace the truth of the resurrection embodied in Jesus, everything in this season of life changes. Instead of breaking hearts, the design of resurrection enlivens and emboldens them

Pope Francis explains this powerful change of perspective at the core of Christian faith: “It is not this life that will serve as a reference point for eternity ... rather, it is eternity – that life – which illumines and gives hope to the earthly life of each one of us!”

From our perspective, the season of life seems to move from beginning to end, from life to death. But Jesus upends that outlook. As a result, says the pope, death stands behind us, not ahead of us. “Before us is the God of the living.”



image: CNS photo/Vatican media

Beyond the recurring season of defeat, of sin and of death, the God of the new and eternal covenant awaits us with “the beginning of a new time of joy and of endless light.” And, thanks to the grace of the Holy Spirit, “already on this earth, in prayer, in the Sacraments, in fraternity, we encounter Jesus and his love, and thus we may already taste something of the risen life.”

The pope’s conclusion assuages the void in our experience. “God’s love is eternal, it cannot change! It is not only for a time: it is forever! It is for going forward! He is faithful forever and he is waiting for us, each one of us, he accompanies each one of us with his eternal faithfulness.”

The pope may not know baseball. He may not realize that it breaks our hearts, because it is meant to do so. He doesn’t have to wait with us until next season to cheer again.

But he does know that people of faith don’t have to wait for God. For we who believe, the God of the living is still with us, really present to us in His holy Word and in the blessed Sacrament each time we come together at Mass. There we joyously ring the bell – to celebrate the resurrected One who will bring us home eternally.

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