Session 1: Listening and Accompanying Others

Opening Prayer

Teach Me To Listen by John Veltri, S.J.

Teach me to listen, O God, to those nearest me, my family, my friends, my [classmates].

Help me to be aware that no matter what words I hear, the message is, “Accept the person I am. Listen to me.”

Teach me to listen, my caring God, to those far from me— the whisper of the hopeless, the plea of the forgotten, the cry of the anguished.

Teach me to listen, O God my Mother, to myself. Help me to be less afraid to trust the voice inside — in the deepest part of me.

Teach me to listen, Holy Spirit, for your voice — in busyness and in boredom, in certainty and doubt, in noise and in silence.

Teach me, Lord, to listen. Amen.

Icebreaker: SHHHH. JUST LISTEN . . .

Put the group into dyads. One of the two is selected as the listener. The listener may make only 3 statements during the 5 to 10 minute time allocation. The listener must somehow get the speaker to continue talking without saying much. I ask the speaker to relay a situation that should be comfortable (an award, a special event, etc.). After the time allocation, I then ask the dyads to switch roles. The discussion that follows concentrates on:

- How the speaker felt when the person just listened and did not exchange information
- How the nonverbal signals encouraged the speaker
- How uncomfortable the silence was
- How it felt to just listen without having the pressure to contribute
- How the speaker felt having the freedom to say whatever he/she felt.

Overview

Ground rules for discussion: Refrain from judging, criticizing, or arguing with someone else who is sharing from their own personal experiences. We will do our best to make sure everyone has the chance to share. This means that if someone does not wish to respond to a particular question they are not obligated, but you do want to make sure everyone has a chance, so you may be asked to keep responses to some questions brief or be asked to wrap up their sharing in order to allow others to share as well. What is shared in the group should be kept confidential by the group, so long as it does not involve risk of someone harming themselves or someone else.
Pope Francis on Listening and Accompaniment

POPE FRANCIS’ LETTER ANNOUNCING THE 2018 SYNOD

A better world can be built also as a result of your efforts, your desire to change and your generosity. Do not be afraid to listen to the Spirit who proposes bold choices; do not delay when your conscience asks you to take risks in following the Master. The Church also wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith; even your doubts and your criticism. Make your voice heard, let it resonate in communities and let it be heard by your shepherds of souls. St. Benedict urged the abbots to consult, even the young, before any important decision, because “the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best.” (Rule of St. Benedict, III, 3).

INTRODUCTION TO SYNOD PREPARATORY DOCUMENT

“The Church has decided to examine herself on how she can lead young people to recognize and accept the call to the fullness of life and love, and to ask young people to help her in identifying the most effective ways to announce the Good News today. By listening to young people, the Church will once again hear the Lord speaking in today’s world.” (Pg 4)

PERSONAL ACCOMPANIMENT IN PROCESSES OF GROWTH
From Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)

We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God’s love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives. But this always demands the patience of one who knows full well what Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us: that anyone can have grace and charity, and yet falter in the exercise of the virtues because of persistent “contrary inclinations”. In other words, the organic unity of the virtues always and necessarily exists in habitu, even though forms of conditioning can hinder the operations of those virtuous habits. Hence the need for “a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery”. Reaching a level of maturity where individuals can make truly free and responsible decisions calls for much time and patience. As Blessed Peter Faber used to say: “Time is God’s messenger”. (171)
Discussion Questions

1. What word or phrase from what we just read stood out to you? Why?

2. What do the words of Pope Francis, quoted here, mean to you as a young person in the United States today?

3. In what manner does the Church listen to you, your lived situations, and the experiences of other young people? How does the Church accompany young people?

4. In what way do the words of Pope Francis call you to listen and accompany your peers?
What is Christian Listening and Accompaniment

Adapted from chapter 2 of *The Art of Christian Listening* by Thomas N. Hart

WHAT IT IS...

1. **To Listen**
   Listening is not always easy. It takes time, and time might be inconvenient besides. It demands really being for the other during that period, fully present and attentive, one’s own needs and concerns set aside. This is exacting. Listening might mean being afflicted with the most profound sense of helplessness, having the springs of sorrow touched, seeing one’s dearest convictions called painfully into question by the experience and testimony of another. The person may not be attractive, might be telling a dull and too oft repeated tale, might be making mountains out of molehills, might be demanding and even manipulative. These are hazards. Nevertheless there comes to me a human being whom God created and loves. There comes a sister or brother for whom Christ died (Rm 14:15). There enters a suffering fellow pilgrim. The first thing one consents to do is to welcome and listen. It is an act of love.

2. **To Be a Companion**
   The willingness to enter into a helping relationship is essentially the willingness to be a companion—not a teacher, not a savior, but a companion. One agrees to go along. The word “companion” means one who breaks bread with another. People who break bread together share life. It might be nice to be able to do more for someone else—to be savior, wonder-worker, supplier of every need. The helper cannot promise so much, but one gift he or she can give, and that is to be a companion. I will go with you on your journey, take to heart all that concerns you, be there when you need me. This is companionship.

3. **To Love**
   To listen attentively to another and to go with another in companionship are expressions of love. To do either without love is an empty gesture and bears no fruit. The helper love the other. [...] How does one person love another? Love is partly a gift, partly a choice. One dimension of the experience of loving someone is gift: to me it is given deeply to understand and appreciate this person, and to care for him or her. [...] Love is also partly a choice. It is a choice to respect another, to recognize his or her autonomy, to presume good will. It is the choice to welcome another warmly, and to provide environment in which the other can feel safe. It is a choice to listen to another with attention and interest, to affirm and confirm all that one can, to share something of one’s own experience, and to apologize when one offends.

4. **To Be Oneself**
   The helper is one who is willing to be him- or herself. Not a professional hiding behind a mask, but a fellow struggler of flesh and blood, with his or her own burdens, doubts, fears, weaknesses, temptations, guilt. To be oneself in a helping conversation might be to allow oneself to cry with one in deep sorrow, to express outrage as one listens to a person suffering injustice, to admit that one is just as baffled by the mystery of life and God as one’s puzzled friend. These are not studied or affected responses, given because calculated to be helpful, but the natural responses of the heart and mind as one enters freely into the
experience of another. To be oneself is the key, expressing puzzlement if puzzlement is felt, affirmation if affirmation is felt, disagreement if disagreement is felt—but all of these modestly, as having no more authority than that of one’s personal reactions.

WHAT IT IS NOT...

1. To Be Responsible for Another Person’s Life
   The helper does not take responsibility for the life of the other... It does a grave injustice to the person seeking help, since it keeps him or her in a position of dependency and immaturity.

2. To Remove Problem or Pain
   Another presumption that defeats helping relationships from the start is the helper’s presumption that he or she is being asked to solve the problem or put an end to the suffering. This is usually impossible, and rarely being asked for.

3. To Offer Greater Experience, Wisdom, and Holiness
   Some misgivings besetting the helper stem from the presumption that one must be older, wiser, and holier than the person seeking help. All of these might be considerable assets, but they are not strictly necessary.

4. To Make the Other a Different Person
   Human beings grow organically, and the operative factors in their growth are multiple, some environmental and some constitutional, all evasive of management. The helper is but one of those factors, and only a modest function. One may be able to plant a seed in someone’s mind that will bear fruit later. One may be able to help set up an occasion or situation which could foster the needed growth. But there are countless factors outside the helper’s control, including the freedom of the person who comes.
Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of a person (or persons) who modeled good listening and accompaniment for you? What was something they did that you would like to imitate when trying to listen and accompany another?

2. Can you think of a time when you were called upon to listen and accompany another? Was there anything specific that you felt you did very well? Is there anything you would like to avoid or improve the next time you listen and accompany another?

3. Why do some people hate to hear other people talk about their problems? What is your own position on this?

4. Why do some people like nothing better than to give other people advice? What is your own position on this?