Friday 20th May 2022, Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge, UK

This first symposium of the Centre for Ecclesial Ethics will bring together different voices and expertise from across the Church in order to critically examine the ecclesial practice of listening. It will aim to explore the ecclesiological fruits and ethical implications that an embrace of this practice carries for the Church of today and tomorrow.

Why listening? Why now?

In company with discernment, accompaniment and encounter, the art and practice of listening has come to be recognised as a foundational hallmark of the ministry and magisterium of Pope Francis – a practice that he models and exhorts for the flourishing of both our Church and our wider world.

In a world whose domestic and international politics are becoming increasingly polemicised and adversarial, and whose societies and cultures are increasingly fractured and enclosed, the practice of listening has been revealed anew as integral for the bridge-building pathway to the healing, justice and reconciliation for which our scarred peoples and war-torn world deeply yearn.

In the wider Christian tradition listening has been recognised through our scriptures and our developing tradition as constitutive of an ethical and just discipleship. It remains however an elusive and costly practice for our Church to personally and systemically embrace, despite our renewed awareness of the central place it occupies on our path to the synodal Church. On the threshold of this ‘change in era’ we are becoming increasingly aware of the imperative to listen.

Indeed as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic our research at the Centre for Ecclesial Ethics suggests that it is a tender, attentive and deep listening that is essential for our Church’s faith-filled response to the personal and collective trauma experienced during this time.¹

Now more than ever for a Church whose bonds of communion are frayed and splintered from successive ecclesial crises and an inattentive and neglectful ear to those most neglected and marginalised, the importance of listening cannot be too keenly underlined if it is to become the vigilant and vulnerable Church it is called to be.² The clerical child abuse scandal and episcopal cover up in tandem with a reductionist anthropology derived from a narrow and neglectful listening

¹ See the foundational seminar series of the CEE Our Church emerging from Covid: preparing the future that included listening, attentiveness, participation and trauma as emergent key themes to which the Church is called to attend and embrace as we emerge from Covid.
² See the Inaugural lecture of the Centre for Ecclesial Ethics delivered by Professor Jim Keenan in December 2021, that explored an Ecclesial ethics of vulnerability as a pathway to a different Church.
has given rise to a growing inattentive engagement and disconnection from the Church’s teaching and praxis across many communities and peoples.

It emerges with greater clarity and focus therefore that our peoples, our world and our Church need the practice of listening. We need to listen in response to the ‘boundless desire to be heard’ which governs the heart and the minds of all peoples. We need to listen to experience that disrupts our prevailing thinking and praxis and draws us into discernment and renewal. Indeed ‘listening with the ear of the heart’ is key to becoming fully human and faithful disciples and reveals the way to a reconciled world and a flourishing Church.

It is in this contextual light that a dialogical analysis of the practice of listening is not only timely but pressing for the ecclesial community on its pathway to becoming a good and better Church. What happens to us personally and as Church when we listen, becomes a critical question to explore. It is listening, its implications and potential that merits the attentive wisdom of our symposium. ‘Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.’

The focus of our symposium

In this one-day symposium, having examined the concept of the practice of listening, we will specifically explore what happens to us when we listen from our personal, disciplinary and ecclesial perspective. We will seek to understand more clearly the personal transformation, the ethical implications and the ecclesiological potential that the beautiful practice of listening to the voices of a vigilant and vulnerable church carries for a renewed church of today, in terms of relationships, roles and responsibilities, values and practices, structures and governance.

The three key questions that we aim to address in this symposium are:

a) What happens to me when I deeply and attentively listen?

b) What happens to us as Church when we deeply and attentively listen?

c) What are the ecclesial and ethical implications of habitual and systemic deep attentive listening for our relationships, practices and structures?

By the end of our time together we will not only have listened out for a vigilant and vulnerable Church, but also explored the potential that the practice of listening carries for a vigilant and vulnerable Church in its function and flourishing.

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4 Revelation 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22(NRSV)