

LISTENING – GEMMA SIMMONDS CJ

I need to say that I'm going to be speaking with several hats on. One is in my persona as a teacher and occasional practitioner of Christian spirituality, especially of Ignatian spirituality, trying to bring the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* alive. I also speak as director of the Religious Life Institute who spent Holy Week helping, as a part of a team of four theologians, to redact the response of the world's religious to the Synod. This gave me privileged access to the voices of religious of all continents and congregations, male and female, in an extraordinary sort of Pentecost of comment and engagement from all around the church. Finally, my original discipline is not theology but modern languages, so I am trained to listen not only for what people say but for what they actually mean. I'm used to listening when there isn't a direct translation in one language for something that is perfectly understood in another language and I have found in my years as a spiritual director that so often the discipline I'm listening out of is that of modern languages, because I'm trying to interpret and find out what the words that this person is using actually convey of what they seem to be meaning. I want to start with the prologue to the Rule of St Benedict, which begins,

'Listen, my child, to the precepts of your master and incline the ear of your heart and cheerfully receive and faithfully execute the admonitions of your loving father, that by the toil of obedience you may return to Him from whom, by the sloth of disobedience, you have gone away'.

When we were asked this morning to give a sentence on what we think listening is, I said it was the heart of obedience because the Latin word for obedience comes from *ob + audire*, to listen attentively or intensely. It is to me a truly tragic irony that the recent Commission looking into sexual abuse within religious orders, particularly the Order of St Benedict, reveals a systemic failure to listen with the ears of the heart to what is going on within their own communities. I don't want to single out the Benedictines because any one of us, as a member of the church, is embroiled in a general ecclesial failure to listen with the ears of our heart. We're all part of this and it's fundamentally a failure in obedience to intense listening insofar as we, as human beings, are remotely able to discern the voice of God. It's a failure to respond to the radical call to listen intensely to the voice of the Spirit speaking in the signs of the times with which we are now engaged within the Synod.

I wonder why Pope Francis did call us into a Synod. I think it's because he's a Jesuit and discernment of spirits is what drives him instinctively towards how we might respond to the Spirit at work in the world. There is at least one of you here who has sat through my classes on Christian Spirituality, and you will have heard me say that spiritual accompaniment is not a dual relationship between two people, it's a *ménage à trois*... We need to think of spiritual accompaniment as a triangular relationship in which both the pilgrim and the companion are committed to deep listening to the real spiritual director, who is the Holy Spirit. When we find a way to do that, we will come to understand why the enactment of listening, of obedience in that sense, is the truest liberation. St Augustine, who took many years to work out how to listen to the voice of God within his own experience and within the texts with which he was trying to grapple, said that the truest form of freedom is obedience to God understood as learning how to listen at depth to what God is saying.

As a church we have two thousand years' worth of spiritual resources from people trying to listen to God and to one another in dialogue with the world. If I can be forgiven for taking something of a quantum leap here, I wish to bring your attention to the almost complete collapse today, at least in this country, of the practice of the sacrament of reconciliation. This is a real tragedy for us personally and as an ecclesial community. A sacrament is a sign which makes real what it signifies. Let's think of that. I can feel, with both pain and passion, what a sign which makes reconciliation real could potentially do for the people several of you have been listening to - what it might mean if, when we listened to these people whose pain is so profound, we actually did have a sign in and from the church that made real what it signifies. But we have been so boneheaded that we have turned the sacraments into religious fetishes. No wonder they don't come back for more, because these signs, as we have allowed them to evolve, convey no meaning and have no impact on the reality of their lives. Yet how extraordinary it would be if we could find a way to convey that the sacraments are part of the dynamic spiritual treasures of our church, if we could unpack them as embodied signs that truly do make real what they signify. This would challenge us not only to listen but to enact and embody what we are listening to. It would therefore require from both the ministers and the receivers of the sacraments to understand the profound mutuality of change and conversion that is required on both sides, just as the rules of religious life require change and conversion.

I want to go back very briefly to my friend St Ignatius who, in his annotations to the Spiritual Exercises at the very beginning says, 'It is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth' [SpExx. 2]. How can we ever find intimate understanding of ourselves, let alone one another, if we do not listen? He warns the director of the Exercises that 'as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other [s/he] should permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature and the creature directly with [their] Creator and Lord' [SpExx. 15]. By this he implies that every single person on the face of this earth, including those apparently profoundly limited people of whom Sue spoke, has the capacity to be in direct relationship with God. If we truly believe that and if we truly enacted that in our churches, we would never again speak about the 'voices of the voiceless in the church'.

Over and over again, we heard in our redaction of the Synod responses from the religious, 'What's the point of this? Who's going to listen - what's going to happen when we've all stopped listening to each other - what's going to change?' I find myself saying to people, 'Look, the process is the product. We can't wait for some product to come out of this like a ready-made game plan. The product has to be ourselves transformed, so that we say and actually mean what we long for and are struggling for within the church'. The voice of the women religious from all over the world said loud and clear, 'Enough of patriarchy, enough of sexism and of a church that excludes and disregards women'. We also heard the longing and passion coming from all the religious, male and female, for a church in which we are actually fed and nourished by the Spirit. The process is the product. The Spanish poet Antonio Machado has a wonderful poem,

‘Traveller, your footsteps are the path and nothing else,
Traveller, there is no path. You make the path by walking’.

With this Synod there is no path, there is no plan or product in the sense of a pre-packaged deal. If we can listen with the ears of our heart in obedience and with a desire and willingness to be transformed, we will find that we have already made the path by walking on a road which opens before us.