



Centre Sèvres - Paris
Facultés jésuites

**Laure Blanchon
Pierre Davienne
Frédéric-Marie Le Méhauté
Christophe Pichon**

**Jean-Claude Caillaux
Étienne Grieu
François Odinet**

Tools for Listening to People on the Margins in a Synodal Process

**If we have to begin anew, it must always be from the
least of our brothers and sisters.**

Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 235

BASIC CONVICTIONS

Christ hears the Voices of the Poor

In the Gospel of Mark (10:46-52), Bartimaeus – a beggar standing by the roadside – calls out to Jesus. The crowd wants to silence Bartimaeus, but Jesus knows how to hear his call, to recognize his faith, and to experience an authentic encounter with him. For Bartimaeus, it is an experience of liberation and belonging: he lifted up to walk among the disciples. These encounters occur often throughout the Gospels.

People on the Margins bring us Back to the Essentials

The Church needs to understand the lives of people on the margins and to hear their voices in order to discover the calls of the Holy Spirit. People on the margins have experiences to communicate and ideas to share, which concern not only their personal lives, but the life of the whole Church. Listening to people on the margins can guide the Church towards the essential: how do our communities truly witness to the fact that Christ saves our lives and renews our relationships?

Listening to People on the Margins Ensures that we are Listening to Everyone

In the richest countries as well as in societies where poverty is widespread, there are always the “least of our brothers and sisters” – people who are excluded, neglected, and counted for nothing. Striving to encounter them, to hear their voices, and to receive their input, is a compass for a synodal process that involves all members of the Church in a genuine way.

STARTING OUT

As everywhere else, so too in the Church: it is not enough to speak, one must be listened to. There are too many people who know, and who know everything. So we can't speak up, because we don't believe that we have things to say, and let alone things that could interest others.

Group on the Role and Voice of the Poor, *Diaconia 2013*

Processes designed for People on the Margins

If the voices of the poorest are to be heard, this intention must be kept in mind from the very outset. It is very difficult to involve people on the margins in processes that have not been designed with them at heart. That is why the way in which expectations are formulated and words are collected must be suited to the needs and realities of people on the margins. This leads to a greater openness towards all the other people who find it difficult to make their voices heard in the Church.

Extending a Listening Ear

Listening to people on the margins requires listening carefully, because they often say unusual and unexpected things. We must therefore be ready to hear what they have to say that is surprising or counter-intuitive, without burying their words in more constructed or conventional language.

To listen is also to invite people on the margins to reflect on their own experience and to recognize that it is a source of knowledge and understanding.

A FRAMEWORK FOR LISTENING

The Hospitality of Listening

People on the margins will feel that their voice is legitimate if it is truly welcomed in a hospitable way: this means taking the time and the means to listen to them, and to sincerely value what they have to contribute to the wider reflection and conversation.

Coming Together as a Group

Speaking in public is often difficult for people on the margins. In order for them to express themselves, it usually helps do so together. This requires “synodal groups” in which they are in the majority, and in which the other participants are willing to welcome them and truly listen to what they have to say.

A Fraternal Setting

This shared experience should take place in a fraternal environment. To this end, it is necessary to be anchored in relationships of trust: synodal groups with people on the margins must rely on people who have already entered into relationship with them, who know how to encounter them, etc. Moreover, when planning this time of the group reflection, it is necessary to organize it within a community experience, including praying together, having a meal, etc.

Caring for what is Shared

In these groups, particular care must be taken in welcoming what people express: making sure that each person is invited to share, that no one is left aside, that people don't impose their advice or judgment, and that the those who have the most difficulty in expressing themselves be given priority.

WAYS OF LISTENING

It is not enough to draft diocesan or national questionnaires that are suitable for people on the margins. To truly honour their reflection, other means must be used. Below is a list of various options. Local animators can implement those that they find fitting. The overall goal is to invite people on the margins to resonate with the Word of God in their own way.

Gospel Sharing

Choose a passage of the Gospel in an accessible translation. Invite participants to comment on the moods and attitudes of the characters and to react to them. Is there a particular action or word of Jesus that reminds them of or sheds light on something in their daily lives? How does reading this particular passage of the Gospel renew our way of living as a Church?

For example: Meditating on Mark 10:46-52, observing the attitudes of the characters, how they remind us of the Church we are familiar with, how Jesus empowers Bartimaeus to walk along with everyone, and what this inspires in us.

Our Life Story

People on the margins can come alive when they tell their story. This allows us to hear their thoughts and reflections for the synodal process. Moreover, these stories and testimonials can even inspire and be commented on by other groups.

Examples of questions to encourage people to share their stories: Who helped you to know God, to become part of the Church, and how? Have you been able to take your place in the Church, to share your faith with others, and how?

Writing Something Together

Invite a small group of people on the margins to write something together. Other groups of people react to this text and comment on it from the perspective of their own daily lives.

For example: Invite people to talk about their dreams for the Church, and how to make those dreams come true. Their exchange can be recorded and written down verbatim. Or the input can be written down and a summary text can be drafted together.

Working with Words

Participants are invited to work on the meaning of a word or expression: what does it mean, what is the opposite, what does it bring to mind, what other words does it evoke? Participants can then choose which expressions best convey the group's overall message.

For example: Ask what "Church" means, or look for words that describe what it means to "walk together in the Church" (one way of defining synodality), and what words describe the opposite. Then ask people the reason why they mentioned a particular word, in order to go deeper in the conversation.

Dialogue using Images

Invite people to choose from a variety of images (photos, paintings, etc.), in order to find one that corresponds to a given word or idea. Participants then share why they chose a particular image. Based on what they say, a common text can be written, which can be accompanied by one or more of these images.

Examples of Questions: Which image illustrates for you the idea of "walking together in the Church," or "following Jesus together"?

Expressing Ourselves through Artwork

Invite participants to draw or paint, and then ask them to comment on their artwork. Both the works of art and the comments can provide helpful insights.

For example: How would you depict the Church? How would you depict your place in the Church?

Collaborating on a Common Work of Art

Participants can produce an artistic creation together. Once the work of art is completed, they are invited to comment on it. Both the comments and the artwork can be submitted as part of the synodal process.

For example: What does the Church look like? How would you depict Christians walking together?

Doing Creative Writing Together

Invite participants to put their imagination together and write a story, poem, prayer, psalm or song. In addition to being submitted as a contribution to the synodal process, the creative text can be proclaimed (or sung) during a synodal celebration.

For example: Writing creatively about “walking together with Jesus” or “walking together in the Church.” Or meditating on Matthew 18:10-14 or Acts 2:41-47, then we write a text that sets the passage in today’s world.

Acting it Out

Participants can write a short play or come up with a dance. Their creation can be performed – or danced – at a synodal gathering.

Examples of Guiding Questions: What is “walking together in the Church”? Why is it important? Why is it difficult?

VALUING PEOPLE'S WORDS

It is not enough to simply collect words: how do we make sure that their weight and value are transmitted through the synodal process?

Identifying the Voices of People on the Margins

When the diocesan and national syntheses are being drafted, it is important that the words of people on the margins be identified as such. Indeed, words resonate differently according to the situation of the people who express them.

Identifying Paths of Conversion

The words and stories of people on the margins are not limited to simple testimonies. If they are taken seriously, they open up new pathways for the local Churches: they can inspire pastoral conversions and new ways of doing things. This is how their words have their full effect and impact.

Involving People on the Margins in Church Celebrations

When a celebration is held to conclude this stage of the synodal process, it is good that the words of people on the margins be heard, and that their presence at the heart of the local Church enliven this occasion as a true celebration.

**The Church cannot let the poor down:
Pastors are called to listen to them,
to learn from them, to guide them in their faith
and to encourage them to take responsibility
for their lives.**

Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, § 107