

LISTENING TO OTHERS: POPE FRANCIS

Henry Wansbrough*

1. Listening to others in the Church

From the beginning of the Church listening to others has been a vital pre-requisite of decision-making. It assumes that the Spirit is present in all members of the Church. There is a striking difference between the first meeting of the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles to elect a successor to fill the place of Judas and the next decision-making meetings, the choice of the Seven and the so-called ‘Council of Jerusalem’ as presented by Luke in Acts 6 and 15. At the first meeting, before the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the decision is made by drawing lots, with the implication that the will of God would be shown in this way rather than by discussion or voting by the disciples, who had not yet received the Spirit. However, once the Spirit has come at Pentecost, the procedure is entirely different. When it comes to the commissioning of the Seven, the same interchange continues: the whole assembly listens to the voice of the Twelve and approves; they then make their choice and present the candidates to the apostles.²⁶ At the Council of Jerusalem the assembly listens to the opposing points of view given by Peter and James, and then give their unanimous decision, ‘It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to ourselves...’ The decision of the community is the decision of the Spirit, reached by listening. Similarly, even in the authoritative Roman world of the Benedict’s *Rule for Monks* listening is important. The Prologue to the *Rule* does indeed start with the uncompromising statement, ‘Listen, my son, to the precepts of the Master’, but when it comes to community decisions Benedict stresses that even the youngest must be given full opportunity to express his views – with a reminder of the wisdom of young Daniel in the trial of Susanna. Benedict himself shows his willingness to learn from others: after several

* Monastery of Christ the Word, Zimbabwe, 28.12.2015

²⁶ Who then lays hands on them? The manuscripts differ: some texts make clear that the apostles do the laying on of hands, others run more smoothly if the assembly as a whole lays their hands on them. Similarly in Acts 13.3 it seems that the whole Church of Antioch laid hands on Barnabas and Sal to commission them.

chapters of detailed work in apportioning the recitation of the Psalms throughout the week, he generously concedes that others may find another arrangement better (chapter 18).

It would be starry-eyed to maintain that listening has always held the place it deserves in the counsels of the Church. The low point in listening was perhaps reached at the end of the nineteenth century with the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), promulgated by Pius IX. This ranged over a whole gamut of opinions without even listening to them carefully. It is in fact not always easy to discern behind the condemnations the opinions which were being condemned. The *Syllabus* was indeed couched in terms precisely of refusal to listen to any other voice than that of the Pope and his inner circle: the Church possessed the whole truth, and that was an end of the matter! There was no attempt to see whether other teachings or other formulations might contain a scintilla of truth. It was this attitude which led the ultramontanes of the First Vatican Council to press for a definition of papal infallibility. A loosening in the final decade of the century, and a willingness to listen to alternative voices at the great international Catholic Congresses was reversed by the hysterical reaction to the Catholic Modernist movement, culminating in *Lamentabili sane exitu* in 1907, which stifled open discussion for half a century. Accordingly, one of the most remarkable developments of the late twentieth century, and especially since Vatican II, has been the growing readiness of authorities of the Church to listen to others. The explosion at the opening of Vatican II, when the assembled bishops refused to accept the schemata presented to them by the Preparatory Commissions has become part of the stuff of history.

One of the most important moments in the advance from this position was the treatment of the non-Catholic observers at Vatican II, and the respect with which their opinions were treated. This attitude was given a doctrinal basis in *Lumen Gentium* (#12-13), which detailed the ways in which those outside full communion with the Catholic Church were described as in some sense united with the Church. This implies that their way of formulating their faith or theology is not without its own values; it at least opens the door to the possibility that Catholics might listen and learn from them. Such an attitude has been the basis also of inculturation, a vital listening to others, on the assumption that the traditional European way of celebrating the mysteries and the traditional European use of symbols is not the only possible way. It opened the way also to movements such as those pioneered by two Benedictines in India, Henri le Saux and Bede Griffiths, exploring the great Eastern world

religions, and asking whether their understanding can contribute to Christian understanding or even be translated into Christian terms.

The openness to others pioneered at Vatican II by the treatment of non-Catholic observers and by the prominent part given to the Church Unity Commission bore fruit in the official inter-church dialogues, such as those between Anglican and Roman Catholics and between Methodists and Roman Catholics. They have markedly advanced theological understanding within the Church. By listening to divergent views and attempting to discern the meaning and importance of the teachings of their own communion, theologians on both sides have advanced their own understanding. When Methodists ‘reverently dispose of’ the remains of the Eucharistic elements, how near are they coming to a doctrine of the real presence of Christ in them? When they do not re-commission a minister who has fallen away and returned again to good standing, how near are they to the idea that priesthood makes an indelible mark on the soul? The depth and clarity of the Agreed Statements, particularly those of the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission, the fruit of patient listening over many years, has made them texts important in the theological training of clergy in many seminary courses.

Another important advance at Vatican II was the creation of a machinery for local, regional and universal Conferences or Synods of Bishops, making provision for the bishops of the world to meet regularly at several levels to listen to one another about important problems. Such provision for listening and consultation was all part of the recognition in practice that the Bishops were themselves successors of the Apostles and not merely delegates of the Bishop of Rome, though many have lamented the failure in subsequent years to implement this machinery more fully. Indeed, Pope Francis, in his important address on the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod (17th October, 2015), speaks of the need to reflect on means ‘to increase the spirit of episcopal collegiality which has not yet been fully realized’ and outlines possible ways in which the synodal process might develop.

2. Laudato Si’

A quite new dimension of listening has, however, come to the fore in the pontificate of Pope Francis. Two aspects of this may be seen in two remarkable changes. The first is the widespread consultation with and learning from Episcopal Conferences which may be

observed in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. It is a normal feature of Papal Encyclicals that they should quote the Pope's predecessors. The purpose of this is to show that the present teaching is in continuity with the teaching of the Church expressed by earlier papal tradition. But a new feature of listening to others occurs in the current encyclical: on almost every page of the encyclical Pope Francis quotes and genuinely builds on opinions expressed by the Bishops' Conferences around the world. The full list of these shows a staggering breadth of consultation and listening. A quick trawl through the footnotes shows that the encyclical draws explicitly on the Bishops' Conferences of Southern Africa, the Philippines, Bolivia, Germany, Patagonia-Argentina, United States, Latin America & the Caribbean, Canada, Japan, Brazil, Dominica, Paraguay, New Zealand, Mexico, Australia.

In many of these cases the Pope is listening to the pleas of countries which have suffered and are suffering injustices of exploitation. Others, from richer nations, show that the Bishops of those regions have themselves listened to the pleas of the exploited. So the German Bishops are quoted as saying that 'Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest' (fn 26). Similarly the Bishops of the United States urge that greater attention be given to 'the needs of the poor, the weak and the vulnerable, in a debate often dominated by more powerful interests' (fn 31) – many of which may well be based in their own country. By contrast, the Japanese Bishops delicately and poetically point out that 'to sense every creature singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God's love and hope' (fn 56).

Such listening to others, and the very demonstration of such listening, are essential prerequisites of the Pope's purpose, for in recent times the papacy has taken on more overtly the role of being the universal teacher, not only of the Catholic faithful, but also of people of good will beyond the confines of the Catholic and Christian faith. Listening by the Pope is to be reciprocated by a wider audience than previously; others beyond the explicit boundaries of the Church are being called upon to listen to the Pope. A striking early instance of such world-leadership was the 1988 Assisi World Day of Prayer for Peace, to which religious leaders from many great religions of the world were successfully invited. Another unforgettable instance was the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Great Britain in 2006. This had been carefully billed by the national press to be the non-event of the year. In fact the Pope's well-studied and tactful teaching and his loving presence from beginning to end stirred the conscience of the nation, perhaps none more profoundly than a fraternal visit to retirees of his

own age, and the historic address about Britain's role in the world, given to the leaders of the nation in Westminster Hall. The message of Pope Benedict was heard gratefully and seriously by many outside his own Roman Catholic flock.

There is no mistaking the objective of *Laudato Si'*; it is addressed to 'all people'. Pope Francis recalls that, 'with the world teetering on the brink of nuclear crisis', Pope John XXIII wrote 'to the entire Catholic world and indeed to all men and women of good will'. He goes on, 'Now, faced as we are with global environmental deterioration, I wish to address every person living on this planet... In this Encyclical, I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home' (#3). To underline the universality of his message he links arms on the one side with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholemew (#7-9) and on the other with that ever-popular figure of Francis of Assisi (#10-13). Not only does he link arms with them, but he also listens to them before giving his own message. 'We need a conversation which includes everyone... We require a new and universal solidarity' (#14). Listening himself to the data of scientific research, and to the concerns of Bishops throughout the world, and reading it all in the light of Christian revelation, Pope Francis is calling on all people to listen.²⁷

However, Pope Francis in this encyclical does not confine his listening to Church sources. He ranges widely over the problems of 'Care for our Common Home' (the sub-title of the letter). The letter is often dubbed 'the encyclical on climate change', a quite unjustifiable restriction, as a mere glance at the chapter-headings shows; it embraces issues such as pollution, waste, misuse of water and loss of bio-diversity. The Pope's goal is 'not to amass information... but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering' (#19). In his listening he refers to scientific data, but carefully refrains from pre-judging issues. So, on the issue of climate change, he limits himself to saying that 'a very solid scientific consensus indicates' a large degree of human responsibility, but at the same time points out that there are other factors, 'such as volcanic activity, variations in the earth's orbit and axis, the solar system', which should be taken into account (#23). It is not the Pope's job to settle scientific questions, and this open-minded listening provides an excellent example of raising important questions.

²⁷ Pope Francis is said to have described himself as the luckiest Pope in history because he can listen to the wisdom of his predecessor. It is well known that he is in constant communication with Pope Benedict over important matters and documents.

3. The Synod on the Family

The second, and perhaps more surprising and innovative feature, is the real consultation of the laity which preceded and animated the recent Synod on the Family. It was as though finally the plea of John Henry Newman in his brilliant tract, *On Consulting the Laity on Matters of Doctrine*, had at last come into its own. Newman's contention was that during the fourth-century Arian controversy it was the laity rather than the bishops who vigorously defended and preserved the faith. He used this argument to stress the importance of a theologically educated laity and of Catholic religious education, criticising the rejection by the English Catholic Bishops of the invitation to take part in the negotiations which eventually resulted in the legislation to make provision for education for all. The writing of this booklet has been described as Newman's act of ecclesiastical suicide, for it was fiercely rejected by the Catholic establishment, with the result that Newman remained an object of suspicion in the English Catholic Church for some decades. However, times change, and Newman's stress on the laity played an important part in many of the discussions of Vatican II.

Accordingly, from the beginning of the Synod on the Family consultation of the laity was a prominent feature. Of course the subject-matter of the discussions at the Synod made this even more imperative than for some previous Synods, such as that on the Bible. It would have been absurd to leave the discussions on the family precisely in the hands of a celibate clergy who had little direct personal experience of many of the aspects of family life. Well before the first session of the Synod, in October 2013, questionnaires were sent round to every diocese, asking the opinions and experiences of the laity on 28 different topics to do with the family. Pope Francis called this 'taking the pulse of the Church'. He also decided on holding an extra session of the Synod in 2014 before the ordinary Synod planned for 2015; the purpose of this was precisely to give time and opportunity for listening to the many opinions which would be voiced. The initial stages of consultation were not perfectly implemented, and there was widespread dissatisfaction in some areas, before the first session, at the failure of Bishops' Conferences to publish the results of the questionnaires sent round dioceses and parishes, resulting in the fear that uncomfortable opinions were being simply swept under the carpet. A second consultation before the second session was, at least in some countries, more wisely and more publicly handled, the results and opinions being made more widely available. On the eve of the first session of the Synod the Pope – as he recalled in his address at the 50th anniversary – said, 'For the Synod Fathers we ask the Holy Spirit first of

all for the gift of listening: to listen to God, so that with him we may hear the cry of his people'. He stressed that the Pope in his turn speaks not on the basis of his personal convictions but as the supreme witness to the faith of the Church as a whole.²⁸

Most of all, however, the presence of married family members, invited to the Synod of 2015, showed that there was a new wind of the Spirit blowing through the Church. Of the 360 people present less than 280 were clergy, and as many as 51 non-voting observers took part, including 18 married couples. These proportions ensured that it was still evident that the Bishops in communion with the Bishop of Rome were the final arbiters and teachers in the Church, but it put into practice the truth that an important element in the office of bishops is to listen to and evaluate ideas presented to them, rather than initiating all the ideas themselves. When the participants were divided into discussion-groups, each of a couple of dozen participants, according to the five main European languages, care was taken that each group should contain a good number of married laity, and that their views should be asked and honoured. This was no window-dressing exercise, for those who took part were struck by the seriousness with which their views were noted and discussed.

In all this it was clear that the Roman Catholic Church was taking its first, tentative and inexperienced steps in directions which were entirely familiar to the Churches of the Reformation and especially those of the Anglican Communion. In the Anglican Communion the exact polity varies from province to province, but the principle is well-established that the pattern is synodical, that is, discussion begins on the level of a synod, composed of three houses, those of laity, clergy and bishops, and the primate (presiding Bishop or Archbishop) comes into play only at the end of the process. In most provinces the presiding Bishop has only a limited power to block the decisions of the lower houses. For instance in one province the synod voted for women priests three times at three-yearly intervals. The presiding Bishop was able to veto this twice, but not a third time, thus being forced to allow the will of the Synod to pass. By contrast, the Roman Catholic pattern is basically primatial: the initiative comes from the top, and the teaching authority resides in the Bishops in communion with the Bishop of Rome. For Catholics, therefore, the process of consulting the laity and striving to listen to their opinions was a novelty. It was still only a matter of the Bishops listening to the laity – and not many of the laity, less than 15% of members of the Synod. In the matter of

²⁸ *Osservatore Romano*, 23.10.2015.

voting on the propositions the place of the laity was still more restricted: the only voting layperson was Herve Janson, the Superior General of the Little Brothers of Jesus, representing the Union of Superiors General! Are we still to expect developments?