

LISTENING BIBLICAL SPIRITUALITY



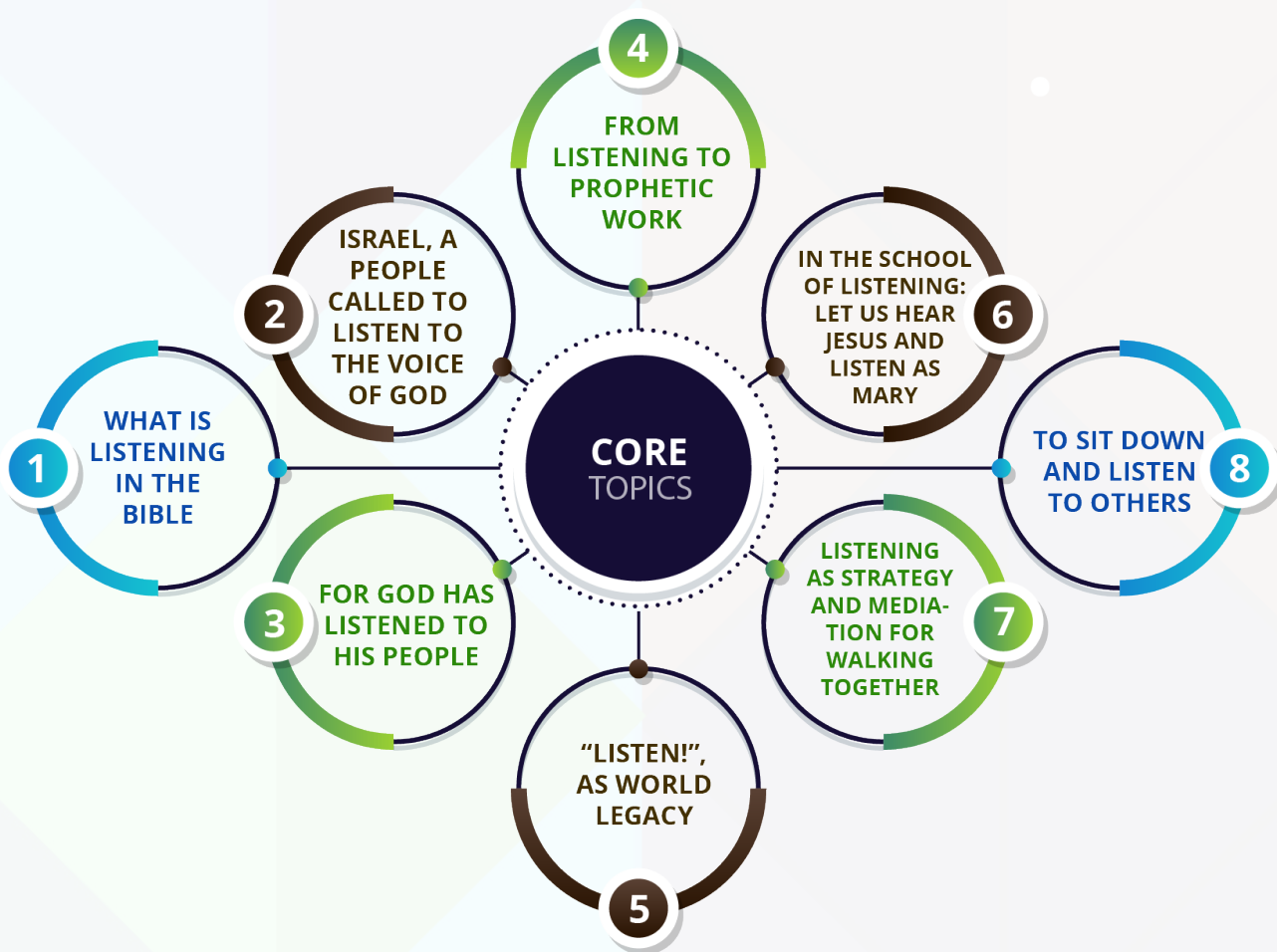
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present reflection is to identify and present the “listening” characteristic of the Holy Scripture, from which the Church Magisterium is nourished. At the same time, we will stress on strategies to highlight such attitude and virtue, as a true sign of the times, especially during this Latin American and Caribbean ecclesial/continental moment, where pastoral listening processes are needed to lay the foundation for the so call synodal theology-ecclesiology and spirituality... This document may serve as a resource for personal and community reflection.

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CORE TOPICS

I.- SOME BIBLE/THEOLOGICAL CRITERION:

WHAT IS LISTENING? LET US HEAR BOTH THE CRY OF THE EARTH AND THE CRY OF THE POOR (CF. LS 49)

The verb to “listen” comes from the Hebrew word *shama*, that can also be translated to “hear,” “obey,” with the intent of “putting attention,” “be aware,” “hear crucially,” “examine closely...” it appears 1,050 times in the Old Testament, a number indicating its importance. Numerous passages testify that the Word of God enters through the “ear:” *shama* Israel = “Hear, O Israel...” (Dt 6,4).¹ In this sense, the biblical revelation focuses, especially, in the word God conveys to man and woman, from whom He expects *openness of heart*.

When we open the Holy Scripture we find that the Word of God is “happening,” “in action,” “I.- operating. Since the first chapter of Genesis, the theological perspective of listening is highlighted. God speaks, and even “chaos” (Gn 1,1) obeys; going from “confusion” to “harmony”: And God said: “*let there be light, and there was light*” ... (1,3). The listening reaches a climax with a simple act of obedience to the authorized voice. In this creation dynamics, the essential point or radically ordinary, is found when the Father addresses the heavenly host of angels, or from the Catholic perspective, the other two persons of the Trinity, saying: “*Let us make humankind, in our image, according to our likeness*” (1,26). Thus, the Trinity itself becomes the paradigm or school of listening/obedience; virtues with which blessing flourishes (1,28).



With the creation of the human being and its particular identity, being of

¹ Cf. H. J. A. *Dicionário Teológico do Antigo Testamento*, Sao Paulo, Vida Nova, 2001, 1586.

GENESIS

“Trinitarian image and likeness,” to listen acquires new dimensions: he/she who listen can reply with his/her own words, freedom and autonomy, thought and creativity...; and in this sense, creating the art of conversation. Human conversation is born with the human being (Gn 2,3), with others (Gn 3,1-7; 16,1-2), with nature (*Psalms* 8), and with God (Gn 3,8-24).

In the story we also find the “strange word,” that which invades the creating Word, contradicting it, confusing it, creating suspicion and breaking the order and harmony much longed for: “...*For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil*” (Gn 3,5). Far from being naïve, this “word” encloses the firm intention of seducing, also through the ear, towards its own “ideological” understanding and logic horizon. And many times is presented in the midst of the assembly of the sons and daughters of God; arrives uninvited, and subtly, even discretely, seeking to wreak havoc (Cf. Jb 2,1).

However, in the contexts where “strange voices,” strive to dominate the space, the Word of God remains steady and solid, “powerful,” “piercing,” “deep” (Cf. Hb 4,12); it “teaches,” “corrects,” “instructs in justice” (Cf. 2Tm 3,16-17); it is “impeccable” (Cf. Sal 18,30), “rightful” (Cf. *Psalms* 33,4), “pure,” “purged,” “sincere” (Cf. *Psalms* 12, 7); “light to my path” (Cf. *Psalms* 119,105). The Lord never ceases nor gets tired of providing it, confident that He will be heard: “*O Israel, if you would but listen to me!*” (Cf. *Psalms* 81,8). The more the different voices arise, the more the demand to the community, for a discernment (Gn 3,8-13).

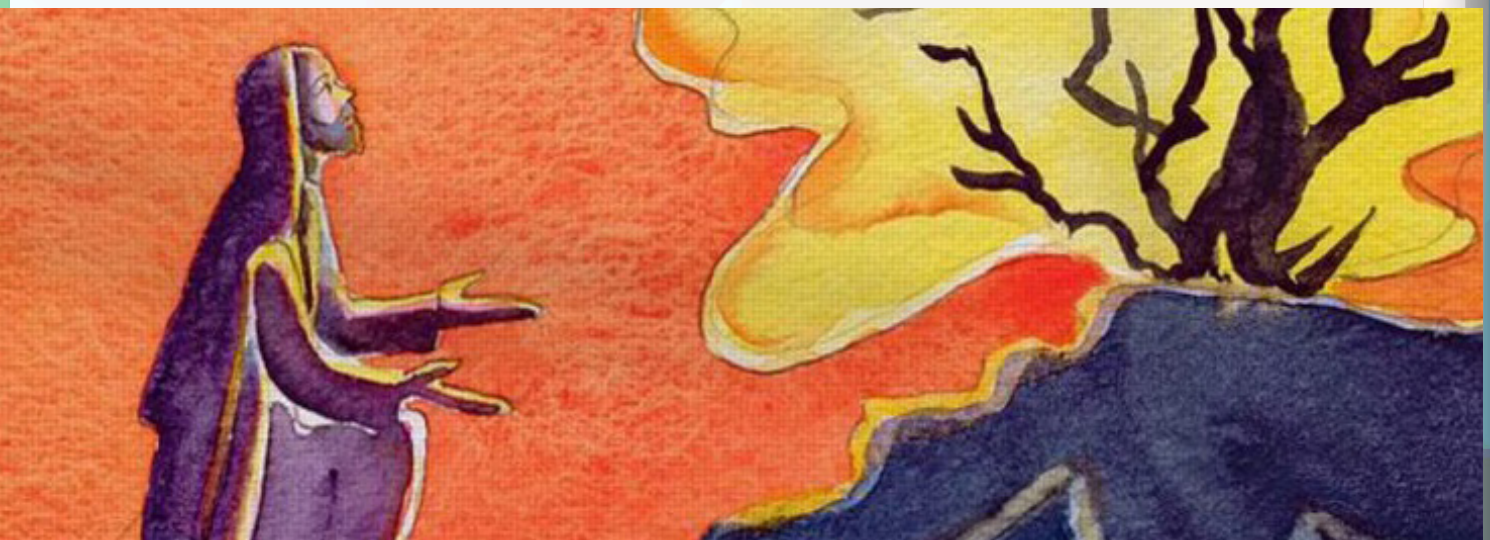
II.- ISRAEL, A PEOPLE CALLED TO LISTEN TO THE VOICE OF GOD

“GIVE EAR, O MY PEOPLE TO MY TEACHING; INCLINE YOUR EARS TO THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH” (PSALM 78,1).



It is expected that the characteristics of the Trinitarian conversation – pure, respectful, fruitful, holy (Cf. Gn 1,26)- mirror the conversation of the People of God. God wants to have a conversation with His People. Hence, divine teaching, as shown next, resorts to use methods or mediations to have a more effective communication: speaks “out of the fire” (Cf. Dt 4,12), in the “gentle breeze” (1Rev 19,3-15) ... Miriam attests to having heard him when she states: “*Has he not spoken through us also?*” (Ex 12,2). For such sacred listening, it is required to have a sincere attitude of prayer, openness and seclusion (Cf. Mq 7,7), with the intent of understanding what it is being communicated (Cf. Gn 11,7). The “no listening” and the “hardening of heart” are related (Ex 7,13). Not every member of the people is at the same theological maturity to listen to God without distractions and interference. The people, has even been berated for not having “ears to hear” (Dt 29,3).

HERE I'M



God, in his teaching/divine strategy had to choose concrete persons to institute, through the Word and listening, the guidelines needed for the development of the history of salvation. It enlightens the episode of Moses before the burning Bush: - *"Moses, Moses!"* And he said: *"Here I am"* (Ex 3,4). Intimacy grows at the same pace as dignity with which the entrusted message is conveyed; this is proved with the tent of meeting, where God speaks to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend (Ex 33,7-11). Among crisis and hope, God's spokesperson gained authority in the midst of his people, therefore he is asked *"You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die."* (Ex 20,19).

III.- ...FOR GOD HAS LISTENED TO HIS PEOPLE

“A MERE GLANCE AT THE SCRIPTURES IS ENOUGH TO MAKE US SEE HOW OUR



GRACIOUS FATHER WANTS TO HEAR THE CRY OF THE POOR” (EX 3,7-8; EG 187).

In Exodus 3,7-8 is clear that the spiritual process of “listening” goes in hand with the “seeing,” “know,” “lower” to “uplift.” It means that the biblical listening has a firm purpose. God listens and it is not indifferent. And when he hears, what does he hear? - “... *the cry of the people before its oppressors*” (v.7). This cry, in the ears of God, comes in form of a prayer. It means that every listening process has to consider the places where these cries and laments are produced; having a contemplative attitude for these, being the eyes and ears of God inclined with mercy.

The awareness that God listens is kept in the memory of the faithful people, who begs for their prayer to be heard: “*he has heard my voice and supplications,*” “*he inclined his ear to me*” (Cf. Psalm 116,1-2). He is called upon in distress (Cf. Psalm 18,6), his ears are open to their cries (Cf. Psalm 34,15). When God does not answer, he is reminded of the wait, “*Lord, when will you answer?*”. (Cf. Psalm 13,1-6; 5,3). A fruitful answer cannot be given without previous respectful listening.

The Word directed at God is also Word of God, confirming the dialogical nature of the entire revelation, and the total existence of the human being turns into a conversation with God who speaks and listens, who calls upon and moves our life. (Cf. VD 24).

IV.- FROM LISTENING TO PROPHETIC WORK

“WHEN WE LISTEN TO THE DIVINE WORD, THE HEART IS BURNING BECAUSE HE EXPLAINS AND PROCLAIMS IT” (DA).

Nabi “prophet”, and *nabiah* “prophetess,” make the experience of the listening of the Word of God, a vocation. without this experience nothing can be conveyed. One cannot speak about God before having spoken to Him first. For example, Samuel, starts in this listening dimension after being led to tune the ear and humbly say: *“Speak, for your servant is listening”* (1Sam 3,10). From that moment on, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground (Cf. 1 Sam 3,19). The fact that prophets and prophetess are his “spokespersons,” means that what was communicated comes from the divine.

It is God who opens the ears and give grace to listen to the Word with a



disciple attitude, without being rebellious nor turning backwards (Cf. Is 50,4ss). There are no comforting words, no missionary dynamism, without the experience of a “*discipular place*,” where the Word settles in the heart and burns it. From this blazing fire emerges the prophecy: “... The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy” (Am 3,8). *The Holy Spirit strengthens the identity of disciples, and awakens in them the firm intention of boldly proclaiming to others what they have heard and lived* (Cf. AD 251).

THE PROPHETIC VOICE EMERGES WITH THE STRENGTH OF THE WORD

The prophetic voice emerges with the strength of the Word. So strong, that sometimes, the earth itself cannot endure it (Cf. Am 7,10-17): gives names, places in reality, collects the cries of the people and creation, identifies where they come from and why. When it becomes the master of dignity, it is despised, dismissed and avoided: *"Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah... Com, let us bring charges against him, and let us not heed any of his words"* (Jr 18,18). In spite of everything, such voice does not tremble. It is mystic but it shaper than any two-edged sword because it is "living and active," piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Cf. Hb 4,12).

Prophets and prophetess confirm in the midst of the people, the presence of those of deaf ears, who do not want to listen and refuse the Word of God (Cf. Jr 11,10-11; Is 29,18), "the ears of the deaf unstopped" (Cf. Is 35,5), called "uncircumcised" (Cf. Jr 6,10). Stubbornness of the heart and closed ears are related (Cf. Jr 9,25). In this sense, Aparecida confirms: *"Conversion" is the initial response of those who have listened to the Lord in wonder* (AP 278).



V.- “LISTEN!”, IT IS THE ADVICE OF THE SAPIENTIAL COMMUNITY, AS WORLD LEGACY

“WHENEVER OUR INTERIOR LIFE BECOMES CAUGHT UP IN ITS OWN INTERESTS AND CONCERNS, THERE IS NO LONGER ROOM FOR OTHERS, NO PLACE FOR THE POOR. GOD’S VOICE IS NO LONGER HEARD ...” (EG 2).

“Listening” is a fundamental calling in the world of wisdom (Cf. Pr 1,8). The opposite is recklessness and stubbornness (Cf. Sal 92,6). The ears open to the voice of God are the first step in the large spiritual-sapiential ladder. As confirmed by numerous advice:

- » *“Be quick to hear but deliberate in answering” (Si 5,11),*
- » *“If you love to listen you will gain knowledge, and if you pay attention you will become wise” (6,33),*
- » *“Some people keep silent because they have nothing to say, while others keep silent because they know when to speak” (20,6),*
- » *“There is a time for everything... a time to keep silent and a time to speak” (Ec 3,7),*
- » *“Let me have silence, and I will speak” (Jb 13,13)...*

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. (Cf. EG 171).

“BE QUICK TO HEAR BUT DELIBERATE IN ANSWERING”

VI.- IN THE SCHOOL OF LISTENING: LET US HEAR JESUS AND LET US LISTEN AS MARY

“AS CHILDREN OBEDIENT TO THE FATHER’S VOICE, WE WANT TO LISTEN TO JESUS BECAUSE HE IS THE ONLY MASTER”².

Before being heard, Jesus was a contemplative listener. The first He listens to is the Father. Solitude, silence and prayer are the scene embellishing the atmosphere of such dialogical encounter; mainly, before making any decisions or when needed to respond to significant issues. Hence, He is identified:

- » In the morning, while it was still very dark, in a deserted place Mk 1,35),
- » At the top of a mountain (Mt 14,23),
- » In the dessert (Lk 4,1-2),
- » On the ground (Mt 26,39) ...

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Cf. Mt 23,8; Lk 9, 35; AD 103; EG 66; AD 103.



Jesus also listened to the neighbor: ill (Cf. Lk 18,41), women (Cf. Mt 15,28), poor (Cf. Mt 9,36), inners (Cf. Lk 3,112; 6,8), scribes and Pharisees (Cf. Mt 12,38-42), elder (Cf. Lk 7,4-6), children (Cf. Mc 10,14), military (Cf. Mt 8,5), multitudes (Cf. Lk 5,1), etc. We can conclude that a good listener cannot improvise. What we allow God to make of us, in prayer, will be decisive for our interpersonal relations and coexistence.



Basically, Jesus listens to the Father, and the Father listens to Jesus; the Holy Spirit listens to the conversation between the Father and the Son (Jn 17,11ss). ***“People feel the contagious power of the Spirit and the Word and are led to listen to Jesus Christ”*** (AD 279).

Matthew 5 present to us the image of Jesus in the mountain, being listened by the multitude. From Him, rivers of wisdom spring; he begins with the blessings, a project of attitudes giving way to a life in perfection, in likeness of the Father. Listening to Jesus is the first step to achieve holiness. To listen to Him, is to start being Christian. *“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”* (DCE 1). Only by listening to Jesus, our own words will make sense and it will be worth to express them; since they will spread the same perfume of Christ, their source.

... Let us listen once more to Jesus, with all the love and respect that the Master deserves. Let us allow his words to unsettle us, to challenge us and to demand a real change in the way we live. Otherwise, holiness will remain no more than an empty word. (Cf. GE 66).

He says to us: *“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you, and eat with you, and you with me”* (Rev 3,20).

Let us listen like Mary, the listener of the Word, who learned to hear:

- ✓ **She listens to the angel of God:** *"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you..."* (Lk 1,28).
- ✓ **She listens to Elizabeth:** *"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb"* (Lk 1,42).
- ✓ **She listens to Simeon:** *"And a sword will pierce your own soul too!"* (Lk 2,35).
- ✓ **She listens to Joseph:** *"Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother y night, and went to Egypt"* (Mt 2,14).
- ✓ **She listens to Jesus:** *"For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother"* (Mt 12,46-50).
- ✓ **And, from then on,** Mary invites others to listen to Him closely, with the intention of doing as He says (Cf. Jn 2,5). The invitation of the mother has a theological foundation: *"This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to Him"* (Mk 9,7).

The distinctive feature of the Marian listening is to "keep all this things reflecting on them in the heart", to meditate and savor them (Cf. Lk 2,19); teaches us the primacy of listening to the Word in the life of the disciple and missionary (Cf. AD 271).

Mary is the image of the Church in attentive hearing of the word of God, which took flesh in her. Mary also symbolizes openness to God and others; an active listening which interiorizes and assimilates, one in which the word becomes a way of life (Cf. VD 27). She is the embodiment of wisdom. Mary, grant us perfection in listening!

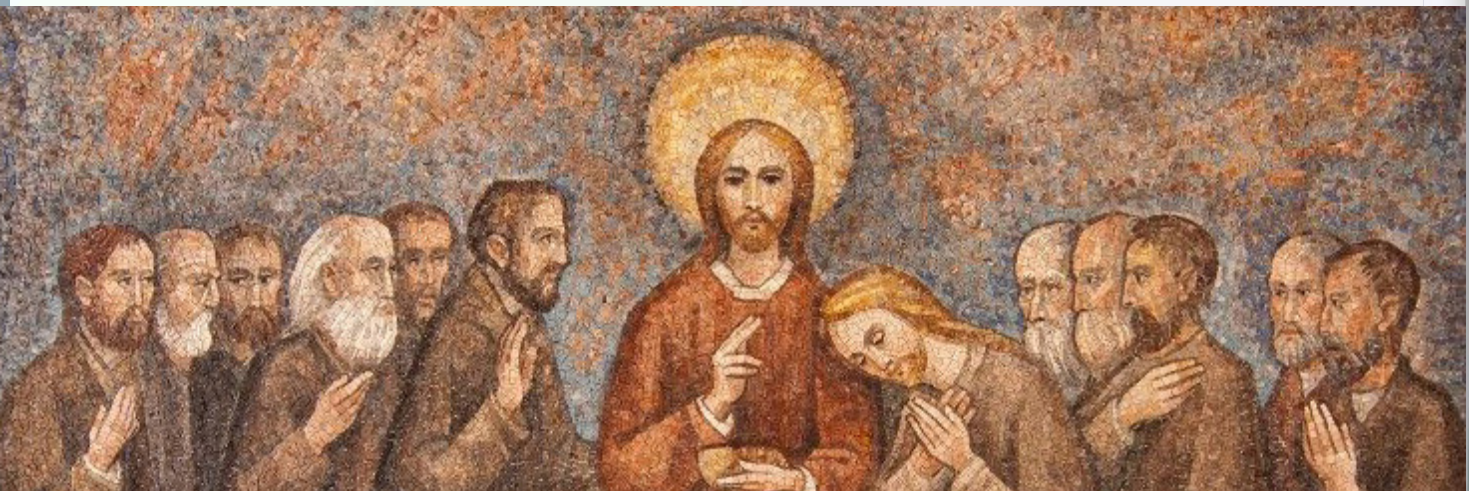
**MARY, GRANT US PERFECTION
IN LISTENING!**

VII.- APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY: LISTENING AS STRATEGY AND MEDIATION FOR WALKING TOGETHER

“ONLY IF WE ARE PREPARED TO LISTEN, DO WE HAVE THE FREEDOM TO SET ASIDE OUR OWN PARTIAL OR INSUFFICIENT IDEAS, OUR USUAL HABITS AND WAYS OF SEEING THINGS” (GE 172.)

The scenario of the first Christian communities is to face new and difficult challenges to spread and enculturate the Gospel in complex realities in the Greco-Roman world. An important reference is the first Council at Jerusalem. How they reached a decision after a heated argument on “*whether the Gentiles, turning to God, needed to be circumcised or not*” (Cf. Acts 15):

- » Met together to consider this matter, since they had different views (v.6).
- » They listened to the sect of the Pharisees (v.5).
- » They listened to Peter (v.8-11).
- » They listened to a Barnabas and Paul (v.12).
- » They listened to James (v.12-21).



After an entire listening process, they reach a decision:

“... for it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials ...” (v.29).

One of the apostolic letters advise, with reason: *“let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger (James 1,19).*

In the current setting of reflection of the Church and from the previous proposal, the listening process is the true and sound pillar of synodal spirituality. Which will not be possible if we do not walk together towards Christ, listening to each other; and, with Him and in Him, with a permanent and decisive attitude of conversion. An internal renewal is much needed, cultivated day by day, and guarded by the grace of the Holy Spirit, in the garden of our hearts. This willingness must come from the commitment of belonging to the Church, from our ecclesial identity; not only feeling we are part of the Church, but really *“being the Church.”* This *“being the Church”* implies, as Saint Arnulfo Romero said in one occasion *“feel with the Church.”* “The Church’s pastoral activity needs to bring out clearly how God listens to our need and our plea for help” (VD 23).

The starting point of every authentic conversion is to recover the dream in which God has created us: to his image and likeness (Gn 1,26). And we are called to listen to the creating Word in every chaotic situation we are in. *“The Church has no reason to offer a definitive opinion; she knows that honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views”* and, at the end, reach a decision, according to the Spirit (LS 61).

**“THE CHURCH’S PASTORAL ACTIVITY NEEDS TO
BRING OUT CLEARLY HOW GOD LISTENS TO OUR
NEED AND OUR PLEA FOR HELP”**

VIII. TO SIT DOWN AND LISTEN TO OTHERS (CF. FT 48)

“APPROACHING, SPEAKING, LISTENING, LOOKING AT, COMING TO KNOW AND UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER, AND TO FIND COMMON GROUND: ALL THESE THINGS ARE SUMMED UP IN THE ONE WORD “DIALOGUE”” (FT 198).

The presidency of the Latin American Episcopate Council has delayed the listening period towards the Ecclesial Assembly until August 30, 2021.³ The decision awakens hope towards a new way of being Church, from participation processes. It is about a *“community path for listening and response”* (EG 166), which is complemented with the Aparecida Document stating: *Listen closely to the poor of the Continent* (Cf. AP 379).

To listen to one another is a pastoral priority, as silence and careful listening disappear, replaced by a frenzy of texting, this basic structure of sage human communication is at risk (Cf. FT 49). *“It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit”*⁴.

³ Latin American Episcopate Council; memo: May 28, 2021.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Commemorative Ceremony of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, Saturday October 17, 2015.

TO LISTEN IS TO HAVE A “HUMAN ENCOUNTER”

To listen is to have a “human encounter”, “paradigmatic of the welcoming attitude”, shown by those who transcend narcissism and accept others, caring for them and welcoming them into their lives; overcoming deafness and halfway interruptions of a conversation (Cf. FT 48). There are no limits for the apostolic endeavor open to “listen attentively” to the Word God has destined in the midst of his people (Cf. Acts 16,14). This is also the core message of Fratelli Tutti: “In the name of human fraternity, that embraces all human beings, unites them and renders them equal; in the name of this fraternity torn apart by policies of extremism and division, by systems of unrestrained profit or by hateful ideological tendencies that manipulate the actions and the future of men and women; in the name of freedom, that God has given to all human beings, creating them free and setting them apart by this gift; in the name of justice and mercy, the foundations of prosperity and the cornerstone of faith; in the name of all persons of goodwill present in every part of the world; in the name of God and of everything stated thus far, [we] declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard» (N. 285).

