

## Listening Practices in a Synodal Church: Interim Reflections from a Symposium in Rome

Anna Rowlands

**Abstract:** Listening is at the heart of Pope Francis’s synodality project. Where does scholarship addressing themes of listening, encounter, and lived experience of Catholicism sit within this project as both a subject addressed by synodality and critical agent of it? This special issue publishes the outcomes of an eighteen-month project, commissioned by members of the Synod’s methodology commission, undertaken independently under university research auspices. The project culminated in a symposium in Rome in March 2023. The project aimed to model a form of academic service to the listening phase of the Synod, rooted in a collaboration between scholars and synodal practitioners; that is, to provide a small-scale contribution of what we have outlined above as somewhat missing in the process so far. This introduction provides background context on the research question and an overview of the articles as well as reflection on the implications of the synodal process for moral theology.

WHEN POPE FRANCIS ANNOUNCED IN MARCH 2020<sup>1</sup> that he was amending the usual formula for the convocation of a Synod of Bishops and convoking the whole Catholic world in a now nearly four-year synodal process, he placed the practice of listening at its heart. The first phase of the synodal process would be devoted solely to an exercise of deep ecclesial listening, with a preference for listening to those living along the various social and ecclesial margins. For some, this was a welcome re-orientation of reform and renewal towards the grassroots, the regions and global peripheries, and the embrace of voices and subjects often neglected in official ecclesial discernment. For others, it was a bewildering notion that risked introducing confusion, seemingly

---

<sup>1</sup> See Francis, “Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome,” September 18, 2021, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html).

placing the primary teaching function of the church in suspended animation, perhaps watering down the proclamatory task of mission. As one bishop said to a synodal meeting during the listening phase, manifesting a genuine anxiety he felt, “Yes, but, I’m a bishop, much of what I hear is in error. When can I *teach* people what is right? That’s my role,” revealing as much about perceptions of episcopacy as the challenges of synodal listening. Others still were broadly welcoming but worried that the listening task seemed vague, too broad, or that the Synod of Bishops was simply the wrong vehicle for such work.

The contemporary institution of the Synod of Bishops was first mooted at the time of the Second Vatican Council and later adopted by Paul VI as a means to deepen episcopal collegiality and enable an ongoing consultative gathering of bishops to aid the ministry of the Bishop of Rome.<sup>2</sup> Francis has made regular—although not unprecedented (see Pope John II)—use of the synod, in its ordinary, extraordinary, and special forms. John Paul II extensively used special synods focused on specific geographical contexts, convoking 16 synods across the three forms in his twenty-six-year papacy. Francis has called five synods in his ten years of papacy. What is novel about Francis’s use of this form is his desire to expand the membership and function of the synod to deepen a synodal renewal of the whole church, viewing growth in synodality as the missionary calling of the church in this generation. He has become convinced, partly based on his experience in Latin America, renewed during the Synod on the Pan-Amazon Region, that the dialogical format of the synod enables a spiritual practice that facilitates encounter, mutual learning, and inspiration guided by the Spirit that can break the church out of a variety of forms of stasis, division, and disagreement. He believes such a practice is a necessary transcendent sign to a world locked in the grip of the same dynamics. In the set of pandemic-era interviews that compose *Let Us Dream*, Francis explains that in synodal listening and speaking, there is the possibility of a moment of “overflow,” closer to the emergence of musical harmony or polyphony than cognitive agreement or consensus, a transcendent practice that cannot be rendered in terms of mere agreement or disagreement and which is a sign for our age.<sup>3</sup> For Francis, synodality is proposed as an integral *moral*, social, and ecclesial practice.

We should be clear, then, that in the realm of academic study, critical attention to this call to synodality and listening as a constitutive

---

<sup>2</sup> Holy See Press Office, “Synod of bishops: General Information on the Synod,” [www.vatican.va/news\\_services/press/documentazione/documents/sinodo/sinodo\\_documentazione-generale\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/documentazione/documents/sinodo/sinodo_documentazione-generale_en.html).

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*, ed. Austen Ivereigh (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

part of the character of a synodal church cannot be left as a matter of interest for hardcore ecclesialogists alone. Indeed, the very call for synodal renewal includes a call for the renewal of theology as an ecclesial practice and promotes the transgression of overly fixed walls between disciplines of study, encouraging dialogue and collaboration. In this sense, scholars are themselves *subjects* of synodal discussion and addressed by the synod fathers and mothers as ecclesial *agents*, called into a more active collaboration in a field of common, if differentiated, labor.

This attention to the role and service of theology relates to a wider difficulty pinpointed by the synodal process but not yet discussed as self-reflexively as it ought to be by synod members or theologians. Whilst there have been creative methods for engaging bishops in forms of listening and discernment and drawing expanded lay membership into formal participation, many have perceived a lack of such creativity in integrating theologians and theology successfully into the process. The place of theology and the role of those who study, teach, and research in service of synodal renewal are elements that have not been well-calibrated thus far. This continued difficulty expresses itself in a number of ways and has various causes, whose more comprehensive mapping lies beyond the task of this editorial introduction. However, it is perhaps important to note in light of the project that has led to this special issue, that a rich and creative contribution of theologians and other scholars of Catholicism from other disciplines to the process has not been aided by either the tendency of some ecclesialogists to dismiss the listening phase as “mere sociology,” nor the failure of the synodal process to draw formally on the expertise of those who study Catholicism from the vantage point of the social sciences, whose methods—despite the cries of mere sociology—have ironically been almost entirely undeployed. If synodality is to become the feature of the Catholic Church in this generation in the way the Pope hopes, the work to engage theology in service of, and as a critical companion to, that task remains only very partially begun.

To state the matter more positively, the ambition and character of the synod is a matter that should interest moral theologians deeply. Certainly, many of the issues raised in the grassroots synodal reports were clearly moral-theological in character. Most obviously, a concern for renewed pastoral and theological attention to questions of sexuality, the body, and gender relations was universally raised across global regions. It is worth noting that a careful reading of the reports sent by the Episcopal Conferences and other groupings in 2022 often asked for better guidance and quality reflection on moral questions, teaching that engaged more adequately the pastoral realities of the church at the local level. Whilst media headlines wanted to press

questions of grassroots “demands” for changes in teaching, beneath the headlines were nuanced calls for better quality moral theological reflection that engages, informs, and listens to the exercise of conscience and practice of discernment at the grassroots. Those requests should interest moral theologians greatly. It also seems that the areas where the synod found most difficulty articulating either the grounds for convergence or divergences (the language that shaped the Synthesis Report)<sup>4</sup> concerned moral questions. The Synthesis Report of 2023 is able to frame the agreements and disagreements over questions of women’s role and status, but lacks similar framing on other moral matters raised in the local reports and discussed in the small groups of the Synod Assembly, a matter that, despite the fears of some, is less likely to be a deliberate suppression and more a lack of capacity to find shared language to frame the debate in terms that those who disagree can recognise, accept, and vote on. The *lack* in the report exposes an important and serious site of moral theological work on questions of theological anthropology, gender, and sexuality for those interested in and committed to ecclesial service. Read carefully, the report itself calls for this work without quite spelling out why it is so sorely needed.

A different kind of challenge for moral theologians is also raised in the views expressed in the local reports: many laity and clergy feel they lack confidence and literacy in areas of social teaching and perceive a “professionalisation” of ethical questions, in particular, around economy, ecology, political community, dignity, and rights. These are seen as topics to be addressed by bishops, academics, and public figures, with social teaching pitched towards their formation. The importance of moral questions as part of ecumenical and interfaith dialogues was also noted as a priority emerging from the local churches not yet matched in official dialogues or documents.

However, we repeat previous mistakes if we reduce moral theology in the context of the synod to ethical issues alone. The synod is throwing up wider questions of how moral theology is at stake and can serve ecclesial renewal. The relationship between theologians and bishops is revealed as rather distant, if not in many instances and contexts quite broken (with notable positive exceptions); the relationship between the formulation of questions at the grassroots and the dominant questions pursued within academic study is revealed as lacking mediation; the relationship between the spiritual practices of the church and the methods of academic inquiry is revealed as at times

---

<sup>4</sup> XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session (4–29 October 2023), “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in Mission,” [www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf](http://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf).

non-existent. Currently, it is a significant limitation of the process that canon lawyers, ecclesiologists, and systematicians have been numerous amongst the synodal “experts,” and moral theologians present mainly as small group facilitators.

There are, of course, many notable examples where none of this applies, and many moral theologians are at the forefront of impressive practices of dialogical research, deep listening, and ecclesial service. They are also at the forefront of addressing ethical and moral issues in the secular world from a theological point of view and through creative interfaith exchange the church has been woefully slow to engage in, learn from, or celebrate. Nonetheless, the wider picture still requires sober attention and should prompt reflection and discussion. Above all, the synodal process invites questions about the character of moral theology as service, and the extent to which moral theology is integrated—that is, open to dialogue with the social sciences, willing to engage the pastoral life of the local church, interested in the historical (and contemporary) methods of discernment in the various spiritual traditions of the church, and willing to grapple with ecclesial questions of power, trust, authority, and responsibility.<sup>5</sup> We should note that most of the core questions emerging at the tail end of the synodal process have a simultaneously moral and ecclesiological character: power, trust, authority, co-responsibility, and accountability. At present, there is little recognition at an official level that these questions are inherently moral matters.

This brings us to the articles collected in this volume. These articles emerge from an eighteen-month project, commissioned by members of the synod’s methodology commission but undertaken independently under university research auspices. The project culminated in the symposium, “Listening Practices in Global Catholicism,” held at Angelicum University, Rome, on March 25–27, 2024, jointly organized by the Centre for Catholic Studies (CCS), the Pontifical University of St. Thomas (Angelicum), and Royal Holloway College University of London, in partnership with the Synod on Synodality Listening Project Steering Committee.

The first two years of grassroots listening produced not only a series of official documents but also questions that exceeded the capacity of the formal synodal process to address. These included wider reflections on how listening forms part of theological praxis, how the social sciences can assist ecclesial listening processes and a fuller expression of synodality in the church. They also respond to the repeated insight that local churches found it especially hard to meet the request that they listen with priority to their peripheries. All reports

---

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., M. Therese Lysaught, “*Ad (Synodalem) Theologiam (Moralem) Promovendam*,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 1 (2024): 1–14, doi.org/10.55476/001c.92079.

suggested this had been more challenging than expected. We also commissioned articles reflecting learning from other non-synodal ecclesial listening processes. In this sense, the articles gathered here deal with some of the excess the synod cannot entirely contain, which is fertile ground moral theologians, amongst others, can engage. We invited scholars who have mainly not been part of the official process to offer their expertise and be in dialogue with pastoral practitioners who have been and remain at the heart of facilitating the synodal process of the last four years. For this reason, this volume contains an initial section of more conventionally academic articles, followed by a roundtable of shorter more practice-based articles.

A series of connected themes emerge through the articles published here. The most sustained common insight is that the synodal ambitions to become a listening church expressed by Pope Francis cannot be realised without renewed commitment to building and sustaining authentic pastoral relationships. A disposition towards genuine listening, in which attention is gifted to the other, is the pre-condition of possibility for such relationships. The articles note that the current crisis of trust and authority in the church creates a serious barrier to the practice of this otherwise obvious insight. This barrier paradoxically makes its practice all the more necessary. As Josh Packard and Megan Bissell note succinctly in their roundtable contribution, the church continues to use “high trust tools in a low trust world.”<sup>6</sup> It appears not yet cognisant of what has happened culturally to our trust relationships. Using the example of their research with young people, they note that authentic deep relationships, which earn trust through relational ministry that starts with listening, are the clear condition of many for a willingness to engage or re-engage with the church. Writing on the experience of synodality in Asia over the last three years, Christina Kheng notes that the condition for overcoming cultural barriers to open listening lies in the willingness to practice radical welcome “in word and deed,” a commitment to active relationship-building focused on practices of communion alongside an openness to leverage current structures and create new ones to facilitate this process. At the heart of this ethic is a commitment to forms of encounter created through listening that create, Kheng writes, “an authentic viewpoint” which is “something emergent rather than

---

<sup>6</sup> Josh Packard and Megan Bissell, “Research Backed Practices to Engage Youth in a Vibrant Catholic Church: The Case for Implementing Sacred Listening Practices,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): 252–270.

pre-existent, ripening through a process of mutual encounter and communal conversion.”<sup>7</sup>

This same theme of rooting listening in authentic pastoral relationships emerges in the articles that focus on the possibilities and challenges of listening at the social peripheries or margins. We noted above that one of the consistent reflections of local communities present in the episcopal conference reports was that listening to persons who live their lives along or within various social peripheries proved far more challenging than they expected, something at once humbling, concerning, and thought-provoking. Drawing on their own research, the contributors to this volume note that such listening is most fruitful and least instrumentalist when it happens from within established, dignified, and sustained social relationships. Richard Wood draws on his own research across different kinds of social movements and organisations to suggest that this has to be a meaningful listening in solidarity in which the moral and social dimensions of relationships are part of the picture.<sup>8</sup> Without commitment to listening in solidarity there is no depth of encounter to structure the act of “listening” to those at the peripheries. He draws on the theology of Pope Francis on “encounter” and “social friendship” to suggest that the very idea of synodality and synodal listening is a moral practice: encounter opens us to the acknowledgement of difference and a necessary tarrying with conflict; it also requires an account of power and its use (and misuse). In his article on Indigenous peoples and the listening church, Julian Paparella talks about the theological disposition that accompanies Wood’s more sociological insights.<sup>9</sup> Encounter, which builds and receives the life of communion, is the moral goal of listening to the peripheries. In and through encounters with neighbors, Christ’s own presence is manifested. In the practice of listening, this deeper and necessary encounter becomes possible. Correspondingly, without such encounters, synodal renewal remains limited. Although not a point he makes directly, there are interesting parallels in Peter McGregor’s article and his treatment of the question of looking and not merely aurally listening for the signs of the Spirit at work, *seeing* through encounter as well as *hearing* what God is doing in history—a New Testament emphasis he finds lacking

---

<sup>7</sup> Christina Kheng, “Listening a Synodal Church into Being: Learning Points from the Methodology of the Synod 2021–2024 and the Asian Experience,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): 108–136.

<sup>8</sup> Richard L. Wood, “Listening across the Américas: Base Ecclesial Communities and Relational Organizing as Listening Practices for a Synodal Church,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): 10–35.

<sup>9</sup> Julian Paparella, “Doing Theology by Listening to Marginalized Voices? Methodological Elements from Encountering Indigenous Families in a Northern Canadian Community,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): 83–107.

in the current synodal formulation.<sup>10</sup> Clare Watkins explores the limitations of the “Conversation in the Spirit” method formalised by the Synod for conversations at the social margins, suggesting the need for reclaiming ordinary conversation in its messy interruptive forms.<sup>11</sup>

A second important connecting theme across these articles concerns the disposition of the researcher and scholar and the place of their craft and vocation in a synodal church. Charles Mercier offers a beautiful and vivid reflection on conducting empirical research on World Youth Day as a social scientist and historian and the relationship between his formation as scholar and Christian, and capacity to offer a service to a church able to receive and recognise (not exactly a plot spoiler, but that last part proves the more challenging).<sup>12</sup> In several articles there is a rather nice interplay between the question of formation through research, especially but not only empirical research which learns about the faith of others, and the creation of information or knowledge that might aid the church in its own formation and understanding.

A key—and perhaps surprising—connecting theme emerging during this synodal process and across the articles is the question of the renewal of models of leadership in the church, including attention to the ministry of the bishop in a synodal church. Ignace Maduku writes of the example of the so-called “listening bishop” Cardinal Malula in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the late 1970s, and explores the need for renewal in the African Church now, more urban and growing in many contexts, in a model of episcopal leadership oriented towards listening in order to foster a “*consensus ecclesiae*.”<sup>13</sup> Wood’s exploration of models of community organising and base ecclesial communities considers briefly the possibility of a model of episcopal decision-making expressive of a genuinely “participative hierarchy.”<sup>14</sup> Hannah Vaughan-Spruce’s contribution to the round-table also addresses the tensive but potentially fruitful relationship

---

<sup>10</sup> Peter J. McGregor, “More Than Listening is Needed for Synodality: Observations Based on the Australian Plenary Council and the Church in the New Testament,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): 137–159.

<sup>11</sup> Clare Watkins, “Beyond Synodal Listening: Theological Action Research and Cultures of Conversation,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): 36–57.


<sup>12</sup> Charles Mercier, “Academic Listening Practices and Synodality: Reflections from a Study of World Youth Days,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): 179–194.

<sup>13</sup> Ignace Ndongala Maduku, “Joseph-Albert Cardinal Malula and the ‘Listening Bishop’: An Institution to (Re)Discover,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): 160–178.

<sup>14</sup> Wood, “Listening across the Américas,” 11.



between listening and leadership for intentional change in parishes.<sup>15</sup> Alana Harris's roundtable contribution, which considers a movement that aims to address sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, explores the possible ways leaders can both emerge from within the community of survivors to create forms of political-ecclesial action, liturgy, and public art and protest and draw forth the leadership of bishops as listening leaders.<sup>16</sup>

We hope the reader will discover other overlapping themes and connections as they read these articles. Their single, common interest has been to explore a little more the terrain of listening in the church of today as a moral, ecclesial, and scholarly practice. 

**Anna Rowlands, PhD**, is the St. Hilda Professor of Catholic Social Thought and Practice at Durham University. She is the founding chair of the UK Centre for Catholic Social Thought and Practice. She is co-editor of the *T&T Clark Reader in Political Theology* (Bloomsbury, 2021), author of *Towards a Politics of Communion* (Bloomsbury, 2021), and co-editor of the *Handbook on Religion and Contemporary Migration* (Oxford University Press, 2024). She is an appointed expert member of the Synod on Synodality and was the project PI for the Listening Practices in Global Catholicism Project (2022–2024).

---

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Vaughan-Spruce, "Two 'Fires' of Leadership: Is It Possible to Listen and Lead Parish Cultural Change?," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): 195–205.

<sup>16</sup> Alana Harris, "Listening in Stereo and Communicating in Semaphore: Child Sexual Abuse Survivor-led Strategies for Culture Change in the Catholic Church," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, Special Issue 2 (2024): 217–238.