



LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE: WHY, WHAT, AND HOW? A SCIENTIFIC, PASTORAL, AND SPIRITUAL BASIS.

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To cite this article: Kunnumpurath, Anthony. (2024). "Listening to Young People: Why, What, and How? A Scientific, Pastoral, and Spiritual Basis." *PAROC Explorations* Vol. 2, No. 1 (January – June): 3-16.

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Published by **PAROC Research Institute**



Published online: **15 June 2024**



Vol. 2 No. 1



Theme of the Issue:
**Towards a Path of Growth and Maturity:
Addressing Youth Issues**

LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE: WHY, WHAT, AND HOW? A SCIENTIFIC, PASTORAL, AND SPIRITUAL BASIS.

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ABSTRACT

Listening has been an essential theme in the Church for the past many years. In today's world, where young people are confronted with unique and often daunting adversities, our efforts to accompany and journey with them is even more crucial. We propose listening as a powerful tool to aid young people in navigating their lives, to accompany them, and to allow them to encounter Christ. This paper delves into the basis of listening - the why, what, and how. Understanding the context of the world today and young people today is crucial to accompanying, journeying with, and listening to young people. To elucidate the why, the what, and the how of listening, this paper draws from the wisdom of the Church through some of her leaders while using empirical data and the sciences to bring about pragmatic viewpoints regarding listening. The paper aims to unite faith and science, a method already familiar within the Church. While the paper uses an intellectual framework, its goal is to help all readers grasp the beauty of listening and its relevance to young people in the world today. The paper intends for all who read it to recognize the relevance of listening so that they may go out into the world and be authentic listeners to young people, thereby bringing the joy of the gospel to them through listening. The findings of this paper are not just for academic discussion, but they are a guide for action, providing practical steps and encouraging readers to listen and accompany young people in their lives authentically.

KEYWORDS: Listening, Young people, Gen-Z, Evangelization.

INTRODUCTION

From the Holy Father to the Synod on Synodality, listening has been emphasized over the past years by the Church. In an interview with CBS News on 19th May 2024, Pope Francis, on inquiring the interviewer about her teenage children, said, “How beautiful. We need to walk beside our teenage kids. We have to be there for them and guide them with intelligence, with love. We have to listen to them. Listening to them is very important” (Francis 2024). Why has the Church placed such a significant emphasis on listening? What makes listening important for young people today? This paper helps us answer these questions while identifying some critical insights that make listening relevant for young people today. The paper wishes to provide thoughts, reflections, and a basis for why and how we listen using empirical data and sciences.

Young people face unique challenges in the world today. Understanding their unique situation, particularly Generation Z, can help us accompany and journey with them. For our research on young people and the purpose of this paper, we have utilized the United Nations' definition of youth as a person between the ages of 15 and 24 (United Nations Secretary General 1981). Our current generation of young people or youth is called Generation Z or Gen Z. For our research and this paper, we have categorized Gen Z as those born after 1997 (as is commonly used in research) (Dimock 2019). Although the researchers and most young people surveyed were from the United States, we believe some characteristics mentioned in this paper can be applied to youth worldwide. However, the author also recognizes that each situation presents its own unique pastoral challenges. Therefore, understanding the context of young people in each situation must be considered when listening to them. This paper intends to give insights into one-on-one listening, that is, an individual listening to a young person. There are different contexts of listening, such as group listening, classroom listening, and so on. This paper does not consider the elements of those types of listening; instead, it focuses only on individual listening.

1. UNDERSTANDING GEN-Z IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WORLD TODAY

1.1 The Epidemic of Loneliness

The Surgeon General of the United States of America, Dr. Vivek Murthy, published a report titled “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation” in 2023 (Murthy 2023). The health advisory is published to bring to attention an urgent public health need. The Surgeon General, who leads public health in the United States (based on multiple studies in his report), detailed how loneliness and isolation need urgent attention. The purpose of an advisory is “Advisories are reserved for significant public health challenges that require the nation’s immediate awareness and action” (Murthy 2023). The United States Public Health determined that the effects of loneliness and isolation were so significant that they needed immediate attention. The reasons why the people of the United States and other parts of the world are experiencing loneliness are beyond the scope of this research team and paper. However, what is evident is that people are experiencing loneliness and isolation, especially our young people. In one study in the United Kingdom, among 55,000 young people, 40% between the ages of 16-24 reported loneliness compared to 27% among those over 75 (Quality of Life and Social Analysis Team, et al. 2018). We acknowledge here that we all feel lonely at times in our lives. Not all of us feel connected at every moment in our lives. There is a distinction between feeling lonely and loneliness. Loneliness is so distressing that it affects our daily lives and interactions. As the United States Surgeon General suggests, loneliness is the “distressing experiences that result from perceived isolation or inadequate meaningful connections” (Murthy 2023). This means we can have “n” number of friends but still have distressing experiences because of a lack of meaningful connections with others. These distressing experiences, as Dr. Murthy points out, can have significant effects on our health, affecting our physical health as well. The effects of loneliness have been shown to cause a 29% increase in the risk of heart disease and a 32% increase in the risk of stroke (Valtorta, et al. 2016). There is substantial evidence linking social isolation and loneliness to accelerated cognitive decline, dementia in older adults, and Alzheimer’s disease (Akther-Khan, et al. 2021). Chronic loneliness was also associated with an increased risk of developing dementia by 50% (Lazzari and Rabottini 2021). In older adults, both isolation and loneliness have been shown to increase the likelihood of depression or anxiety independently. These findings were also consistent among younger people (Domènech-Abella, et al. 2019). An increase in loneliness was reported as the primary motivation for self-harm in one study among 60,000 adults. (Troya, et al. 2019). A health advisory about

loneliness was issued for all these reasons and so many more (as mentioned in the Surgeon General's Report). Overall, the effect of loneliness on our bodies is worse than smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Murthy, Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community 2023). And this is not just affecting a few people. As rightly described, it is an epidemic. An epidemic is an unexpected increase in cases in a specific area. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2012) The Surgeon General recognized an unexpected increase in the number of cases of loneliness and isolation, issuing a health advisory for the same. Seeing the significant impact of loneliness on the health of the individual and the community, countries such as the United Kingdom and Japan have appointed Ministers for Loneliness (Díaz 2021). This is one attribute of the world young people live in. We cannot deny this or dismiss this. We must then recognize the unique challenges of the world today and the threat they pose, which will allow us to understand, accompany, journey with, and minister to young people.

1.2 Characteristics of Gen-Z: Not to condemn, but to understand.

The purpose of articulating some qualities of young people today and their world is not to define or reduce them to specific elements but to understand young people so that we can journey with and listen to them. We must also remember that not every young person will have all these characteristics. Many more elements make up the young person today. Each individual is unique and unrepeatable, created in the image and likeness of God. Nevertheless, these broad attributes may allow us to understand young people, their mindset, and their adversities, thus allowing us to be better listeners.

1.2.1 Life is more than money and mental health.

For Gen- Z, life is more than money. In a large and diverse study of 22,000 young people by the Deloitte group, the top two reasons for choosing their current work did not include money. The top two reasons were work/life balance and learning and development opportunities (Deloitte 2022). Another essential characteristic of Gen-Z is their mental health concerns. In the same study by the Deloitte group, 46% of Gen-Z say they are stressed or anxious almost all the time (Deloitte 2022). Young people today report higher rates of anxiety, depression, and distress and have the least positive outlook on life compared to previous generations (Coe, et al. 2022). The reasons for mental health problems in this

generation are being extensively studied. Understanding the reasons for mental health challenges is beyond this paper's scope and the author's expertise. However, we are to bear in mind the challenges faced by young people today, including mental health, when we accompany and listen to them.

1.2.2 There is a need to understand the digital generation and social media.

Gen- Z is the first generation to have never experienced a world without the internet. (Amoris Christi 2022) Technology is effortless for Gen-Z since they grew up with it. 73.7% of millennials and Gen-Z in the US communicate more digitally than in person, and a similar number would rather text than call if they had to choose one (Bradbury 2021). Seeing the need to understand social media and the effects of technology, especially on young people, the Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. Vivek Murthy, published an advisory titled "Social Media and Youth Mental Health" in 2023. The advisory contains research that has identified both positive and negative effects of social media. There is still more to learn about the social media and its effects. However, what is clear is that extended periods of greater than 3 hours on social media were associated with poor mental health, including symptoms of depression and anxiety (Murthy 2023). Another study from Pew Research suggests up to 95% of teens aged 13-17 use social media, and one-third use it constantly (Vogels, Gelles-Watnick, & Massarat 2022). There is no doubt that social media has its benefits, whether in terms of finding a community with shared interests and abilities, finding your voice, or even developing friendships and social connections (Murthy 2023). In our ministry with young people, social media's harms and benefits are to be considered since it is part of the context and world they live in.

The Church has also taken into account the particular challenge of social media (recognized in the Dicastery for Communication document named "*Towards Full Presence – A Pastoral Engagement with Social Media*"). As the document posits, our response to the digital generation and social media cannot be determined by whether we should engage it or not, but how do we engage? It is not a question of yes or no to social media, but how? The Church acknowledges that "Social media, in particular, is an environment where people interact, share experiences and cultivate relationships unlike ever before" (Dicastery for Communication 2023). However, at the same time, we must be aware of the challenges technology and social media poses. As Pope Francis mentions in his Encyclical letter

Laudato Si, “We have to accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities” (Francis 2015). The Holy Father asks us to remember that “technology is an instrument we use,” whereas sometimes it can be vice versa (Francis 2015). Bl. Carlo Acutis is a beautiful witness to the grace-filled use of technology among young people. His use of technology to develop websites for parishes and Eucharistic Miracles gives us an example of how young people can find meaning and contribute to society through technology (Gori 2021). Evangelization through social media is another example of engaging media and technology to bring others closer to Christ. Social media has harms and benefits, just like any other technology we use. In our work with young people, we must consider the benefits and harms while accompanying and journeying with them. In the context of young people today, Gen-Z’s particular characteristics can help us understand how to best accompany and journey with them by listening. But first, why listen?

2 WHY LISTEN?

We have mentioned the complexities and some novel characteristics of Gen Z that are particular to this generation and their world. But how can we walk with young people, journey with them, and bring them closer to the heart of Christ? One such tool or aid we propose is listening. Listening may not solve all the problems of the young person, but we suggest listening as the starting place for any accompaniment of the young person. In a survey of nearly 200 young people, 71% agreed or strongly agreed that having someone listen to them was one of the most essential factors in their success. (Amoris Christi 2022). If we are to engage young people, be involved in their lives, help them find success, and allow them to live to the potential they are called to, we must begin by listening.

One of the many benefits of listening is that it improves understanding and relationships. It helps build social connections (Amoris Christi 2022). Listening helps us understand the person and understand what’s at the heart of what the person is saying. This forms the basis of any relationship. Pope Francis often talks about “wasting time” with the other, whether parents and their children, children, and grandparents, or even wasting time with Jesus in the Tabernacle. Early in his papacy, the Holy Father reminded us of this in one of his addresses. He said, “And tell me, Mr. or Mrs., do you play with your children? “Excuse me, Father?”. Do you spend time with your children? Do you play with your children?” (Francis 2013 a). This is the concept of wasting time. What is the benefit of playing with your

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child? When you look at it from the outside, there is no benefit. Nothing is achieved after an hour or two of playing with our children. But this is precisely where relationships are built. When we play with our children, spend time with others, and listen to others, we often experience nothing coming out of it or that nothing was achieved, but it is in these moments that relationships blossom and flourish. This is why the Holy Father reminds us of “wasting time” with Jesus in the tabernacle, because it is in those moments that our relationship with Christ flourishes (Francis 2023). We can talk about a generation gap with young people or the inability to understand young people. However, in this complex reality in which young people live, listening can help improve understanding and relationships with the young person. Only from this place of trust, understanding, and relationship that listening fosters can anything else begin. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for Laity, Marriage, Family, Life, and Youth, in their national framework for ministry with youth and young adults, proposed the framework of “Listen, Teach and Send” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2024). Listening is the starting point for our journey with young people. Listening is the starting point for our accompaniment and bringing Christ to young people. Listening is one way young people can overcome the epidemic of loneliness. Through listening, young people encounter the other person; they experience belongingness and a relationship with the other.

When we think of helping young people, we often think of guiding and instructing them. However, in the context of young people and their world, this cannot happen without establishing trust and relationships with them (which occurs through listening). We can be cynical and say young people want to be listened to and don’t want anything more. However, one of the benefits of listening and continued listening is that it allows to provide guidance and support. It helps us communicate our point, especially during crisis management (Amoris Christi 2022). Young people also expect guidance and support in listening. In a survey of 200 young people, 58% said they expect practical guidance for issues when they speak about them to others (Amoris Christi 2022). Young people don’t expect just to be listened to and for us to stay quiet. Young people expect a response. Listening is not just about doing nothing but requires a response. The response is from a place of understanding and trust, but listening involves responding. A response can be silence and empathy, support, acknowledgment, or practical guidance. However, listening always consists of a response from the person listening. Even young people expect this.

The late Brother Roger (1915-2005), the founder of the Taizé community, beautifully describes what happens when we listen in one of his reflections called “*The Beauty of*

Listening.” For Br. Roger, listening is a vocation that we are called to. Br. Roger ascertains that when we listen to another, the burden of what is being said is taken off the other and shared between two persons. This sharing of burden allows the building of trust, and this trust now becomes the beginning of faith (Roger of Taizé, 2011). How many times have we experienced the pain of not being heard? Instead, when we had someone listen, did we not experience the sharing of burden and the building of trust as Br. Roger mentions? Ultimately, listening allows young people to encounter trust, relationships, and faith. This is what listening is about and why it is essential, especially for the current generation and their living context. Having explored why we listen, we can now address the what and how of listening.

3 LISTENING– WHAT AND HOW?

Br. Matthew, the newly elected prior of the Taizé community (Taizé 2023) in his very first annual letter after being elected prior asserted the importance of listening. In the annual letter titled “*Journeying Together*” he writes, “Listening is an act of love. Listening is at the heart of any relationship of trust. Without listening, little can grow or develop. No relationship can function without it. When we listen to the other selflessly, we give them the space to be. We enable them to express what they need to express, sometimes even what cannot be said through words” (Br. Matthew of Taizé 2023).

To love, as St. Thomas Aquinas describes, is to “will the good of the other for the other’s sake” (Aquinas 1266-1273). Listening is about wanting what’s best for the other and the young person in front of us. In this complex world and the many challenges (described earlier in the paper) that the young person faces, listening can be one way we love the young person, allowing him/her to trust, build faith, and encounter the Risen Lord.

In one of his Messages for the World Day of Communications, Pope Francis called for “listening with the ear of the heart” (Francis 2022). Through this message, the Holy Father highlights how, in listening, we are participating in the “humble style of God” (Francis 2022). How do we listen with the humble style of God? How are we to listen with the ear of the heart? The Holy Father exhorts, “Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur” (Francis 2013b). For listening to participate with the style of God and be an apostolate of the ear, it requires an openness of our heart. In listening, we are not called to make quick judgments about the other before us but rather have an open heart. As the Holy Father mentions in *Evangelii Gaudium*, this open heart allows the other to encounter a closeness

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with us *as we listen* and thus an intimacy with God (Francis 2013b). This openness is not effortless, but it is what we are called to and required; to allow the young person to encounter Christ. Many of the mannerisms and behaviors of young people today can make us uncomfortable. It is precisely in these places that make us uncomfortable that we are called to have an open heart to the young person in front of us. This requires courage and boldness. It requires courage to be open rather than make quick judgments and rash decisions. Young people recognize this. 61% of teenage respondents found it difficult to open up with people who point out imperfections and failures (Amoris Christi 2022). However, as mentioned before, listening is not just about staying quiet or letting others do as they wish. Instead, we provide practical advice and guidance in listening, but this comes from a place of openness and trust. Young people tend to shut off without this openness and trust. The late Fr. Henri Nouwen SJ (1932-1996) puts it boldly.

To listen is very hard, because it asks of us so much interior stability that we no longer need to prove ourselves by speeches, arguments, statements, or declarations. Faithful listeners no longer have an inner need to make their presence known. They are free to receive, to welcome, to accept.... Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you (Nouwen 2006).

This is another aspect of listening; it requires genuine humility. It requires us to say that it is not about us but the person in front of us. No matter who that person is - whether it's someone that bothers us or we rejoice in, listening always puts the other first. Listening requires being in front of the other person and say, it's not about me; it's about you. As Fr. Henri Nouwen says, this requires an "interior stability" where we don't have to interrupt, where we don't have to prove how much we know, and we don't have to prove everything we have done. This is the call of listening, as Pope Francis says in the "humble style of God" (Francis 2022). Young people recognize when we make listening about us, not the person we are listening to. In a survey, 59% of young people said they cannot express themselves when someone interrupts them constantly (Amoris Christi 2022). Authentic listening calls for true humility, being in front of the other, loving them, and realizing the mystery of who they are and what they have to say right now.

Finally, listening requires empathy. In a survey, 61% of young people said they expect empathy when speaking about their issues with others (Amoris Christi 2022). Empathy is not asking how I would feel if I were in the other person's situation (Amoris Christi 2022). Empathy is also not feeling pity for the other, which is sympathy (Psychiatric Medical Care

Communications Team 2022). Empathy, instead, is about trying to understand what the other person is going through in their situation (as we listen to them) while at the same time not losing our identity in the process (Segal, Gerdes, Lietz, Wagaman, & Geiger, 2017). It is not trying to see what I would do or experience in their situation. Alternatively, empathy endeavors to understand what the other is experiencing as we listen to them. This distinction between what I would do vs what the other would do (without losing your sense of self) is critical to empathy. Though it can seem challenging and frequently requires listening without making judgments, empathy in listening can foster a connection with the other person (Psychiatric Medical Care Communications Team 2022). Young people look for empathy in listening. When asked about the top qualities that make young people comfortable opening up to someone, they responded, “Understanding, Trustworthy, Nonjudgemental, and Empathic” (Amoris Christi 2022). Empathy is not about fixing every problem presented to you by the other; instead, we share in the pain of the others as we undertake the effort to apprehend what the other is experiencing. As we share in the pain of the other, we foster connection, build trust, and, thus, plant seeds of faith. This is essentially what Br. Roger of Taizé affirmed in *“The Beauty of Listening”* (Roger of Taizé 2011)(which we mentioned earlier in the paper)

CONCLUSION

Young people today face unprecedented adversities. The role of the Christian accompanying and journeying with the young person is to allow the young person to encounter Christ. Listening can be one such way we can enable the young person to encounter Christ. When we listen to young people, we allow them to trust, help foster connections and friendships, provide guidance, and amplify their voices (Amoris Christi 2022). The Synod on Synodality Synthesis report articulated the need for a preferential option for young people by listening and accompanying them (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2023). The first Synthesis report regarding a Synodal Church in Mission asserts the importance of listening by dedicating an entire section to listening called *“Toward a listening and accompanying Church”* (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2023). As described in this paper, listening is first an act of love. Authentic listening requires openness, humility, and empathy. “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” (Francis 2013b). We want to see young people thrive and do well in their lives. We want to see young people live fully to the potential they are called to and respond to God’s love for each one of them. Listening can be a way to lead them to be the saints each one of them is called to be.

CONTRIBUTOR

Dr. Anthony Kunnumpurath MA (Philosophy) MBBS/MD (Internal Medicine) is a seminarian studying for the St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Eparchy of Chicago (USA) and Jesus Youth (a pontifically recognized international movement) member. He is currently in Configuration II (Theology II) at St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary, Florida, United States. He is a board-certified internal medicine physician. He completed his medical studies in Kerala, India, and his internal medicine residency in the United States. He is part of the research wing of the Amoris Christi Institute (an affiliate of Jesus Youth) in Florida, United States, which published the book “*The Art of Listening to Young People – A pastoral and scientific guide.*” in 2022. He is a Catholic Medical Association (CMA- USA) member and serves on the Catholic Medical Association National Missions Committee. He is also serves as a member of Jesus Youth National Mission Team (USA).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Most of the data obtained for this paper has also been used in the book *The Art of Listening to Young People—A Pastoral and Scientific Guide*. (Amoris Christi, 2022). The author of this paper wishes to disclose that he is part of the Amoris Christi Institute (an affiliate of Jesus Youth) in the United States. The author expresses gratitude to the Amoris Christi Institute (an affiliate of Jesus Youth) in the United States, especially members of the research wing, including Jolly John, Dr. Edward Edezhath, Fr. Thomas Pulickal, Anoosh Michael, and Denis Wilson. Without them, the topic of listening, the insights into listening, and the data used for this paper would not have been possible. For more information about Amoris Christi's research, visit <https://www.amorischristi.org/acie>

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