

Joint Witness meeting between the Bishops of the SACBC and the Major Religious Superior in the SACBC territory. EMSENI in Benoni, 17 September 2024.

Your Eminences, Archbishops, Bishops, Administrators, Major Religious Superiors, General Secretary's and Staff.

Dear Brothers and sister in Christ, in this session we are gathered to reflect on Communication: heart of collaboration listening openly to each other locally. Communication in the Catholic Church is fundamental to its mission of spreading the Gospel, fostering unity, and building a strong community of faith. At the heart of this communication is the principle of collaboration through open and respectful listening, especially at the local level. This approach not only strengthens relationships but also ensures that the voices of all members of the Church — from clergy to laypeople — are heard, valued, and integrated into the life of the Church.

1. The Importance of Listening in Church Communication

The Catholic Church's long tradition of discernment and dialogue is rooted in the idea of listening. Listening is not passive but an active, intentional practice of being open to the concerns, insights, and experiences of others. Pope Francis often speaks about the need for a "culture of encounter," where listening becomes the foundation for genuine dialogue. In this context, communication is more than the exchange of information; it is a means to build relationships and foster collaboration. Locally, this means that parishes, dioceses, and religious communities must prioritize listening to the unique voices within their congregations. This includes listening to those on the margins—such as the poor, the oppressed, and the disillusioned — who may feel disconnected from the Church.

2. Collaboration in the Church: Working Together in Unity

Collaboration within the Church is essential for its vitality. It requires the participation of all members in the mission of the Church, from the local parish to the global Church. Effective communication creates the foundation for this collaboration by ensuring that each member's voice is heard and respected. At the local level, collaboration can take the form of parish councils, community outreach programs, and shared decision-making processes. In these settings, priests, religious leaders, and laity work together, utilizing open channels of communication to discuss pastoral concerns, community needs, and future plans. When each member of the Church feels they can contribute to the mission, the Church becomes more dynamic and responsive to the needs of the faithful.

3. The Synodal Process: A Model of Collaborative Communication

The synodal process, especially under the guidance of Pope Francis, is an example of collaborative communication in action. Synodality is about journeying together as a Church, fostering a spirit of communion, participation, and mission. At the heart of synodality is the idea of mutual listening, where the hierarchy listens to the laity and vice versa. In dioceses around the world, synods are convened to address pressing issues, and the process is built upon the principle of listening — everyone is encouraged to contribute their thoughts, concerns, and aspirations. This ensures that the decisions and directions taken by the Church are reflective of the people's needs and the Holy Spirit's guidance.

4. Challenges and Opportunities

While the call for open communication and collaboration is clear, there are challenges. One of the primary challenges is ensuring that all voices are genuinely heard, especially in large and diverse communities. Cultural, linguistic, and generational differences can create barriers to effective communication. Additionally, there may be a tendency for certain groups to dominate discussions, leaving others feeling marginalized. However, the Church has an opportunity to overcome these challenges by fostering environments where dialogue is respectful, inclusive, and Christ-centered. Local parishes can be proactive by creating spaces for open discussion, such as town hall meetings, listening sessions, and small groups where individuals feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

5. Listening in the Context of the Synod of Synodality

The Synod of sinodality, showed us that in the Church the basis of all discernment is listening to the Holy Spirit together and listening to each other in the perspective of mission. The kind of listening that does not assume anything in advance, but gives the feeling that everyone is important and that everyone counts, no one is excluded. The Holy Spirit can speak through everyone, even the smallest or youngest. In every Church community, by listening to each other, we are aware not only of our own needs, but also of the gifts with which we can and should serve each other. The Holy Spirit, who spoke not only in the past, but also speaks today, enables us to make good decisions and adopt the right attitudes. By listening to the statements of various people, we find tips for pastoral care, or for the general vision of the family, parish and any other community in the Church.

The Synod enables us to read the signs of the times in the Holy Spirit and to convert, which always begins with a change of thinking. This seems to resonate very strongly today. All of us must change our thinking, break out of patterns, and open ourselves to current pastoral needs. Pope Francis convinces us that reality is more important than ideas: "Ideas – conceptual elaborations – are at

the service of communication, understanding, and praxis. Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action. What calls us to action are realities illuminated by reason. Formal nominalism has to give way to harmonious objectivity. Otherwise, the truth is manipulated, cosmetics take the place of real care for our bodies. We have politicians – and even religious leaders – who wonder why people do not understand and follow them, since their proposals are so clear and logical. Perhaps it is because they are stuck in the realm of pure ideas and end up reducing politics or faith to rhetoric. Others have left simplicity behind and have imported a rationality foreign to most people." (EG 232). Such a change of thinking should be made in each of the areas considered during the synod.

The ongoing Synod is an "exercise in synodality." It is not so much about giving opinions, but about the spiritual experience of cooperation with the Holy Spirit. The synodal process is very welcome because it is the first historical attempt to give a voice in the Catholic Church to people who have never participated in former synods or Councils. In the past, the Councils were open only to bishops and to theological discourse. This time the synodal process opened very widely. And since this is happening for the first time, this attempt will probably not be fully understood until it receives the proper outlines. But the process itself is very interesting and very desirable, because it is an expression of the courage to pose questions and problems to all continents at once. There has never been anything like this. Synodality is a response to what St. Vincent of Lerins spoke about tradition. Tradition means the immutability of the essence and the changeability of the accidents, i.e. the immutability of what is essential for the Church, and at the same time continuous development. Constancy and development are contradictory concepts that lie hidden in the problem of tradition. For some, tradition is a fossil that has been formulated a long time ago and nothing can be changed in it, and for others it is a "fluidity" that has practically nothing stable about it. You have to find a way out between these two extremes. Moreover, this is what the synodal process in the Church serves.

Conclusion

Effective communication in the Catholic Church, particularly at the local level, is about more than transmitting information. It is about creating a culture of collaboration rooted in mutual listening and respect. When members of the Church listen openly to one another and work together in the spirit of unity, the Church becomes a more vibrant, responsive, and faithful witness to the Gospel. In this spirit, local Catholic communities are called to foster a culture of dialogue, where every voice contributes to the Church's mission and the body of Christ is strengthened through collaboration.