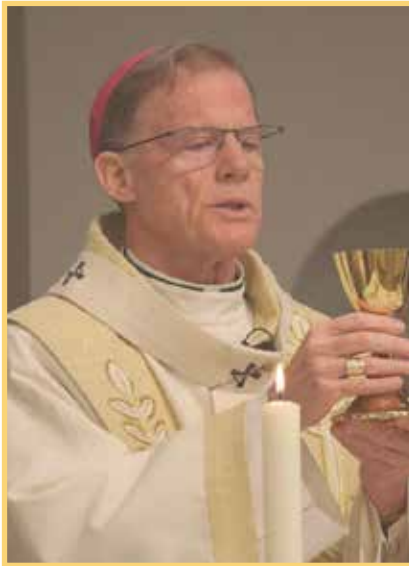


Abide in Christ

Communication is Communion



Archbishop John C. Wester

Father Eugene Konkel, PSS, was a dear friend of mine who was a master of quips and one-line wisdom. One of my favorites was, "The inevitable outcome of all human communication is partial misunderstanding." These words of Father Gene came back to me when I read about the encounter between a Catholic high school student, Nick Sandman and a Native American gentleman, Nathan Phillips at the National Mall in Washington, D.C.. A lot of ink has been spilt trying to translate that encounter and I do not wish to add yet another interpretation. I do believe, however, that there was a lot of partial misunderstanding going on in that situation. Whatever the two meant to communicate did not seem to be getting through to either of them as they were locked in a cloud of apparent misunderstanding. As young seminarians, we quoted a scholastic axiom to describe such situations: "Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur" (whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver). The famous Scottish poet, Robert Burns, put it another way, "Oh would some Power the gift give us, to see ourselves as others see us."

The complexity of human communication brings home to me the importance of developing an authentic and attentive listening ear. Whether in the newspapers or in social media, we see evidence of constant chatter, but not much listening seems to be going on. Name-calling, stereotyping, pre-judgments, bigotry, cultural differences, jealousy, anger, and self-centeredness put up huge roadblocks on the road of smooth communication. They make it difficult for us to truly listen to what another is saying. Real listening demands that we break through these obstacles and give another our full and selfless attention, exhibiting a genuine concern for the other and a desire to understand deeply what he or she is saying. This does not mean that we will end up agreeing with what is said, but it does mean that we will be open to learning, growing and deepening in our appreciation of another point of view. This is truly a demanding task.

It seems to me that the best way to develop the skill and art of active listening is to observe how Christ listened to others, especially His Father. After all, He is the ultimate Word spoken by God. What better way is there to learn how to listen than to open our ears and hearts to Christ, to the Word that has the power to give us eternal life? Take for example the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well in John's Gospel (Jn.4:5-22). This conversation is an icon of Christian listening that can lead the prayerful reader to become a better hearer of the word.

What strikes me first in this beautiful Gospel passage is that Jesus listened deeply. He went beyond the superficial words of the woman and attended to what was going on within her heart. He listened to her distress, her sadness, the difficulty of her life. He went beyond her words and no doubt saw etched in her face the lines of worry and concern. He gave her time to converse and to say what she had to say. He allowed each new sentence to take Him deeper into an understanding of what she really wanted. When I read this passage, I am often embarrassed as I realize that I am often in so much of a hurry or preoccupied with so many thoughts that I do not

give people the time they need to communicate. Or, I may choose to stay on the surface because I am not in the mood or just too tired to go into any depth. When I ask a person, "How are you?" I am not really looking for a genuine answer but rather a simple, "Fine, thank you," so I can go about my business. Jesus gave the Samaritan woman time, lots of it, and He gave her His undivided attention. Quite a bit there to think about.

It occurs to me that listening in this way involves a real humility, the kind of humility that Jesus exhibited when He engaged the Samaritan woman in a conversation. For one thing, it would be unheard of for a man to talk to an unknown woman in public, much less at the water well where women were not allowed except in the early morning or late afternoon. That is why John specifies that the hour of the conversation was about noon. The disciples, we are told, were greatly surprised to find Jesus talking to a woman in such circumstances. For another thing, Jesus was a rabbi, a respected and revered teacher who would not be expected to take the time to engage this woman in conversation. Furthermore, it would be highly unlikely that a Jewish man would speak to a Samaritan due to the tensions between the two cultures. But Jesus transcended all these mores and in humility He listened attentively to what the Samaritan woman had to say. Humility is a key component to genuine listening. So often I catch myself not really listening to another but rather simply waiting for them to stop talking so I can make my point, defend my position, promote my righteousness or defend my honor. When I am caught up with only my concerns it is rather difficult to really attend to what another is saying on any level. It takes real humility to put myself second and give the spotlight to the person with whom I am speaking.

Developing a sense of humility in order to be a more effective listener does not mean that I am not part of the conversation. While Jesus puts the focus on the Samaritan woman, He continues to involve Himself in helping her find what she is looking for. Paying attention to somebody else does not mean that I just hide behind a veneer of active listening and mumble "Uh, huh" and "Yes, I see" every so often. Rather,

His Mercy Endures Forever

it means that I share myself, my feelings, my desires and my wisdom. In the case of the Gospel, Jesus offers His very life for the Samaritan woman as He lets her know that He is a wellspring of life-giving water. To be a good listener means that we follow Jesus's example and respond generously to others as we attend to what we have heard. I believe that this gets at what Thomas Merton meant when he said, "The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless ... beyond speech ... beyond concept."

I offer these brief reflections in the hope that all of us can seek to be better listeners. There are so many issues that are demanding our attention these days: the sexual abuse crisis in the Church, immigration, abortion, assisted suicide, political rivalries, and so much more. It is essential that we genuinely listen to one another. Such listening does not mean that we are going to compromise our values or abandon our deeply held beliefs. It does mean, however, that we will seek to understand the other's point of view better and that we will strive for unity in the midst of our diversity. It does mean that by understanding more fully another's position, it will help me to embrace my own views with greater clarity and that I will be willing to grow and even change some aspects of my thinking if called for. An active and attentive listener never needs to be afraid of the truth.

I am reminded of a story I heard about a husband and wife who were having an argument. At one point the husband, in a fit of anger, called his wife an ugly name and began to walk out of the room. Before he reached the door, she asked him, "Did you say that to me because you love me or because you wanted to hurt me?" The husband responded, "What kind of a stupid question is that?" and he left the room. A day later at the breakfast table, the husband said to his wife, "You asked me a question yesterday and I didn't really answer it. The truth is that I wanted to hurt you and I am sorry. I love you." It was at that point that they really began to communicate.

Jesus never shied away from encountering people and speaking to them heart to heart: *cor ad cor loquitur*, as Cardinal John Henry Newman's motto would have it. It may be true that our human communication is given to partial misunderstanding, but by following Christ's example and praying that He will grace our conversations there are ways for us to seek better outcomes; to understand one another more effectively and to deepen the bonds that unite us.

I remember as a child being told that there was a reason God gave me one mouth and two ears. That simple truth may not be very profound but it could go a long way to clearing up all that partial misunderstanding.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,

+ John C. Wester

Most Reverend John C Wester
Archbishop of Santa Fe