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Silence and the new evangelization

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On Wednesday, Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila spoke to the Synod of Bishops [1] about the power of silence. In a world where the loudest voices dominate meeting rooms, political debates, the media and online discussion boards, Tagle reminds us all that, "In Jesus, silence becomes the way of attentive listening, compassion and prayer. It is the way to truth."

Silence is more than the absence of words, sounds or distractions. The virtue of silence knows when to listen and when to speak. When listening, it listens attentively. When speaking, it chooses words carefully. It allows for true dialogue to take place in an atmosphere of mutual respect and desire for deeper understanding.

The original *lineamenta [2]* for the synod invited all bishops to promote such a dialogue with women and men in their diocese on the topic of the new evangelization. The present working document for the synod is a summary of responses to the original *lineamenta* from bishops around the world. Hopefully the bishops truly listened to many and diverse voices and are now bringing these experiences to the synod discussions. After all, a dialogue about the new evangelization without knowing the desires and needs of those you wish to evangelize is fruitless.

Hopefully the bishops will listen attentively to each other so each local experience can be reflected upon within the larger, global reality. Hopefully the pope will listen attentively to the final reports from the synod and write a document that will reflect the voices of all.

Evangelization, whether old or new, requires us to listen attentively to each other. Really listen. And it requires us to seek the right words to express the truth in ways that are life-giving, not threatening.

John XXIII decried the prophets of doom in his time. Yet these prophets are still with us, railing against the Catholics who have "fallen away" or "drifted" from the church. Yes, many have left because of lukewarm faith or indifference. Some have beaten a path to the door in anger and disillusionment. Some remain on the margins of the church, one foot in and one foot ready to bolt. Are the words that they hear from us words of hope that reflect the joyful message of the Gospel? Or do they only hear words that are accusatory and judgmental? Do our words offer a welcome back into the heart of the community or provide a final nudge out the door?

The responsibility for the new evangelization rests with all of us, not just priests and bishops. We all must look carefully at the virtue of silence in our daily interactions. Do we know how to listen attentively? Do we choose our words carefully? Do our words enrich a conversation and encourage dialogue or do they merely shout out our agenda, hoping to drown out the words of another?

And, yes, sometimes it is best to put words aside all together. Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, spoke to the synod [3] of the important role that contemplation can play in our ecumenical efforts. "With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow."

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