

Opening Mass
St Pius X College
21 February 2023

Over 1500 years ago, at the end of the fifth century, there appeared a man in central Italy called Benedict. He lived at a time of enormous upheaval. The Roman Empire had collapsed and much of southern Europe was under assault from marauding groups from the north. Benedict began new Christian communities which became oases of learning and welfare at a time when social infrastructure was disintegrating, and this network of communities became the foundation for the emergence some five centuries later of what we broadly recognise as Europe .

Benedict wrote a little framework of guidance for those communities. The text began with a Latin word, *Ausculata*. Like a number of foreign words, the word *Ausculata* does not have a direct English equivalent. It needs a few sentences to translate. However, the common English translation is "Listen with the ear of your heart." Listen with the ear of your heart. By this, Benedict was urging his followers to listen deeply to all that was occurring, to develop a heart and mind capable of genuine listening. We are to listen to everything, however, with the expectation of hearing something. For him, we are to live our lives with a sense of expectancy, a sense of anticipation. We are to engage our lives as if we are knocking on a closed door but with the expectation that someone on the other side is to say, 'come in'. We know the experience. We have our hand on the door handle, ready to open it as soon as we hear the voice from the other side. For Benedict, if we live our lives with this attitude, it is extraordinary what life opens for us. Nothing becomes too ordinary or too banal. Everything has the potential to tell us something. And for this reason, Benedict went onto write, in the most remarkable way, that the utensils of the community workshop were to be treated in the same way as the sacred vessels of the altar in the church. If we listen to all our lives with a deeply attentive spirit, then everything becomes alive with possibility.

Fast track many centuries, to the twentieth century. In the 1930s lived another remarkable person, Simone Weil. She was a French philosopher. And she, too, had a profound sense of the importance of listening in our life. She wrote that the entire purpose of our education was to help us to learn how to listen, to listen truly. She observed that this is the most difficult of enterprises. All of us think we might listen well. However, listening is something we can never exhaust. There is a tendency in each of us to want to grab hold of things, to grasp things quickly. But Simone Weil taught that there are many things in our life for which we must simply attend and wait. For being able to listen, means also waiting. Not forcing, not pushing, but attending and waiting. And this is not easy for us. We want things instantly and quickly. Life is considered a series of problems that require resolution. But to live with what cannot be resolved, this is what it means to listen truly. As she wrote, we do not find the most precious things in our life by searching for them, but by waiting for them – in other words, through our listening. And she observed further, that listening is the most powerful gift that we can give to one another. For one of the deepest needs we have is to be listened to. When we experience someone is listening to us, we discover ourselves. To know that someone is listening to us is such a powerful, healing experience. That is why she went onto define God as 'attention without distraction.'

This year you have chosen as the theme, “Listening to learn, learning to listen.” I do not think you could have chosen a more profound theme. Listening is the foundation of all knowledge. And it is also the foundation of a genuinely mature life. Later in the twentieth century another philosopher – this time in Canada – Bernard Lonergan proposed that human knowledge was built on four main steps. The first step is ‘attending.’ We begin to grow in knowledge firstly to the extent that we become attentive, that we listen. We allow all the data to come before us – before making any decisions, or any judgements. Make sure that we have as much on the table, so to speak, as we can. Attend to it, listen to it. And then, secondly, inquire into what we have heard. Ask questions, inquire. And then, thirdly, when we have exhausted the questions, interpret what we have in front of us: only now are in a position to evaluate, to make judgements. Our problem, of course, is that we tend to make judgements before we have listened and before we have asked any questions. And then we wonder why our judgements don’t stand the test of time. Only when we have listened deeply, inquired widely, and evaluated fully can we then fourthly act, in other words, make decisions. But now our decisions are solid for they are built on our listening, our inquiring, and our interpreting. Lonergan summed all this up by saying, Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be rational, Be responsible: listen, inquire, interpret, act. Our entire educational adventure must be at the service of developing these skills. If our school years have not taught us how to listen, how to inquire, how to interpret and how to make decisions then they have not served their genuine purpose.

Lonergan, however, went further to suggest that the outcome of these four stages of knowledge was love. If we truly listen, if we truly inquire, if we truly interpret and make our decisions based on this then our lives will be as loving as they can be.

I think this is very true. For one of the most important lessons I have learnt in my own life, is that we love to the extent that we listen, and we listen to the extent that we love. We love to the extent that we listen, and we listen to the extent that we love. Love is the decision to listen, and the more we listen, truly listen, we cannot but love. We stop loving when, for whatever reason, we have made the decision no longer to listen.

Take care how well you listen, says Jesus to us. It is one of the most important things he says to us. Take care how well you listen. For if we have learnt how to listen, then all possibility opens for us. But if we have closed our ears, if we have closed our eyes, if we have closed our hearts, then even what we think we have is taken away by boredom or contempt.

Learn to listen, Listen to learn.