Columns
Ministry



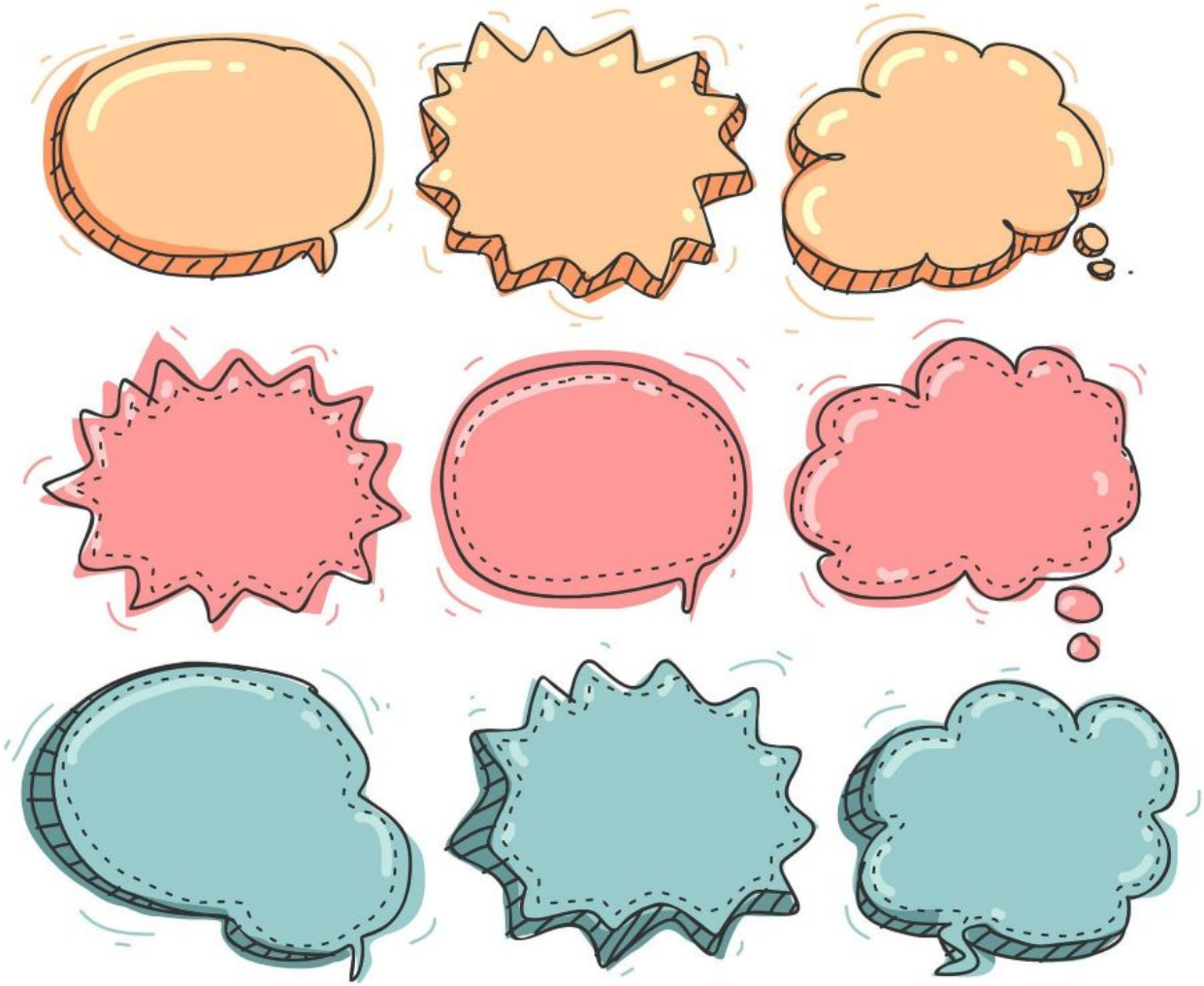
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Our pastoral care area, or PCA, for the synodal listening session consists of five parishes grouped together, based on proximity. The first session was Dec. 15.

As I was going to the meeting, I ran into a young person near the church and struck up a conversation. He asked, "What is going on this evening?" I threw the question back to him: "What do you think is happening? He replied, "I don't know. I hear that there is going to be a big complaining meeting!" "Complaining about what?" I enquired. "I don’t know. I guess the church!"

We conspired to find a good place to sit and experience the listening session firsthand. He was surprised that some young people were expressing a preference for Latin Mass. He thought lively music would do it for him.

As I reflected on the synod listening session, four different processes come to mind. First: I remembered many listening sessions with my father when I was growing up. Second: I thought about the Bible story about the journey to Emmaus, when Jesus listened to two disappointed disciples. Third: I considered the common practice of dialogue in our institute. We religious sisters listen to each other and to the Holy Spirit when discerning apostolates to be carried out by our sisters. Fourth: a scientific way of doing the listening — the use of focus groups as a representation of a large population to collect data to understand an issue. In a way I feel that this synodal listening process is using all four processes in a global way.

I come from a humble background; we were simple folks. But what really stands out in my memory is how my father would engage me in conversation. He would ask me an open-ended question, like asking how the semester was going. I would rattle on and on about everything. My father would listen, smiling, as long as I talked. He had a gentle way of finding out as I talked where I was struggling or where I needed guidance. He did not interrupt, but whatever the issue, he would note it down in his mind — peer pressure, homework or the teachers. When I was finished talking, he would ask me, for example, why I had referred to a certain teacher as a "mean freak." It would catch me off guard: "Did I really say that?" He would gently guide me to understand that it's fine to differ, but I didn't have to be disrespectful, or he would help me devise a way I could maximize my learning experience without being caught up with negative attitudes.

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Being able to voice our concerns — and being heard — have a huge impact on how we perceive the church, or any relationship for that matter. Sometimes people do get clarity just by talking, even before they receive responses. Perhaps that may be what the church is doing with these listening sessions. If nothing else, we have a place where we can be heard. That in itself is important. When we let out our frustrations or pent-up emotions, then we can create room for inspiration and growth. We are not busy dealing with suppressed or unvoiced issues.

Second, as I reflect on synodality as journeying together, the scene of the journey to Emmaus comes to mind (Luke 24:13-35). The disciples were having a lively exchange. Of course, they were disappointed: They had put their hope in Jesus. We can presume that they are running away, trying to make sense of what has happened, thinking that now they have to move on with their lives and put the sad events of the last few days behind them.

A stranger joins them; he simply asks a question and then he listens. Initially they are almost irritated that he is not in the know of the "breaking news" in Jerusalem. They proceed to express their hopes, experiences, expectations and then frustration because it didn't work out as they had expected.

Somehow, I feel that this is what we are doing during the talking/listening session. We the faithful just express what we think is happening in our life journey in the church: our concerns, hopes and dreams. Hopefully, eventually we will connect the dots starting from the Old Testament, through the New Testament, and how it all ties together with our own salvation history. If we trust the tradition and interpretation of the church's teaching, then at the breaking of bread, our eyes will open and our hearts will burn — because we will understand how God writes straight with crooked lines.

Third, I consider how dialogue is encouraged in our institute. In our religious community, dialogue has an important place in the discernment process. As an institute, we listen to each other — and together to the Holy Spirit — to know and understand the needs of our times. This enables us to listen to the nudging of the Holy Spirit and discern our apostolic endeavors. That's why the chapter is important, because it's there that the rules and regulations are formulated to guide the community. This is done through dialogue and deliberations.

The fourth way illustrates how the church might use science. In qualitative research we engage a *focus group* as a representative of a given population. We can possibly liken our listening sessions to a focus group representing people going to church. It may not be perfect because it's mostly a self-selected group, but nonetheless it is a good place to start. It lays a foundation for understanding what is going on in people's life journeys.

Any meaningful relationship is built on effective communication. This global synodality is even richer because we are all together listening to the voice of the

Holy Spirit who raises men and women in every age to respond to the needs of the time.

I feel really thankful to the young man for his sincere exchange, and to the organizers, for my opportunity to participate.