

Listening: Being Present for the Other

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Last September, I took part in a formation offered by the spiritual accompaniment service at home for the sick or elderly (SASMAD – Pastoral Home Care) of the Archdiocese of Montreal. This service was founded in 1992 by Sister Madeleine Saint-Michel, Religious Hospitaller of Saint-Joseph. Volunteers who have received specific training make spiritual and/or religious home visits according to the needs expressed by the person being visited.

At the centre of this accompaniment is an “in-depth” listening to what is occupying the spirit and heart of the person. While I cannot report on all the richness and depth of material that this formation offered, I will simply recall that which encouraged me, as a result of this course, to put into better practice the skill of listening.

Openness and Trust

Spiritual accompaniment is based on the conviction that every individual has a spiritual life that is expressed through a search for the meaning of his or her life and action.

“Our life is spiritual through our very existence as a person endowed with reason, by our search for love and the absolute. Spirituality is also conveyed by the questions we ask ourselves about the meaning of life and death, happiness and unhappiness, being and becoming, God and the hereafter.”¹

By creating respectful and reassuring human contact, spiritual accompaniment aims to establish a climate of openness and trust and thus offers persons who are visited an opportunity to communicate what interests them, what worries them, and what makes them rejoice.

Listening Deeply

According to the SASMAD documentation, listening is like saying to persons visited that they are important for us, that we are happy that they are there, that we appreciate their presence. This message is conveyed not necessarily with words but with our physical expressions, our actions and our whole being.

Listening in-depth means welcoming others as they say they are, as they understand themselves to be and as they feel. It is being attentive to their needs, at their request of the moment, while welcoming what awakens in us as they entrust to us.

Genuine listening to people requires great inner freedom to welcome the others as they are, to grasp what they are saying with the words they speak or the emotions they manifest; the needs they express. To listen is to encourage others to become aware of their resources and their power to choose the direction they want to give their lives.²

Personal History and Society

“Our personal history is not just about our inner states or our relationships with our loved ones. It has a direct link with the state of the society in which we live at a given time, as well as with the groups that compose it.”³ This statement by Maurice Angers invites us to reflect on the impact that the important transformations taking place in our institutes and our societies have on our experience.

“The nights are laden with life and no one knows the day to come.”⁴ This theme, discussed last May by Elena Lasida, designates the current state of our institutes remarkably well. What impacts do these nights have on personal security, on community life, on the apostolic commitments of people? This is a question that our gatherings are trying to answer.

Chapters, forums and group meetings are all offering extensive information to our members about the present state of our religious congregations. These assemblies are important places for a broad listening to the Institute’s members, the circles of action and the appeals of the Church and the world. Conferences and formation days on advanced age and the mission of the elderly are also invitations to listening and sharing of life experiences.

Should we not encourage the willingness and perhaps the courage to share questions, emotions and opinions raised by the profound changes taking place in our institutes and in our personal lives?

When the Listened-to Becomes the Listener

We can all, each and every one of us, continue to show attention to each other with a smile, a greeting, a friendly conversation. These marks of attention convey meaning to others; that they are important to us and that they are part of the family.

Simple, open and non-judgmental exchanges, in small groups can, also favour deep listening. It can provide the milieu required for accepting feelings aroused by the transformations being undergone by our institutes. These are conversations in which each person is heard and take turn to listen.

If people with the desired training and availability were to become committed to providing spiritual accompaniment in our communities, how happy would the members of our communities be; they would benefit greatly from such support.

Listening, Accompanying, Being There

“It’s enough just being there,” wrote Jacques Gauthier. “Accompanying someone in the twilight of their lives is to be a witness to a work of love in the making. We know it; it is above all to listen more than to speak, to be there more than to do something ... To be there to be born and to grow with the person.”⁵

Being available to offer our sisters and brothers simple and warm listening is like Jesus on the road to Emmaus. We ask ourselves the same question Jesus asked to the disciples: “What are all these things you are discussing as you walk along?” (Lk 24:17). May the listening offered arouse in every man and woman, the joy of the risen Christ.

¹ Jacques Gauthier, “Spiritualité et vieillesse, la voie de l’intériorité” (Spirituality and old age, the path of interiority), in *Spiritualitésanté*, Québec, Spring-Summer 2012, p. 28–32.

² SASMAD, Information drawn from basic training documents for future counselors.

³ Maurice Angers, *Se connaître autrement grâce à la sociologie* (Getting to know one other differently thanks to sociology), Éditions St-Marin, 2000, p. 7.

⁴ Elena Lasida, Conference at the CRC General Assembly, Montreal, May 28, 2018.

⁵ Jacques Gauthier, *ibid.*