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4 tips for empathetic listening

We all have a profound longing to know that we are understood, valued and appreciated. In dealing with another person, it may be that what we say does not interest them at all. However, it is unlikely that we are indifferent to feeling understood. We are not just talking about “understanding another person” but rather about them “feeling understood”. This is the essence of empathetic listening: listening so as to understand and showing that we are listening and understanding.

Friendship and spiritual accompaniment require the necessary aspect of charity that is understanding. Through this, we can progressively discover that the understanding that we can provide each other is but a slight reflection of the full paternal and maternal understanding of God towards his children, men. In fact, this desire to be loved and understood that we carry in our hearts is surely a sign of our desire for God. We thus walk towards “a new heaven and a new earth”, where the Lord will wipe away all tears and there will be no crying, no mourning or pain (Revelations 21, 1-4).

Here are 4 tips for listening with a truly empathetic and understanding attitude:

- 1. Be aware of what empathetic listening is not.** In empathetic listening, the fundamental thing is the other person’s intervention, not ours. For this reason, empathetic listening is not judging a situation, nor is it offering advice or solving a problem, nor is it trying to change the interlocutor or telling one’s own story. In empathetic listening, the protagonist is the other person. It is possible that while we are listening, we are thinking about what we are going to say next. Though these two tasks are not incompatible, our main duty when we listen is to concentrate so as to understand the message we are receiving in its entirety with an understanding attitude.
- 2. Be aware of two preconditions for empathetic listening: look with affection and be interested in listening.**
 - To look at the other person with affection is to look at them without prejudice, aiming to “put the brake” on our natural tendency to prejudge and label others for who they are or what they have done. Though the convictions of the person

we are listening to may be far removed from our own, we can try to appreciate that each person is unique and unrepeatable, to discover the good that is in them and to resist the desire to make them in our image.

- Being interested in listening to the other person will be reflected in having time for that person, without giving the impression of being in a hurry to finish; in focusing on listening to them, without becoming distracted; in letting them speak without interrupting or changing the subject; in remembering what they have told us, etc. Ultimately, we listen with respect and interest because we are interested in the person with whom we are speaking. From a supernatural perspective, we may say that we are interested in that person because we look at them with the eyes of Christ, that is, with a look of deep care and affection.
- 3. Give the other person signals that we are listening.** Empathetic listening is not a technique but rather a vital attitude. We listen to those we love. Perhaps we do not feel anything for the person we are listening to, we may even note a certain rejection, but we can understand that they are a creature loved by God and that can provide us with the necessary motivation to listen to them. Starting from this premise, there are tools that can help us to show the other person that we are listening: ask clarifying questions, ask for examples of what they are trying to convey, paraphrase or repeat what they tell us (with the same words, with synonyms or in the form of a question), recap or summarize what they have told us by asking a question to check (“If I have understood correctly, you are saying that... Is that so?”), make gestures or associate certain facts with a specific change in the person’s physical or mental state, etc. By putting some of these interventions into practice in a timely and natural way, we will be better able to understand what is happening to the other person and to help them deduce and better understand their situation or problem.
 - 4. Give the other person signs that we understand them.** In this last phase, it is about listening to the other person’s emotions. Often, underlying the words there are motivations, emotions, feelings, beliefs or values that, sometimes, the person is unable to express with precision. To empathize it is necessary to make proper use of the imagination and intuition in order to find out what is behind the words we are hearing. Then, if appropriate, we can make empathetic comments with which we show the other person that we understand what they may be feeling. Finally, it is worth noting that empathy is not affective identification, that is, it is not about feeling the same as the other person. To this end, and especially in areas such as spiritual accompaniment or psychotherapy, it is necessary for the person that is listening to maintain a certain emotional distance so as to avoid generating affective dependencies that in the long run may be harmful to both people.

This article originally appeared in collationes.org, was written by José María Martínez Ortega, and was translated into English by Nick Lumsden.