

"Ephphatha—Be Opened!"

AN INVITATION TO A CULTURE OF CONVERSATION

Silence will not rebuild trust or contribute to the effective proclamation of the Gospel...Let us work together to create a culture of conversation, consultation, and collaboration among ourselves, within our organizations, and with the official structures of our Church.

One day, the Gospel of Mark tells us, Jesus encounters a person unable to hear and speak. Our Lord responds with compassion. He says, "Ephphatha—be opened!" and the sufferer's hearing and speech are restored. This is the healing that our Church urgently needs today.

Together with the whole Church, we are deeply troubled by the revelations of sexual abuse and its cover-up by some priests and bishops. We grieve at the scope and depth of the injury to victims and their loved ones. While this crisis is unprecedented, one of its main causes is not. That cause is silence, an impediment greatly in need of healing.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) sought to renew the Church so that it might proclaim the gospel more effectively in the contemporary world. A sign of and a means to that renewal were to be the active participation of every member of the Church, each according to her/his own gifts and competencies, in the Church's life and work. Embracing the vision of Blessed John XXIII, the Council laid the foundations for a Church marked by conversation, consultation, and collaboration. The Council summoned every member of the People of God to new responsibilities in accord with their God-given dignity, talents and baptismal call. No longer were they to be silent subjects but active partners in every aspect of the Church's life.

This part of the renewal has not taken root. Procedures and structures for meaningful conversation, consultation, and collaboration were never sufficiently developed. Terrible as it is, the sexual abuse crisis is not the only consequence of silence in our Church. When leaders make decisions without consulting those affected, they do not necessarily make bad decisions, but neither can we be confident that they are the best ones. Even a good decision will lack the support and credibility that consultation provides. Issues that affect the Church's mission and credibility, such as the availability of the Eucharist, qualifications for ordained ministry, financial accountability, and sexuality have not been open for discussion. Only official procedures and teachings are acceptable. Other views are dismissed or even repressed. There is a growing fear of speaking out. A culture of silence too often prevails.

This silence must end. Our life together must mirror our belief that the Holy Spirit "distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts the Spirit makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks or offices advantageous for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church..." (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 12).

This is a difficult time in our Church. Silence will not rebuild trust or contribute to the effective proclamation of the gospel. We believe something else is needed. Therefore, we have invited each other as persons ministering within the Church to break this silence. We now invite the rest of our sisters and brothers to join us. Let us work together to create a culture of conversation, consultation, and collaboration among ourselves, within our organizations, and with the official structures of our Church.

We realize that this is not the work of months but of years. Yet we must begin now. Faithful Catholics are forbidden to meet in parishes and diocesan facilities to discuss the issues facing us. Rather than remain silent, we can address this injustice. If those who work for reform in the Church are accused of disloyalty or prevented from speaking under official auspices, we can affirm that different perspectives can strengthen our faith rather than threaten it. If leadership does not encourage wide involvement of the faithful in a parish or diocese, we can claim our baptismal right and responsibility to participate fully in the life of the Church. Rather than self-censoring, we can explore the issues, bring them to prayer, and engage in conversation with others about them.

There are risks and hardships involved in creating a culture of conversation, consultation and collaboration. We cannot do this without faith. That is why we turn to Jesus' own Spirit present in us and in our sisters and brothers, who also belong to the Body of Christ, for the courage to speak, the humility to listen, and the willingness to change. Nor can we do this by ourselves. That is why we have joined together to issue this invitation to one another and to others who might join us. "Ephphatha—be opened!"

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