A Church Ever Ancient, Ever New

A Theological Synthesis from the Perspective of the XV Synod of Bishops on "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment"

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As mentioned in the Synod's final document, the young people today are "the present and not only the future."[1] This was congruent with the theme, "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment." It also reflected the Church's concern over the young people, their contexts, and their challenges today. From the proceedings, the bishops aspire to determine the direction of the Church in preaching the Gospel in all areas of human life. Significantly, the proceedings included the participation of the young people from the preparatory stages down to the discussions.[2] The Synod turned out to be fruitful in revealing the young people's worldview,

1 The Holy See, "Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith, and Vocational Discernment," XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2018, http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/final-document-of-the-synod-of-bishops-on-young-people--faith-an.html, §54. Further references to the document are indicated in the main text with the abbreviation FD, followed by the section number.

2 The Synodal process involves four particular stages held from 2017 to 2018, namely (a) the Preparatory Phase in which a commission is formed to create a work outline to be discussed in the second phase, (b) the Presynodal Meeting held in Rome where young people all over the world are gathered with the task of creating a Document that reflects the views and concerns of the young, which leads to (c) the creation of the *Instrumentum Laboris* which integrates input from the different dicasteries and committees in the Vatican, together with the Final Document of the Presynodal Meeting, and finally (d) the Synod itself, which is tasked to produce a final document that serves as the synthesis of the whole process. For a summary and timeline of the process, see FD 2-3.

situation, lived faith, and evaluation of the Church's identity and pastoral activity. The Church pays attention to the young people and accompanies them toward Christ and the offer of salvation. Given that these are at the heart of the Church's faith and mission, one might ask: *What does the synodal process reveal about the reality of the Church and her distinct way of living and believing?*

This theological synthesis would attempt to answer this question by discussing how the three interconnected points of the Synod's bring to new light the fundamental aspects of the Catholic faith. Ultimately, it shows how the Church, in her task of listening and accompanying the followers of Christ, constantly updates herself with the present contexts of the world. As the Church "ever ancient yet ever new," she affirms her distinct character as Christ's Body, called to participate in the mission received from the Holy Trinity. The Church bears the essential task of understanding and responding to the world in her preaching of the Gospel in word and deed.

Young People and the Call of a Listening Church

Being a listening and accompanying Church is not the end-product of the synodal process but her fundamental characteristic. With the "joys and hopes, grief and anguish" [3] of the young people today, the synodal process shows a Church that truly attends to their contexts and challenges. Moreover, the process shows a Church allowing the youth to be active participants in her mission, given their unique ways of belonging to

3 Vatican II, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery O.P. (Northport: New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1984), §1.Further references to the document are indicated in the main text with the abbreviation GS, followed by the section number.

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and acting in the world.[4] Reflecting on this more deeply, the Church identifies her role akin to how the Resurrected Christ listened to and accompanied His two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Like Christ, the Church continually listens to the concerns of young people and leads them to recognize Him in their journey toward growth, maturity of faith, and fullness of life (cf. FD 4). A part of this listening stance is the Church's trust and confidence in the youth's ability to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19), and make the salvation of Christ relatable to their context and challenges.

An important detail that emerged is the ***synodal*** identity of the Church, wherein she identifies with *all her members and with all believers*, most especially with the marginalized sectors and the world at large. From this, she sets to understand herself as a pilgrim community that journeys to her ultimate destination by listening and taking care of the needs and concerns of her members (cf. FD 121). As one people of God, the Church carefully discerns the path she will take in the future, recognizing that the treasures of her past and the concerns of the present can aid her in doing so.

True enough, this was the way the Synod Fathers and the young participants identified the Church's becoming.The documents and proceedings of the Synod genuinely reflect the Church's concerns and views of the young, from how technology affects their lives down to how the present culture affects their faith. Rather than resorting to generalizations, the Synod faced these head-on and named particular ways

4 The Holy See, "'Young People, Faith, and Vocational Discernment': Pre-Synodal Meeting Final Document," XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2018, http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/news/final-document-from-the-pre-synodal-meeting.html, §11. Further references to this Document will be indicated by the abbreviation PM, followed by the section number.

the Church could listen to and accompany the young in their journey to Christ.

This unique way of being Church reflects her fundamental identity affirmed and asserted in ***ecclesiology***: as the Father's people, called to holiness in and through the Son, and continuously animated by the Holy Spirit in her mission of evangelization.[5] As such, the Church heeds to her calling to be in this world, to understand where and how people dwell and witness the Gospel (cf. GS 40). The dialogical nature of the Synod reflects this calling in today's context, as young people are gathered together in Christ to share their situation, their lived faith, and the significant role of the Church in their lives. Moreover, they are encouraged to be creative in living their faith by using their God-given gifts and talents in their groups and communities.[6]

The Church remains faithful to her fundamental identity by listening, discerning, and accompanying the faithful toward Christ. Through the Synod, she names and articulates her mission. She heeds and responds to the realities of her members, finds avenues to preach the Gospel, and seeks opportunities to make the faith concrete through loving, merciful, and hopeful deeds. She does so with the aid of the treasures (Sacred Scriptures and Sacred Tradition) entrusted

5 Cf. Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), in *Vatican Council II* ed. Austin Flannery O.P. (Northport: New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1984), §9-17. Further references to the document are indicated in the main text with the abbreviation LG, followed by the section number.

6 Cf. The Holy See, "Instrumentum Laboris for the Synod 2018: 'Young People, The Faith and Vocational Discernment,'" XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2018, http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/instrumentum-laboris-for-the-synod-2018--young-people--the-faith.html, §140. Further references to the document are indicated int he main text with the abbreviation IL, followed by the section number.

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to her to safeguard and articulate. The Synod brought out the meaning of what it means to be Church. The results can be brought to fruition if lived concretely in local churches and communities. While on her journey to the fullness of life, the Church accepts and fulfills her tasks (LG 63).

The Faith: The Believing Young in an Unbelieving World

More than reflecting on the identity of the Church, the Synod also considered the nature and situation of the Catholic Christian faith today. As reflected in the Final Document, both the Preparatory Document and the Presynodal Meeting show that the bishops—and the Church as a whole—desire to understand what the youth firmly believe in and hope for.[7] Thus the Synod articulated the beliefs (or the lack thereof) of young people today. In turn, this articulation assists us in widening our understanding, not only of the theology of ***revelation and faith*** but also of ***Christian worship*** and its primary expression *(lex credendi, lex orandi).*

The Synod identified that the world was primarily secularized, and its perspectives and values present a challenge for preaching and living out the authentic Catholic Christian faith. This identification does not disregard the possibility of living an authentic faith since the Church believes in its gratuitousness and the holistic response to it by her members. [8] Thus, the Synod appreciates the vibrant faith of the young believers and how it brings a sense of meaning and purpose in

7 The Holy See, *Documental Support for the Presynodal Meeting* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), 24-25; See PM 6-7.

8 Vatican II, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*)," in *Vatican Council II,* §5.Further references to the document are indicated in the main text with the abbreviation DV, followed by the section number.

their complex lives (cf. PM 14; IL 31; FD 16). The Synod also presented two distinct but inseparable images that capture their faith. On the one hand, it notes the prevailing worldviews which present as challenges to the Catholic Christian faith. For instance, the idea of being "spiritual but not religious" and the distorted/incomplete views of Jesus' identity and mission (cf. FD 50.) On the other hand, it shows how the young respond creatively to the challenge of living out their faith within their own spaces, contexts, and communities. These enable them to gather for common prayer in faith assemblies and youth festivals (PM 13-14).

Following these observations, the Synod pointed to a fruitful response: ***to witness the Christian faith*** by living and reflecting its truths. This is to be taken together with the challenge to know the faith through comprehensive catechesis (cf. FD 164). The Synod emphasized making Christ present in our midst and reflecting the love, mercy, and compassion he shows through listening and accompanying his present followers in their journey. The young desire to commit to this way of life (cf. PM 12), they also aspire for models who can help them be honest and open in sharing their struggles and hopes (PM 10). To put it simply, the young desire a faith that is both professed and lived in the ordinariness of human life. They desire that Christians truly follow Christ, the same Christ who incarnated God's love through his sacrifice on the cross and the same Christ who promises eternal life to those who believe and follow him. Here, the Synod affirms and situates the **fundamental *Christological* point of our Christian faith**.

This the core of ***Divine Revelation,*** which the Second Vatican Council articulates as the revelation of God's goodness and wisdom. By revealing Himself and His will, "men [and

women] should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature" (DV 2). Furthermore, it is to believe that the words we profess truly express the meaning of the actions we are called to do and make these actions represent what we mean in our words (DV 4). These essentially constitute Christian witnessing which the youth desire to see and live out. This also shows that we are more challenged to profess our faith by a careful and joyful understanding, articulating, and living out our faith in the world that seems to reject or take it for granted.[9]

But more than just witnessing, the Synod also articulated the desire of the young to proclaim, celebrate, and make present the God whom they firmly believe. Thus, the Synod also discussed the significance of ***sacred liturgy and worship***. Appreciating the Sacred Liturgy as the source and summit of Christian life in its totality,[10] the young people affirm the importance of Christian worship, most especially the Eucharist as the Real Body and Blood of Christ (cf. SC 7).

However the young people demand a "Eucharistic way of life," where they could draw from the Eucharist on how to live the Christian life and celebrate it in worship. They recognized the different avenues and spaces for them to celebrate their faith in communal gatherings and assemblies (e.g., youth days, prayer and Bible study circles, or gatherings in common

9 Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation* Evangelii Gaudium *on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, Apostolic Exhortations, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

10 Vatican II, "The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), in *Vatican Council II*, ed. Austin Flannery O.P. (Northport: New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1984), §10. Further references to the document are indicated in the main text with the abbreviation SC, followed by the section number.

spaces such as coffee shops). They know that through these, they can appreciate more the Eucharist and the rest of the sacraments, for these are the means to proclaim, discuss, and celebrate their faith. Moreover, they also desire to lead and organize events and initiatives (e.g., musical, artistic, or sports events) to attract other young people to the Church (cf. PM 12-14). In articulating these aspirations, young people point out diverse ways of living out the meaning and significance of our faith as it is taught, lived out, and celebrated in the sacraments, most especially in the Eucharist.

With these considered, the Synod brought forth an understanding and living out of the faith by drawing from the treasures of the Church and appropriating it within the context of the young. Furthermore, these expressions are centered on Christ, who accompanies and listens to those who follow Him.

Voational Discernment: Faith and the Fullness of Life

Finally, the Synod discussed ***vocational discernment***, with special attention to the fundamental call to holiness and its appropriation to given situations and contexts. More than just laying down specific guidelines for making the "right choices" in life, the Synod emphasized that knowing God's will involves going through a process of prayer and reflection (see FD 77). Furthermore, the fruit of this process is to recognize and make good and loving choices, which the Lord desires that every person commits given his or her fundamental call to holiness.

The Synod greatly emphasized that this call to holiness is not restricted to the priestly and/or religious life. Rather, holiness is found and expressed in different ways of living that

young people today know and feel they are called to (cf. PM 8; IL 85). Seeing it as a "proposal of love" and a "missionary sending," the Synod pointed out that vocation is fundamentally relational, taking into consideration the quality of relationships that one has with God and with others. Therefore, what is necessary is to use one's own gifts and talents in the service of God and neighbor, which constitutes the loving choices that we are called to make.

It is noteworthy that part of responding to this call to holiness is to choose what is right and avoid evil.[11] Living a moral life might be more challenging given the changing social norms, public opinions, technology, and social media. Without issuing moral judgments on some issues, the Synod pointed out that young people need to understand their situations to do what is good. It called for young people to transcend a certain sense of "moralism" and get in touch with the real, individual situations that call them to be good and do good.[12] As with discerning God's call to be and act in a certain way, the young are called to seek the guidance and accompaniment of Christ (through the Church), not only teachings but also in witnessing a good and holy life.

Bringing all these together, the Synod provides an understanding of young people based on the Christian understanding of personhood, which binds Christian anthropology and morality with our theology of grace, evident in present circumstances and challenges. The Church firmly believes

11 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Manila: Word & Life Publications, 1994), no. 1777. This is the Church teaching on conscience, as "a judgment of reason" through which he comes to know the good to be done and the evil to be avoided (CCC 1778).

12 In the Presynodal Meeting Document, this is the participants' way of describing a particular stance the Church takes with regard to morality and moral teachings (see PM 1.).

that, as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, human beings are called to live a life that glorifies God; in doing so, they receive the fullness of life and the salvation they seek and desire (GS 12). Though these ultimate ends are freely granted by God, with the desire for it placed in their nature,[13] free and intellect need to be exercised to understand and pursue these ends. Despite limitations, the human person is called to make choices that reflect and manifest God's love and goodness and affirm and value our God-given dignity. These choices involve life-defining and small acts of charity. Thus, young people are called to choose freely and even"risk" living the way of life that God calls them to be and incarnate His love and mercy.

Conclusion: The Church "Ever Ancient and Ever New" Within the Horizon of Hope

To summarize this discussion of the three major aspects in the XV Ordinary Synod of Bishops, it is important to see that the Synod reflected and touched on the fundamental aspects and dimensions of the Christian faith and life within the context and situation of young people today. This active dialogue involving the Church, the young people, and all peoples of good will lead to a further articulation of our fundamental beliefs on God, the Church, the human person, and the challenges brought by the present circumstances. In other words, it touches on the theological themes of **ecclesiology, divine revelation, Christian worship, Christology, Christian anthropology, and Christian morality.** Indeed,

13 In this regard see also Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967).

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the Church in her synodality, shows that she can respond to the signs of the times and critically and prayerfully discern how to move forward. She does so by incarnating the treasures handed to her in our current situation. This fulfills St. Augustine's words of a Church "ever ancient and ever so new."[14]

This way of being Church says something about doing theology as a fundamental aspect in her life. Reflecting on the process and fruits of the Synod, it can be seen how theology is attuned not only to official teachings but to the present realities. In addition, theology also pays attention to other disciplines that aid in understanding God, the Church, the world, and the human person. What emerges is a dialogical and "synodal" theology. It is attentive to the signs of the times while being faithful to "seeking understanding." More importantly, it leads to fruitful action and encounter with the world, especially with persons and communities. The Gospel is preached and made alive in particular situations, cultures, and contexts.

After having seen how the Church exists in a synodal manner, it must not be forgotten that all these articulations and proposed responses are placed within the horizon of hope. The synodal process highlights the hope of the Church that the young can "see visions and dream dreams" (cf. Joel 3:1; PM 15) and participate in the divine work of "making all things new" (Rev 21:5). Surely, the conversation and dialogical process initiated at this Synod must continue even after the Synod. As time passes, new challenges and opportunities to preach the Gospel will appear. Most of all, one must see that the Church places her hopes on the young who hope and

14 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), X, xxvii.

dream for a better future. In turn, they will lead the Church closer to God, their true end. Uncertainty looms, and the Church's "ever ancient and ever new" task of bringing the world closer to God remains as daunting as ever. The pilgrim people of God can only hope and trust in the God who guides and accompanies them, the same "promise-keeping" God who loves and calls today's young people.