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2018 SYNOD OF BISHOPS ON THE YOUTH

An Overview

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In January 2017, Pope Francis wrote to young people encouraging them to help the Church prepare for the 2018 Synod. Francis said he chose the topic "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment" because "I wanted you to be the center of attention, because you are in my heart." He also said that the preparatory document (released on January 13, 2017) was entrusted to the youth "as your 'compass' on this synodal journey."[1]

Employing the paradigm of God's call, which is "a compelling invitation, a challenge" to Abraham to "go" and set out for the future, Francis noted: "I invite you to hear God's voice resounding in your heart through the breath of the Holy Spirit.… Have you heard this voice? Have you felt this urge to undertake this journey?" Francis notes that the Church "wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith; even your doubts and your criticism.… My brother bishops and I want even more to 'work with you for your joy' (2 Cor. 1:24). I

[1]Francis, *Letter to Young People on the Occasion of the Presentation of the Preparatory Document of the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (Jan. 13, 2017), available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170113_lettera-giovani-doc-sinodo.html.

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entrust you to Mary of Nazareth.…"[2] In short, Francis humbly admits that the Church may not have all the answers, but she sincerely wishes to hear the voice of the youth and be engaged with them.

Surprise Initiative. On the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi (October 4, 2017), Pope Francis at the conclusion of his general weekly audience invited young people (both Christian and the followers of other faiths) to a "pre-synod meeting" to be held on March 19–24, 2018 in Rome. Francis sees this gathering as an opportunity for the Church "to listen to the hopes and concerns of young men and women." He said: "Through this journey, the Church wants to listen to the voices, the sensibilities, the faith as well as the doubts and criticisms of young people."[3]

The General Secretariat of the Synod said that the Pope's initiative "will allow young people to express their expectations and desires as well as their uncertainties and concerns in the complex affairs of today's world," and noted that the young people attending this March 2018 meeting (seven months prior to the opening of the Synod) "will represent bishops' conferences, the Eastern Catholic Churches, men and women in consecrated life and seminarians.…" It will also include "representatives from other Christian communities and other religions" as well as "experts in the fields of education, culture, sports and arts, who 'are involved in helping young people discern their choices in life.'"[4] Young people from the "extreme existential peripheries" will also be present.[5]

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[2]Francis, *Letter to Young People.*

[3]Junno Arocho Esteves, "Pope announces pre-synod meeting to listen to youths' hopes, doubts," *Catholic News Service* (Oct. 4, 2017), http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2017/pope-announces-pre-synod-meeting-to-listen-to-youths-hopes-doubts.cfm.

[4]Esteves, "Pope announces pre-synod meeting to listen to youths' hopes, doubts."

[5]Elise Harris, "Pope announces pre-synod meeting with youth as participants," *Catholic News Agency* (Oct. 4, 2017), https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-announces-pre-synod-meeting-with-youth-as-participants-96002.

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This special gathering in Rome "is meant to [complement] and 'enrich' the consultation" process that has already begun "with the publication of the Synod's preparatory document and a questionnaire available for youth to [accomplish] online [described below]." The dates for this worldwide meeting were intentionally selected "to coincide with the celebration of the 2018 diocesan World Youth Day event," which has the theme "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."[6] The event concludes on Palm Sunday with Mass celebrated by the Pope. Francis has repeatedly insisted: "We need to listen to young people."[7]

Background to the Preparatory Document of the 2018 Synod. The youth are seen as those persons ranging from 16 to 29 years of age.[8] Moreover, it is clear that discussions will have to be adapted to different local situations and circumstances. The preparatory document has been sent out widely throughout the Church; it "'begins the Synod's phase of consultation of the entire People of God,' to gather information on the current condition of the young … so as to be able to carry out an adequate discernment with a view to the drafting of the *Instrumentum Laboris* [working document for the synod]."[9] It should be noted that "joy and love" are frequently mentioned in the document, providing

[6]Harris, "Pope announces pre-synod meeting with youth as participants."

[7]"Pope Francis: Audience: Pre-synodal Meeting with Young People from Across the World from 19 to 24 March 2018: 'We need to listen to young people!'" (Oct. 4, 2017), https://agensir.it/quotidiano/2017/10/4/pope-francis-audience-pre-synodal-meeting-with-young-people-from-across-the-world-from-19-to-24-march-2018-we-need-to-listen-to-young-people/

[8]"Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment" [Preparatory Document for the 2018 Synod on the Youth], available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20170113_documento-preparatorio-xv_en.html. All quotations in this article come from this document unless cited otherwise.

[9]"Presentation of the Preparatory Document of the Synod on 'Youth, faith and vocational discernment'" (Jan. 13, 2017), available at https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/01/13/170113c.html.

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clear links to *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Amoris Laetitia*. There are also references to *Laudato Si'* and *Lumen Fidei*. One notes that all of Francis's previous major writings are mentioned in this preparatory document, though the insights of *Evangelii Gaudium* feature most prominently.

Structure of the Document. The complete document, including the questionnaire, reaches twenty-one printed pages. Following the *Introduction*, one finds three chapters: **I.** *Young People in Today's World;* **II.** *Faith, Discernment, Vocation;* and **III.** *Pastoral Activity*. The detailed *Questionnaire* is an integral part of the document, deemed essential for the synodal process to be grounded and effective. In a broad sense, this writer believes that the document reflects the time-tested "See, Judge, Act" approach; each of the three chapters corresponds to one of the three moments of seeing, judging, and acting.

Introductory Section of the Document. "Proclaiming the Joy of the Gospel is the mission entrusted by the Lord to His Church." To better accomplish this mission, one must look to the Synod on the New Evangelization and *Evangelii Gaudium* as well as the two synods on the family and *Amoris Laetitia*. In the 2018 synod, the Church seeks "to examine herself on how she can lead young people to recognize and accept the call." The Church knows "the strength and beauty of young people, [namely] the ability to rejoice at the beginning of undertakings, to give oneself totally without [looking] back, to pick oneself up and begin again in search of new conquests."

The Gospel image of John the Apostle can serve "both [as] an example of a young person who chooses to follow Jesus and 'the disciple Jesus loved' (Jn. 13:23; 19:26; 21:7)." Again and again, the Gospels narrate Jesus's invitation to "Come and See" (John 1:35–39, 43–47). Consult also John 13:21–26, 33–38 [Last Supper]; 19:25–27 [Foot of the Cross]; 20:1–10 [Visit to the Tomb]; and 21:1–14 [Jesus's Appearance and the Miraculous Catch of Fish].

> John's example can be of assistance in understanding that the vocational experience is a gradual process of inner discernment and growth in the faith, which leads to discovering the fullness of the joy of life and love, making a gift of oneself, and participating in the proclamation of the Good News.

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Chapter One: Young People in Today's World. This chapter does not intend to be "a comprehensive analysis of society or the young people's world." There is a "multiplicity of worlds when speaking of young people" (e.g., demographics, history, religious traditions, gender, perceptions of reality, forms of domination/freedom, stages of life, the reality of migrants and refugees, etc.). Local adaptation is therefore always necessary to address the specific circumstances of various regions and peoples.

1. A Rapidly Changing World. Rapid change and transformation appear to be "the main characteristic[s] of contemporary societies and cultures." This often produces uncertainty and increased vulnerability. Many challenges have emerged: "the overwhelming increase in the number of refugees and migrants," "economic globalization," the "throw-away culture," and societies becoming "increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious." Thus, "the situation is seen as a sign of our times." Here one recalls the insight of Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes:* to carry out her task of evangelization, "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes* 4).

2. New Generation. Social changes affect young people's "aspirations, needs, feelings and manner of relating to others." There is also the challenge of "multi-culturalism." Some characteristic features shaping today's young are: a) *Belonging and Participation;* b) *Personal and Institutional Points of Reference;* and c) the *Hyper-Connected Generation*. The Church's "pastoral activity" therefore needs readjustment.

The document goes on to mention the many concrete challenges facing this new generation:

> young people experiencing poverty and exclusion; those who grow up without parents or family, or are unable to go to school; children and young boys and girls who live on the street[s] in many suburbs; the young who are unemployed, displaced persons and migrants; those who are victims of exploitation, trafficking and slavery; children and young people forcefully recruited in criminal gangs or as guerrilla fighters; and child brides or girls forced to marry against their will.

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How can the Church reach out to these disadvantaged persons, seeking their inclusion in the broader society?

3. Young People and Choices. Many youth see their horizon as consisting of "options which can always be reversed rather than definitive choices." They say: "Today I choose this, tomorrow we'll see."

Francis asks:

> How can we reawaken the greatness and the courage of comprehensive choices, of the impulses of the heart in order to face academic and emotional challenges? The phrase I use very often is: take a risk! Take a risk. Whoever does not risk does not walk. "But what if I make a mistake?" Blessed be the Lord! You will make more mistakes if you remain still.

The document also sees the positive aspects of the situation of the youth today: "The search for ways to reawaken courage and the impulses of the heart must necessarily take into account that the person of Jesus and the Good News proclaimed by Him continue to fascinate many young people."

Chapter Two: Faith, Discernment, Vocation. Through every phase of this 2018 Synod, "the Church wants again to state her desire to encounter, accompany and care for every young person, without exception." For the Church, this means "accompanying them [the youth] and walking beside them on this journey as they deal with the weaknesses and difficulties in their lives, and especially supporting them in the exercise of freedom which is still being formed." This author notes that a pivotal concept found in this document and in the Church's ministry with the youth is *accompaniment*, of which one may assert is a primary mode of all youth ministry.

Francis proposes that the Church follow the example of Saint Joseph, "a strong and courageous man, a working man," because "in his heart we see great tenderness, which is not the virtue of the weak but rather a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love."

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1. Faith and Vocation. "Faith is seeing things as Jesus does … [and] is the source of vocational discernment; … [it enables one to make] concrete and consistent choices in life." Faith is "both a gift from on high and a response to feeling oneself chosen and loved. Faith 'is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love.'" Thus, we "gradually become aware of God's plan of profound love for each" of us.

Our dialogue with God takes place in our consciences. "As taught by the Second Vatican Council, conscience 'is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths' (*Gaudium et Spes* 16). Conscience is therefore an inviolable place where a promising invitation is present." It is in the depth of one's conscience that an individual hears and responds to God's call.

2. The Gift of Discernment. A key focus of the Synod is "vocational discernment, that is, the process by which a person makes fundamental choices, in dialogue with the Lord and listening to the voice of the Spirit, starting with the choice of one's state in life.… The Spirit speaks and acts through the happenings in the life of each person."

Three verbs are used in *Evangelii Gaudium* (51) to describe discernment: *recognize* (one's concrete situation), *interpret* (one's desires and inner movements), and *choose* (in authentic freedom and personal responsibility); all these are to be done in "coherency with one's life." Indeed, "promoting truly free and responsible choices … remains the goal of every serious pastoral vocational programme."

3. Paths toward Vocation and Mission. Vocational discernment "is not accomplished in a single act; … [it] is a long process unfolding over time, during which one continues to monitor the signs used by the Lord to indicate … a vocation that is very personal and unique."

> Time is fundamental in verifying the effectiveness of a decision made.… Accepting the mission [vocation] implies the willingness to risk one's life and to travel the way of the cross, in the footsteps of Jesus.… Only by giving up being selfishly occupied with one's needs does a person

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> become open to accommodate God's plan.… Consequently, contact with poverty, vulnerability and need are of great importance on the road to vocational discernment.

A fundamental question needs to be asked: is the person willing to become "imbued with the 'smell of the sheep'"?

4. Accompaniment.

> Three basic beliefs underlie the process of discernment.… The first is that the Spirit of God works in the heart of every man and woman.… The second belief is that the human heart, because of its weakness and sin, is normally divided.… The third belief is that every way of life imposes a choice, because a person cannot remain indefinitely in an undetermined state.

To guide the process of discernment and choice, "the Church's spiritual tradition emphasizes the importance of personal accompaniment." Such *accompaniment* "demands the constant refinement of one's sensitivity to the voice of the Spirit and leads to discovering a resource and richness in a person's individual character." Here the Church is to follow Jesus's pattern in accompanying the young in their vocational discernment; the Church "accepts her call to collaborate in the joy of young people.…"

Chapter Three: Pastoral Activity. The purpose of this third chapter is "to focus on how earnestly to respond to the challenge of pastoral care and vocational discernment, taking into consideration those involved in this task, the places where this guidance takes place and the resources which are available." The discernment process needs to be tailored to the needs and experiences of the diverse local Churches around the world.

1. Walking with Young People.

> Accompanying young people requires going beyond a preconceived framework, encountering young people where they are, adapting to their times and pace of life and taking them seriously.… In this regard, Pope Francis said: "Vocational pastoral ministry is learning the style of Jesus, who passes through the places of daily life, stops without being hurried and, by looking at our brothers with mercy, leads them to encounter God the Father."

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Accompanying the young demands three actions: a) *going out* from any Church framework in which individuals sense restrictions and limitations; b) *seeing* and appreciating the "joys, hopes, sadness and anxieties" of the young; and c) *calling* and inviting the young to "newness of life."

2. Agents. A variety of persons are needed to guide the young who are "not objects but agents" of their own future. Who are these agents who can guide the young in their life's journey? They are: a) *Young People Themselves* who give shining testimony of a faith-centered life; b) *A Responsible Community* that seeks to form the new generations; and c) *People of Reference* who provide credible witness, e.g. parents, family, shepherds of souls, teachers and educators.

3. Pivotal Places. Simply stated, these are places and occasions for personal interaction with the young; some examples can be listed as follows: daily life, World Youth Days, parishes, Church schools, volunteer activities, associations, ecclesial movements, and the digital world, among others.

4. Resources. The document provides a list of possible resources to be used in fostering youth engagement; these include: engagement through pastoral opportunities; educative, evangelizing paths; and silence, contemplation, and prayer.

5. Mary of Nazareth. The 2018 synodal process "is entrusted to Mary," who

> in every stage of her existence accepted the Word, and preserved it, pondering [on] it in her heart.… Each young person can discover in Mary's life the way to listen, the courage that faith generates, the depths of discernment and dedication to service.… Mary opened her heart to "Here I am," and thus began the Gospel journey.

Questionnaire. The document concludes with a questionnaire composed of three parts: 1) Gathering Statistics; 2) Evaluating the Situation (here one finds special questions according to geographical areas); and 3) Sharing Activities. The detailed questions elicit depth reflection, and clear instructions assist respondents. The data gathered will facilitate the drafting of the working document (*instrumentum laboris*)

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to be used at the actual synod itself. Although not explicitly stated, it is the view of this author that the three-fold structure of the questionnaire is once again built upon the helpful "see-judge-act" methodology.

Conclusion. One may recall the forthright words of Pope Francis in determining the topic of the 2018 Synod to be focused on the youth. He addresses the youth, noting that the Church "wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith; even your doubts and your criticism.… My brother bishops and I want even more to 'work with you for your joy' (2 Cor. 1:24)." Francis says that he wants the youth to be "the center of attention, because you are in my heart.… I entrust you to Mary of Nazareth."[10]

[10]Francis, *Letter to Young People*.

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