Philippine Pastoral Implications of Pope Francis' Vision of Youth Evangelization

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Introduction

On January 18, 2015, a vast crowd greeted Pope Francis on the grounds of the University of Santo Tomas (UST) in Manila, where he met with different religious leaders and led a liturgical celebration at the UST Sports Field for his encounter with the youth.

With fatherly affection, Francis said to the youth present:

> It is a joy for me to be with you this morning. I greet each of you from the heart, and I thank all those who made this meeting possible. During my visit to the Philippines, *I wanted in a particular way to meet with young people, to listen to you and to talk with you.* I want to express the love and the hopes of the Church for you. And I want to encourage you, as Christian citizens of this country, to offer yourselves passionately and honestly to the great work of renewing your society and helping to build a better world. In a special way, I thank the young people who have offered words of welcome to me.[1]

Pope Francis listened to four representatives of the Filipino youth who shared their testimonies and raised questions in the

1 Pope Francis, *Message with Young People: Address of his Holiness Pope Francis.* Vatican Archive, January 18, 2015, accessed July 7, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco_20150118_srilanka-filippine-incontro-giovani.html.

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meeting. In the afternoon, during a mass attended by around six million people in Manila's Rizal Park, Francis called on Filipinos to be "outstanding missionaries of the faith in Asia."[2] In his homily, he described the Philippines as "the foremost Catholic country in Asia," saying "this is itself a special gift of God, a blessing," and a "vocation."[3]

Pope Francis believes that as a country which is predominantly Catholic, the Philippines has much to offer in view of evangelization, especially to the youth. On the day the Filipino Church celebrates the "Santo Niño," Francis urged Filipinos to look to the Christ Child, the protector of the Philippines, as their model and reminded them of the importance of protecting the family. He said that Filipinos need to see each child as a gift to be welcomed, cherished, and protected. He concluded that young people need *pastoral care* so they will not be "robbed of hope and condemned to life on the streets."[4]

This article aims to make a thematic presentation of Pope Francis' vision of evangelization and youth evangelization as presented in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) and *Christus Vivit* (CV). Five key themes will be explored in this chapter: (1) the missionary mode of evangelizing, (2) the agents of youth evangelization, (3) synodality and accompaniment, (4) the culture of encounter, (5) and the joy of the Gospel. In each theme, the author gives a brief summary of the key points of Francis' vision of evangelization and youth evangelization. Then, a short synthesis from the two salient points is given. Lastly, an illustration of pastoral implications in the Philippine context is drawn. In conclusion, the author emphasizes that a

2 Scjphil, "Pope's Message to the Youth and Filipino Catholics," *Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Blog,* January 18, 2015, https://scjphil.org/2015/01/18/message-for-the-youth-and-filipinocatholics/ (accessed July 7, 2021).

3 Scjphil, "Pope's Message to the Youth and Filipino Catholics."

4 Ibid.

missionary and synodal Church, a ministry of presence and encounter, and being sensitive to the signs of the times are important elements of youth evangelization.

Integration of Key Evangelization Themes of Pope Francis and Youth Evangelization in *Christus Vivit*

Missionary Mode

Vision of Evangelization

In Pope Francis' vision, he says that the Church is primarily and fundamentally missionary. He dreams that the entire Church would constantly be in a missionary mode—always ready to go out, extend herself to others and preach the Gospel message of Christ, rather than always in a conservation mode (cf. EG 27). Like previous popes, he teaches that the Church does not only have a mission. *The Church is missionary by her very nature.* The moment "mission" is removed from the Church, it ceases to exist. Thus, missionary outreach must be the paradigm for all the Church's activity (cf. EG 15). Furthermore, he advocates that the "ecclesial introversion" mindset must be removed and prefers a Church that is bruised, hurting, and dirty because of going out on the streets (cf. EG 49). A missionary Church is one that goes out from her own comfort zone in order to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel. Hence, he envisions the Church as a missionary Church and sees the role of his pontificate as bringing about the transformation of the Church into a missionary Church. His mission is one that ushers in transformation.

In other words, the missionary mode is one of the salient themes in the pontificate of Pope Francis, as it is evident in

his vision of evangelization. He desires that the Church should go out and continue the journey onto the streets. He wants to promote a new missionary thrust that goes hand in hand with the social dimension of evangelization and overcomes the inward-looking focus of earlier Church theology. He wants the Church not to be self-referential but always going forward to continue in its journey, take the initiative to seek others who have fallen away, and stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast.

Youth Evangelization

In *Christus Vivit,* Pope Francis highlights the context of young people today (cf. CV 86-110). During the 2018 Synod on Youth, most of them raised that many are taken by ideologies, marginalized and socially excluded, influenced by the digital environment, youth migrants, or have experienced violence and abuses. Francis says that the reality where the youth find themselves today is heavily influenced by different aspects of society. Given these situations, there is a need for them to be evangelized.

Concomitantly, youth evangelization for Pope Francis should be primarily missionary. The Church should go out and proclaim the Gospel to the youth. In order to respond to the dreams of young people, the Church must be open, welcoming, and not self-referential. According to the Catholic News Service, "many young people want to know and understand the teachings of the Church."[5] They want to be evangelized. Despite what many people may think, they long for silent reflection and active involvement to serve their communities.

5 Catholic News Service, *"Christus Vivit: Church, World Need the Gifts, Enthusiasm of the Young,"* St. Louis Review, April 2, 2019, https://www.archstl.org/christus-vivitchurch-world-need-the-gifts-enthusiasm-of-young-people-3842 (accessed May 17, 2021).

In the same manner, Francis encourages the youth to take risks, be present and get involved. He asks the youth to have an encounter with the Church.

Synthesis of Evangelization

Part of the Church's **mission is to evangelize the youth**. In CV, Pope Francis emphasizes the reality of the youth today. Given their context, the youth need help, assistance, and pastoral care from the Church. All these realities point out the Church's need to be missionary in her stance. This would only be possible if the Church shifts from self-conserving to a missionary mode of youth evangelizing. The Church cannot just remain enclosed within herself. She must always be ready, as on a mission, to evangelize the youth today.

Secondly, the **entire Church is missionary.** Everyone is involved in this missionary work of youth evangelization and not just the ordained ministers: "Although it is never easy to approach young people, two things have become increasingly evident: the realization that the entire community has to be involved in evangelizing them and the urgent requirement that young people take on a greater role in pastoral outreach" (CV 202). The laity are also involved in this missionary outreach. In the same manner, youth evangelization does not end with the youth being evangelized. After being graced with the gifts of evangelization, they are also called to evangelize others as well. They, in turn, will be missionaries patterned after the missionary Jesus. They are also sent on a mission: "If we hear what the Spirit is saying to us, we have to realize that youth ministry is always missionary" (CV 240). This point will be further elaborated in the next theme.

Pastoral Implications

In 2019, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) dedicated the entire year as the **"Year of the Youth"**—part of its "nine-year journey for the new evangelization." This year-long celebration reflected on the theme "Filipino Youth in Mission: Beloved, Gifted and Empowered." Activities on the national and diocesan levels were aimed at various objectives: youth in formation, youth in community, Church and society, youth in mission, and youth ministry and ministers.

The third goal of the 2019 Year of the Youth was "Youth in Mission." The goal aimed to foster "youth who are constantly inspired by the Church's missionary spirit and the Blessed Virgin Mary, who courageously shares Christ's message of joy and hope to people in difficult situations, rekindles the faith of those who drifted from the Church, and promotes dialogue with other faiths."[6] The 2019 Year of the Youth invited the Church into a prayerful discernment about young people's importance and life-giving presence in the local Church and society. It called for dialogue and active engagement focused on the reconnection and renewal of a new generation of young people in the life of the Church. The Church is sent as on a mission.

A recent survey conducted by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) says that 80% of Filipino youth suffer some form of physical and psychological abuse.[7] Now, the youth are

6 CBCP News, *"An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines,"* CBCP News, May 31, 2018, https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/an-open-letter-of-the-filipino-youth-to-the-catholic-church-in-thephilippines/ (accessed June 22, 2021).

7 MSC Mission Office Philippines, *"Beloved, Gifted, Empowered: The Year of the Youth in the Philippines,"* MSC Mission, July 4, 2019, https://www.mscmissions.ie/news-media/beloved-gifted-empowered-year-youth-philippines/ (accessed June 25, 2021).

facing problems such as poverty, inability to attend school, thoughts of suicide, emotional distress, mental disorder, distorted values, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and the like. These data show that many young people are deeply wounded and broken. In this regard, the Church has an important role and mission in the youth's psychological, emotional, and spiritual healing and well-being.

To give a particular diocesan viewpoint, the fifth pillar of the Diocese of Cubao Priority Agenda for 2019-2027 is "engaging with the youth."[8] According to the Diocese of Cubao Commission on Youth:

> The Filipino youth today faces different issues such as increasing suicide rate, premarital sex, illegal drugs, depression, identity crisis, and family problems that greatly affect their emotional, social, spiritual, physical and moral well-being. These situations hinder their involvement and active participation in the life-mission and work of the Church. Therefore, it is vital for young people to be properly informed and formed about the Catholic faith and Christian values and empower them to be Christ-centered servant leaders and active proponents of change.[9]

Thus, by the end of 2025, the Diocese of Cubao aims to be a local Church where the youth are Christ-centered servant leaders and active proponents of change. This will happen

> through the empowerment of young people by giving intensive leadership training and formation programs that focus on virtue, learning, spirit, and service towards self-transformation; formulation

8 Christ the King Parish, *"2-Page Primer: Diocese of Cubao Priority Agenda 2019-2027,"* CTK Parish, May 2019, https://christthekingparish.ph/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/DCPA-diocese-8-pt-priority-agenda.pdf (accessed July 3, 2021).

9 Christ the King Parish, *"2-Page Primer: Diocese of Cubao Priority Agenda 2019-2027."*

> of programs and activities that engage the youth in the life-mission and work of the Church that will help them become proponents of change; and establishing relationships and collaboration with other ministries that provide opportunities for growth and development of the young.[10]

Hence, the Church and the young people of the Philippines are in mission: proclaiming the Good News who is Christ, especially to their fellow youth in the peripheries.[11] The Filipino youth are beloved by God and his Church, especially through her youth ministry, who raise them up and carries them lovingly through life, with all its trials and tribulations. They are gifted with the Holy Spirit, who inflames them with faith, passion, and courage. Rooted in Christ, they are empowered to shine on a world of darkness and confusion, taking part in His Body, the Church, for building God's Kingdom.

Agents of Youth Evangelization

Vision of Evangelization

In EG, two crucial elements as regards the agents of youth evangelization are emphasized: the agents themselves and the understanding of the renewed emphasis on the missionary nature of the "entire" Church (cf. EG 120). The agents of evangelization are all people. This means everyone not only the clergy, but also the laity. Also, in EG, Pope Francis specifically mentions that primarily, the transcendent agent of evangelization is the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, in this work of evangelization, he says that the Blessed Virgin Mary,

10 Christ the King Parish, *"2-Page Primer: Diocese of Cubao Priority Agenda 2019-2027."*

11 Christ the King Parish, *"2019 is Philippine Catholic Church's Year of the Youth,"* CTK Parish, December 31, 2019, https://christthekingparish.ph/2018/12/31/2019-is-philippinecatholic-churchs-year-of-the-youth/ (accessed July 3, 2021).

https://publications.lst.edu/

the entire people of God, universal Church, diocese, parish, Church institutions, homilists, youth, and the poor, are all vital agents of evangelization (cf. EG 111-134).

Consequently, Pope Francis also emphasizes that anyone who is simply animated by the Holy Spirit can be an evangelizer. They can be ordinary and simple people who manifest a life of faith. Even children, according to him, can evangelize other people because they are also part of the Church. Every Christian is a bearer of God's Word wherever one may find oneself.

Finally, any person can evangelize insofar as he or she can initiate an interpersonal encounter. A real encounter is always between two human beings in all their richness and depth of meaning. To evangelize other people holistically, the agent must initiate an encounter. This is only possible when both parties are open to one another. Evangelization is possible for as long as there is an interpersonal relationship.

Thus, all baptized persons are agents of evangelization. Every Christian is called to engage with one another in the task of evangelization. Everyone is a missionary disciple.[12] As affirmed by EG, "all the members of the People of God are missionary disciples" (EG 120).

Youth Evangelization

In CV, Pope Francis says that youth evangelization is not just for Catholic youth alone. Instead, it is a universal call for all the youth regardless of religious affiliations. Youth ministry must be like a home for everyone, capable of being inclusive and providing room for all kinds of young people

12 James H. Kroeger, M.M., G*o, Teach, Make Disciples: Sourcebook for Mission Education and Animation* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines Episcopal Commission on Mission, 2020), 24.

because the Church is a home with open doors. Youth evangelization is for all. In this line, the pope advocates for a "popular" rather than an "elitist" youth ministry—one that is inclusive even of youth that might not yet accept some aspects of Catholic teaching. Francis states that it is enough to have an open mind to all those who desire and are willing to be encountered by God's revealed truth.

Synthesis of Evangelization

First, since evangelization is a task of everyone, **youth evangelization is a vocation for all**. Youth evangelization is a task of the Church, the People of God. It is not reserved to the ordained ministers alone, but the entire People of God must be involved. It is a responsibility for all Church members and disciples. Every member of the Church shares in this mission and exists for its service, for anyone who has truly experienced God's love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love, especially to the young people. Evangelizing the youth is embedded in the Christian faith and mission.

Secondly, the **youth are also evangelizers**. In CV, Francis sees that young people are "street preachers" (*callejeros de la fe*), joyfully bringing Jesus to every street, every town square, and every corner of the world. He believes that the young bring about fresh and immense hope because the young represent new directions, ways of thinking, and different approaches to the present realities. They offer the Church new ways and means to make her relevant and responsive to the signs of the times lest the community cling to an emotional nostalgia for structures and customs that are long dead and passé.

Finally, as evangelizers themselves, the **youth's characteristics are essential in evangelization**. The special characteristics of the youth can, in turn, be used to evangelize other

people as well. Pope Francis describes the youth as hopeful, in an age of choices, gifted, enthusiastic, connected to Christ, unique, joyful, courageous, and committed. As concluded by Pope Francis, the goal of youth evangelization does not end with the youth being evangelized only. After being evangelized, the youth are also called to be evangelizers and missionaries as well, bringing with them all their gifts, talents, and characteristics that they can share with other people.

Pastoral Implications

One of the four themes of the 2019 Year of the Youth is the "Youth Ministry and Youth Ministers." The Filipino youth have stated that they aim "to have a preferential ministry for the young animated by youth ministers, who are filled with the spirit of the new evangelization and equipped with pastoral skills and resources, ably responding to youth issues."[13] In the Philippines, the loci of youth evangelization are more commonly at home, in school, and the religious community. The agents of Filipino youth evangelization can be parents, school teachers, elders, and their fellow youth themselves. The family is the basic unit of society; thus, evangelization primarily begins at home.

According to the 2002 nationwide survey among Filipino Catholic youth, the respondents manifest their positive appreciation of family values and strong attachment to family members, particularly their parents, in spite of the general impression that they prefer to stay with their peers rather than with their families.[14] Filipino Catholic youth are always linked

13 *CBCP News,* "An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines."

14 National Filipino Catholic Youth Survey 2002. Quoted in Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines Episcopal Commission for Catechesis and Catholic Education, *National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 2007), 76.

to their families and their growth in faith. The Philippines is a country that places great value and importance on the family, and indeed, the family is significant in the value and faith formation of their children. Kissing of hand, saying *po* and *opo*, respect for elderly, are only a few of the Filipino traits and virtues that are preserved and traditionally handed on by the family. Basic prayers, names and lives of the saints, and Catholic feasts are often introduced by Filipino parents. There can be no doubt that the Filipino family plays a pivotal role in the life of the individual, society, and their faith formation.[15]

Vatican II stresses that "the family is, in a sense, a school for human enrichment" (GS 52). Significantly, even the youth today still refer to a family member as the first agent who introduced them to the faith.[16] This underscores the indispensable role of parents in educating their children in the faith. Therefore, parents are valuable evangelizers and formators of the faith because, in the family, God is made visible and credible through parents' words of love and acts of charity toward their children.

Secondly, the Filipino youth express that they value their education with their teachers and formators who teach them much of what they know, since they spend most of their time in school.[17] Sadly, some parents have passed the responsibility of educating and forming their children in faith and virtues to the school because of different reasons such as economic realities and single-parenting. Some simply feel that they are incapable of keeping up with their responsibility as formators of faith. Too often, the catechesis of the young is considered

15 CBCP Episcopal Commission for Catechesis and Catholic Education, *National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines* (Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 2007), 63. Abbreviated as: NCDP.

16 NCDP, 77.

17 *CBCP News,* "An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines."

only in the context of religious instruction.[18] Thus, the author noticed that while some took advantage of the Catholic heritage being offered to students by the institution, many also drifted away from their faith. The campus ministers in the school also share the same sentiments. In their facilitating of recollections and retreats, they realized that there is really a need to follow up with the students about how the sessions and input affected their lives after a series of spiritual-growth activities. The goal is to assess if there is now a growth in their relationship with God and their perspective about life and dealings with others. Thus, there is a vital need for the schools to invest more in Christian Living classes, increase spiritual awareness through quality recollections and retreats, and initiate spiritual-growth activities that allow young people to deepen their faith. After the family, the schools are vital arenas for evangelization.

Lastly, the Church or religious community is the most common place where the youth evangelizers are to be present. Through the Church and her pastoral activities, the youth find a place for encountering Jesus and deepening their faith. The religious community is where the youth feel a sense of belongingness with their fellow youth, hone and share their gifts, talents, and creativities for the Church, and encounter Jesus, the ultimate evangelizer. Angelica Mananes, a parish youth leader in the Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish, Bantug, Nueva Ecija, shares her insights:

> Pope Francis said, "Let the Church always be a place of mercy and hope where everyone is welcomed, loved and forgiven—the place that every young person is looking for." The Church is unlike other people who might love us at first, but if they notice something they don't like, they can easily leave

18 NCDP, 77.

> us. God's love for us has no limit—He loves us wholeheartedly. Let us not waste our talents, the gifts that God has given us; let us not be afraid to dream of great things because the Church believes that young people in mission are beloved, gifted, and empowered.[19]

Indeed, the Church has a great role in youth evangelization. The CBCP Commission on Youth said in a statement: "In this journey, we tell the story of the Filipino youth with our Risen Lord; we, young Filipinos and Filipinas listen to Jesus, the Youth Minister par excellence and, as we are blessed and gifted during this journey, *we are empowered to witness and share our faith*."[20] All baptized people in the Philippines are called to be agents of youth evangelization.

Synodality and Accompaniment

Vision of Evangelization

Pope Francis envisions a decentralized papacy because it could complicate the missionary outreach of the Church. Instead, he advocates the way of "synodality." He explains that what Jesus is asking from the Church today is contained in the word "synod," which means "walking together—laity, religious, clergy, and the bishops." Admittedly, he purports that it looks like an easy concept, but it is difficult to put into practice.

Similarly, accompaniment is one of the major themes in Pope Francis' papacy. Jesus Himself was incarnated into

19 MSC Mission Office Philippines, *"Beloved, Gifted, Empowered: The Year of the Youth in the Philippines,"* MSC Mission, July 4, 2019, https://www.mscmissions.ie/news-media/beloved-gifted-empowered-year-youth-philippines/ (accessed June 25, 2021).

20 CBCP News, *"Church to Observe Year of the Youth,"* CBCP News, November 15, 2018, https://cbcpnews.net/cbcpnews/church-to-observe-year-of-the-youth (accessed July 9, 2021).

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vulnerable humanity so that He can walk, journey, and accompany the entire people of God. The work of accompaniment that is given to the Church is classified as spiritual accompaniment, the art of listening and being centered on the Word of God.

Spiritual Accompaniment is an approach that leads other people to God by being available to them and walking with them in their spiritual journey. Many people think that they can find true happiness by living apart from God and so engage in worldly things to seek fulfillment. However, they fail to see that they remain existentially orphaned, helpless, and homeless apart from God. Guiding other people towards a new life in Christ, sharing with them God's Word, and living a life of familiarity with God are means by which an agent can spiritually accompany other people.

The art of listening is another approach in accompaniment that Pope Francis aims to develop for everyone. According to him, listening, which is more than simply hearing other people, is an openness of the heart that makes closeness possible so that a genuine spiritual encounter may occur. In listening, there must be a constant and honest effort to understand others. This listening requires the agents to be present—attending and tending to another as a person.

Finally, Pope Francis mentions that in order to be an evangelizer through accompaniment, it is necessary to be centered on the Word of God. Familiarity with the Sacred Scripture enables a person to draw from the wellspring of God's love and wisdom. Moreover, God's Word itself is the very source of evangelization. The Church cannot evangelize if she does not allow herself to be evangelized first by the Word of God.

Youth Evangelization

The FD affirms that "synodality" is always done for the sake of mission. The Church needs to gather together, work with one another and listen to each other in order to learn and grow more in harmony. Pope Francis highlighted that youth ministry must be synodal in essence. It should involve journeying and walking together that value the gifts and charisms of each young person. Motivated by the Holy Spirit, youth evangelization must always be inspired and directed by God, who gathers every person to Himself. Through synodality and accompaniment, the Church, together with the youth, can learn from one another and reflect the richness of the Catholic faith.

Synthesis of Evangelization

Pope Francis has mentioned the theme of accompaniment in evangelization and journeying together with the youth in CV. First, Francis expresses the problems, situations, and contexts of the youth that surfaced from the 2018 Synod on the Youth. Given all these realities, he is telling the Church that **the youth need to be accompanied.** The youth need pastoral care, and hence, synodality is the key in dealing with them. Young people need shepherds who will guide and direct them back into the life of meaning with Christ. They need teachers who walk the talk. They long for role models to emulate. They want leaders who will journey and listen to them and not boss or police every work they do.

Secondly, **youth evangelization must be experiential**. The youth need evangelizers who will help them know Christ and deepen their relationship with him through companionship and experiences, not mere indoctrination through dogmas, doctrines, or rigid Church teachings. Pope Francis

notes that many young people get bored with the Church, lose the fire of their encounter with Christ, and are robbed of the joy of following Him because the approach of the Church in evangelizing is only through formation meetings, lectures, and inputs. Church interventions to the youth should approach them *experientially*. Evangelization through experiences proves helpful in attracting the young to join Church groups. It must consist of events for renewing and deepening the experience of love and personal encounter with Christ with the accompaniment of the evangelizers. Pope Francis suggests that rather than being too concerned with teaching doctrines, awakening and consolidating their experiences of encounter with the Lord would be more holistic and rooted.

Lastly, the Church needs to enter into **dialogue with contemporary youth culture.** According to the 2018 Synod on the Youth, many programs for the young are no longer effective because the approaches used no longer apply to the present generation. The youth today want more involvement and collaboration. They want to be active participants in Church activities and not just passive receivers of the Gospel. To be sensitive to the signs of the times is a great key to enter the world of the youth today. Pope Francis suggests that this can be done through testimonies, songs, active prayer meetings, spiritual reflection on the Scriptures, and even a prudent maximization of social media, where the youth are into these days.

Pastoral Implications

Lei Lopez, a pastoral counselor of the RMT-Center for Family Ministries in Ateneo de Manila University, recounts her experiences of journeying and accompanying adolescents and young adults (many of whom are seminarians) in the Philippines. She often listens to stories of heartbreak, suicidal

attempts, pressure from parents, sexuality, skepticism, toxic relationships, betrayals, etc. While there is a tendency to immediately judge the youth today using the pretext of the older generation, she notes:

> Yet if we are to be ministering to them, we have to set aside these tendencies and judgments. We start with an honest effort to understand them. There must be a degree of curiosity about what is happening to the teen, adolescent, *millenial*, young adult or youth whom we are ministering to.[21]

The Filipino youth see themselves as beloved, gifted, and empowered.[22] They want to be seen as life-giving, dynamic, overflowing with blessings, willing and open to learn and grow; that they are searching for their identity in terms of meaning and purpose, and that they are called to act, but also need *guidance formation.* Lopez acclaims that in her dealings with the youth, what usually stands out as the one thing that makes the most sense and impacts to them is *when they are noticed and listened to.*[23] In other words, the best approach to accompany and engage with the youth is a ministry of listening. Coming from the perspective of a pastoral counselor, if the ministry of listening is truly practiced, encounters and engagements with the youth will be more effective and meaningful.

Earl Valdez, a priest of the Archdiocese of Manila and one of the participants of the pre-synodal meeting held in Rome in preparation for the XV Synod of Bishops on "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment" affirms that

21 Lei Lopez, "A Pastoral Counselor's Reflections on Ministering to the Youth," in *Tinig Loyola,* 21 (2020): 31.

22 *CBCP News,* "An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines."

23 *Ibid.*

> Overall, the participants believe that all young people in the world have enough gifts and capacities to contribute to the Church and the world in new and fresh ways. They can accept the mission of evangelizing through listening and accompaniment in their own contexts in the same way that they are guided and led by good Christians in their own lives, ordained and lay alike.[24]

In accompanying the Filipino youth, the evangelizers should first provide the space and opportunities for them to name their situation from their own perspectives and contexts. The Church must be willing to first dialogue on the level of the concerned people themselves, and it is only then that the evangelizers propose and discern ways of moving forward and determining what the Lord desires for the Church and the youth in particular. Deep pastoral listening is the starting point for accompanying young people in their journey of discipleship.

Secondly, considering pastoral implications during the 2019 Year of the Youth, various activities were organized by the youth ministries in parishes, dioceses, and even other religious communities. The activities such as youth camps, vocation jamborees, piety seminars, and others were held. In addition to religious festivities, some workshops such as leadership trainings, seminars on mental health issues, preventing suicides, and issues on sexuality (teenage pregnancy, premarital sex, contraceptives, and relationships) were also conducted.[25] Mainly as a response to the needs of the youth from their open letter to the Philippine Catholic Church, these activities allow the youth to engage and participate experientially in

24 Earl Valdez, "Synodality and the Church," 2019. Unpublished Article.

25 John Christian Baxa, "Evaluation and Reflection on the Year of the Youth in the Philippines," in *Tinig Loyola* 21 (2020): 29.

Church activities. Most of the Filipino youth benefited from these various programs. Indeed, for youth evangelization to be more effective, it must be experiential, guided, and accompanied by various agents of evangelization.

Lastly, in the open letter of the Filipino youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines, they assert that many of them regard themselves as "more spiritual than religious."[26] They acknowledge the presence of God, believe in Him, and yearn for Him; however, many choose to express this longing for a deeper relationship with the Lord and heighten their experience of faith through personal prayer and participation in various prayer gatherings—not through liturgical celebrations. In this context, what the young people need is guidance and accompaniment. If the Church only insists on its doctrines, teachings and pastoral letters, little evangelization can happen. This is because the youth also mentioned their apparent distrust and doubt on the credibility of the Church.[27] Hence, entering into dialogue with their youth culture, meeting them where they are, and listening to them are basic steps for the Catholic Church to understand their emotions, sentiments, and spiritual needs, which will serve as a guide to formulate a pastoral program.

The Filipino youth emphasize:

> Our hearts are open to see and embrace role models who give witness to the goodness of life while rooted in the family. We want our elders to journey with us, to be approachable and not untouchable, to level with us to a certain extent, to walk the talk, and to make us sense that we are all equal. We are persons

26 *CBCP News,* "An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines," 4.

27 *CBCP News,* "An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines," 4.

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> capable of contributing in the way others do—with our own skills, knowledge, and wisdom.[28]

The CBCP said in reply:

> As with the two disciples of Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-35), Jesus constantly and faithfully accompanies young people in the journey of life. We, as Church in the Philippines, are called to take the same stance with our youth: journeying with them, listening to their doubts and dreams, inviting them to conversion and communion, and raising them up in mission to enlighten and inflame the country with the Spirit of Christ and to tell the world of His love.[29]

This mission of accompanying the Filipino youth does not cease with the end of the 2019 Year of the Youth, but rather, it is a beginning for the Church to journey with the youth towards being beloved, gifted, and empowered. They need teachers and mentors. The youth have much to offer if only they are listened to, initiated through experiences, and experience accompaniment.

Culture of Encounter

Vision of Evangelization

As stated in the first theme, Pope Francis strongly believes that the entire Church must be missionary by her very nature. She must always be in missionary disposition to go out and preach the Gospel to all peoples. In doing so, however, Francis also believes that a "Culture of Encounter" must be at the forefront of every mission. For him, it is not only enough to see but look; not only hear but listen; and not just feel pity but

28 *CBCP News,* "An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines."

29 Christ the King Parish, *"2019 is Philippine Catholic Church's Year of the Youth."*

be moved with compassion. Simply put, he is asking the evangelizing community to get involved, be present and create a culture of encounter with other people.

In the Scriptures, the covenantal relationship between God and His people is very prominent. Out of love, mercy, and compassion, God remains faithful to the Israelites despite their infidelity. He saves them through the prophets, speaks with them, and works miracles for the people. This relationship is primarily an encounter of love and faithfulness. In the time of Jesus, many accounts record Jesus' encounters with various people. Likewise, he would speak to them, listen to their struggles and walk with them. He is constantly reaching out to everyone and inviting them to an encounter of life.

In this culture of encounter with one another, Pope Francis reiterates the words of Pope Benedict XVI, which says that "the beginning of an encounter with one another is but a product of one's encounter with Christ" (cf. CV 11). Thus, an evangelizer's encounter with God leads to a desire to encounter others. It is the encounter with the mercy of God which commissioned evangelizers as missionary disciples to share the Gospel with those who are outside the experience of God's merciful love.

Pope Francis says that people are already used to the "culture of indifference." In this situation, people usually tend to make comments, express verbal pity over unfortunate things, and then move on. It is a shallow involvement with other people. Nevertheless, according to him, an encounter is different—a person must gaze and not just see; touch and not just stop; speak and not just pass by. In the same manner, evangelization can happen when an authentic human encounter is present among individuals—something that is compassionate, inclusive, and one that weaves a relationship, not division.

Youth Evangelization

In CV, Pope Francis frequently mentions Jesus' encounters with the youth, the very experience of Jesus as a young person, and Mary as the model for the young. He uses the Sacred Scripture to illustrate how God constantly reaches out to the young people and offers them guidance and direction through an authentic human encounter. These quotations allow the Gospel to speak and serve as a message to the youth to always be open to authentic human relationships and cultivate a culture of encounter.

Moreover, in CV, Pope Francis says that young people leave the Church because an encounter is missing. The youth want to participate and learn more about the Catholic faith not just through catechisms and meetings but through life-experiences and encounters with one another. Pope Francis is encouraging the youth to establish an encounter with the Church.

Synthesis of Evangelization

First, in order to initiate an encounter with the youth, the evangelizer must first establish an **encounter with God** himself. One must nourish a relationship with God. Having a strong and intimate relationship with Christ is necessary to preach God's Word because to be an evangelizer, one must be first evangelized himself. No one can animatedly be engaged in the Church's mission of making an encounter with the youth without having a connection with Christ through strong faith and prayer life. In order for God's Word to penetrate the hearts of the youth today, the agents of evangelization must be inflamed with the love of Christ, sustained by prayer and spiritual guidance.

Secondly, the Church must be **willing to listen to the youth and enter their world**. The Church can easily evangelize the youth by creating an encounter with them. As Pope Francis puts it, "The Church must listen with an openness of heart which makes closeness possible in order that a genuine spiritual encounter may occur" (EG 171). Such listening entails setting aside biases and judgments about the youth in general. There must be an honest effort to understand and enter their world. For example, the Church must be willing to establish an encounter with the youth by using social media, where the youth are mostly found today. While Francis cautions the Church to always be discerning in engaging in the digital world because of inauthentic encounters, he affirms that the media and the digital world can help people feel closer to one another and create a sense of unity and connectedness with one another. Social media, too, can be a great avenue for evangelization.

Lastly, youth evangelization must be an **experience of encounter**. While lectures, meetings, inputs, and catechisms can be effective channels of Catholic teachings and formations, they may lack the experiential aspect that the youth mostly prefer today. The youth need powerful experiences of God that touch their hearts, leading to an experience of encounter with Him and the growth of authentic community life. They want to be present, involved, and welcomed.

Pastoral Implications

In the open letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church, they indicated that "Youth in Formation" and "Youth in the Community, Church, and Society" are the first two goals of the 2019 Year of the Youth. They believe that these goals are essential for the greater evangelization of the youth in the Philippines.

As "Youth in Formation," they aim to have an "evangelized youth, conscious of his/her giftedness, transformed by a *personal encounter* with Christ, and growing and maturing through youthful formation and activities."[30] Indeed, the beginning of youth evangelization is a deep and personal encounter with God. Then, it is followed by different Church interventions that allow the young people to grow and be guided. These encounters contribute to building a culture that fosters authentic interpersonal relationships with one another.

Further, according to the open letter:

> We [the youth] long for a Church that embodies Christ's vision and dream for her. It is a Church that has confidence in the young and ensures that they are not marginalized but feel accepted. It is a Church that declares and actualizes her preferential apostolate for them and draws the attention of young people by being rooted in Jesus Christ.[31]

Rooted in a personal encounter with Christ, the youth will yearn for a greater encounter with the Church through various activities and celebrations. The young people need to first feel welcomed and accepted by the Church, before a holistic evangelization can happen through various means of encounter. Consequently, the second goal of the 2019 Year of the Youth hopes for "a family-oriented youth whose image of oneself is patterned after the life of Jesus, who is *actively involved in the life of the Church and society* through their vocation, profession and stage in life."[32] Various Church involvements that cater to the needs of the young people are very important in this work of evangelization, because they

30 *CBCP News,* "An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines."

31 *Ibid.*

32 *CBCP News*, "An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines," 6.

pave the way for genuine encounters to happen. They need to be involved. They want to participate.

In the same way, the 2019 Year of the Youth was also a time to see and assess the situation of young people so that the Church can become an agent of encounter to them. Young people are vulnerable due to the greater problem of the nation, which is poverty. Because of this, innocent youth are exposed to prostitution, forced labor, violence, abuses, human trafficking, illegal drugs, and other heinous crimes.[33] Many also experience rejection and depression. The Church, especially during the 2019 Year of the Youth, sought to become a beacon to defend the young people who are experiencing violence and abuses and make them aware of God's presence and His desire to encounter them through the Church.

In response to these problems, the youth ministries and other groups in different dioceses and parishes organized some seminars and workshops in order to help the youth who are facing problems and various forms of crisis in their lives. Spiritual counseling was also organized to guide and accompany them in their spiritual life and treasure their faith in God so that it will serve as a solid foundation of the life of young people. Information campaigns through social media accounts, recollections, retreats, celebrations in the diocesan levels, promotions, pilgrimages, formation programs parish-based activities, dialogues, workshops, research, etc.[34] are just some programs and activities of the 2019 Year of the Youth that the young people themselves proposed and initiated.

The CBCP Commission on Youth said in a statement that "the 2019 Year of the Youth is indeed *a journey of*

33 John Christian P. Baxa, SSP, "Evaluation and Reflection on the Year of the Youth in the Philippines," *Tinig Loyola* (June 10, 2019): 29.

34 *CBCP News,* "An Open Letter of the Filipino Youth to the Catholic Church in the Philippines."

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encounter with Jesus, accompanied by Mary, the Star of the New Evangelization."[35] Above all, the youth should draw inspiration from the life of Jesus, who is ever young. He dedicated his life to mission by bringing God's Kingdom to all the people through countless encounters with them. Truly, 2019 was a fruitful year for the youth of the Philippines because of various programs, activities, and events that established an authentic encounter with God, the Church, the evangelizing community, and fellow youth.

The Joy of the Gospel

Vision of Evangelization

Pope Francis describes the joy of the Gospel as delightful and comforting. This is because Jesus Christ Himself is the center of it. Hence, the mission of evangelization must always be filled with life, spirit, and joy. It is never static, negative, or lifeless.

As evident in Pope Francis' writings, joy is central in evangelization. He often speaks of the joy of the Gospel on different occasions and celebrations. Indeed, the reason is that he believes that joy should be one of the driving forces of an evangelizer. The Gospel must be preached joyfully, and joy must be felt by the people to whom the Gospel is preached.

In the very first line of EG, a joyful and spirit-filled missiology is already highlighted (cf. EG 1). Throughout the rest of the document, Francis says that the Church needs to embark on a joyful and jubilant pilgrimage of mission—the proper attitude of all evangelizers. Hence, an evangelizer whose mission is to proclaim the Gospel must radiate the joy that comes from a fruitful encounter with Jesus Himself.

35 *CBCP News,* "Church to Observe Year of the Youth."

Every individual and institution of the Church must shine and scatter the joy of the Gospel to everyone.

Secondly, the missiology of attraction is one of the highlights of Pope Francis' vision of evangelization in view of the joy of the Gospel. He writes that evangelization must work towards attracting people. Thus, the Gospel must be preached joyfully and attractively. Evangelizers cannot help but spread the Gospel of Christ in creative, spirit-filled, and artistic ways.

Lastly, whenever the Gospel is preached, the people receiving it must feel a certain sense of joy. The very source of this joy of the Gospel is one's encounter with Jesus. Joy is present in the recipients because this encounter is not only a simple encounter with other persons—it is, first and foremost, an encounter with a mystery, that is, the sum and substance of joy and happiness. Thus, joy must become the essential companion and content of evangelization because it is an integral aspect of the Christian life.

Youth Evangelization

Unlike the previous documents and exhortations of Pope Francis that speak of joy as a starting place, this time, he used the title *Christus Vivit* which gives the *reason for the joy* being experienced: "Christ is alive!" In this line, CV is a message of joy and hope. It is a timely message to people, especially to the youth today, who are experiencing despair and weakness in their faith because of different factors in society. He sees the kerygma as a "joyful experience of encounter with the Lord" (CV 214) that must be the foundation and "center of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal" (EG 164).

In CV, being a youth is described as a "joy," a song of hope and a blessing (cf. CV 134). Young people today are

characterized by the spirit of joy, exuberance, and jubilation. They are animated members of the Church, and precisely, this is what the Lord desires for them as well: to be happy and joyful (CV 145).

Similarly, this joy of the Gospel that is reflected by the youth today means finding more attractive and appealing ways to come together. As stated by Pope Francis, they know how to organize events, sports, competitions, and ways to evangelize using social media (cf. CV 210). Indeed, they must be approached with the "grammar of love" and the "language of closeness" (cf. CV 211) for evangelization to happen. The young people love attractive and innovative ways more than structured and doctrinal approaches.

Synthesis of Evangelization

Integrating the foregoing observations, one discovers several pivotal points. First, youth evangelizers must be **"joyful evangelizers."** Young people today must see in the faces of their evangelizers that the Gospel they proclaim makes them really joyful and life-giving. The joy they proclaim must be evident in the way they move, preach and share the Word of God. There is no greater proof to something than seeing the message being proclaimed is evident in the person's life. To share the joy of the Gospel to the youth, this "joyfulness" must be present in all the agents of evangelization.

Secondly, to evangelize the youth, the Church must develop **attractive and appealing ways of evangelization.** The youth love attractive activities in the Church, and hence, it is a big challenge for the evangelizers. Since many young people grow weary of the Church's doctrinal and spiritual formation programs through endless meetings and lecture sessions, other avenues of evangelization should be explored.

Pope Francis suggests that there is joy in arts, music, sports, theatre, etc. These are just some key ways by which the youth today can easily belong and find themselves. Moreover, there are many festive occasions in the Church that can be creative avenues for these active and joyful activities, such as Christmas and Easter seasons. These occasions can help them experience the joy of faith and the "celebration" of the sacraments.

Lastly, the youth must **experience joy in being evangelized** by the Word of God. Although this can be a very subjective and personal one, the joy that comes from Jesus must penetrate the hearts of the youth. More than the feelings of happiness and merriment in Church's activities of evangelization, a more profound sense of joy and fulfillment that is felt in the heart must be evoked. This is none other than the joy of the Gospel itself entering the core of the young people's identity—an affirmation of God's overflowing love and desire to share himself with humanity.

Pastoral Implications

According to the *National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines* (NCDP), recent youth surveys create headlines picturing a dire catechetical crisis in the youth's poor understanding of the essential doctrines of the faith.[36] Consequently, these surveys underscore the pressing need to radically improve the manner of communicating the essential truths of the faith as truly "salvific truths that save, inspire, uplift,

36 NCDP 78. Cf. Episcopal Commission on Youth, "National Filipino Catholic Youth Survey 2002" which reported that only 58% of the youth respondents (13-39 years old) consider God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; that they had little knowledge of, and less motivation about, the teachings of the Church on social justice, premarital sex, marriage and divorce, death penalty, abortion, etc. In another survey, the youth listed religious instruction in the schools among the subjects they least like to study.

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guide, offer help and consolation."[37] More than learning the basic tenets of the faith, the youth need to experience the joy of the Gospel once again to understand it better.

The NCDP further observes that "maturing in Christian faith surely involves not only educating the youth in basic Christian teachings but also adopting *a new strategy* for evangelization."[38] The youth need to be approached with fresh and attractive ways. These strategies should bring joy, experience, and attraction to young people.

> This catechetical methodology emphasizes "modes of communication of the Gospel that one might call *epiphanic* rather than argumentative or didactic: not so much clever marketing techniques that make the Gospel appear attractive but rather modes of communication which allow inherent beauty — the *claritas* or radiance, the *consonantia* or harmony, the *integritas* or wholeness — of the Gospel to shine forth, and to attract and draw people's hearts to the acceptance of faith.[39]

In other words, this mode of evangelization can be achieved primarily not only by teaching but by witnessing. As Pope Paul VI asserts: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (EN 41). *In order for the youth to understand the joy of the Gospel, they must first see their evangelizers as joyful as well. In order for the young people to share and spread this joy of the Gospel, they must first feel and experience it in their lives.* This could only

37 NCDP 179.

38 NCDP 79. "Yet, this new and more effective presentation does not mean reducing knowledge of the correct memorized formulae, or evaluating this knowledge in terms of its "popularity" as religious instruction in schools is commonly evaluated" (Ibid).

39 Daniel Huang, "Emerging Global, Postmodern Culture in the Philippines," *Landas* (1999): 58. Quoted in NCDP 79.

happen if their evangelizers are truly formed by a deep love for God, fully revealed in Jesus Christ. The youth love attractive programs and activities where they feel joy and belongingness. According to PCPII, "such a religious formation is necessary to ground and guide the creative, imaginative, on-going search and experimentation for new methods, new fervor, new expressions, and new means of social communication—for more effective instructing in the 'Good News' especially among the young."[40]

During the 2019 Year of the Youth, various relational activities were organized by youth ministries and other groups in the Philippine context to celebrate it. More than evangelizing the youth through seminars and lectures, the Filipino youth yearn for joyful and attractive activities where they can see joyful evangelizers and discover the abiding sense of happiness that only Jesus can bring in their lives.

Summary and Conclusion

In summary, Pope Francis' vision of evangelization is mainly characterized by its **missionary mode of evangelizing.** In both EG and CV, he stresses the need for the Church to go out, be open, and not be self-referential (cf. EG 15 and CV 41). To respond to the dreams of young people, the Church must be open and not self-absorbed. To listen, the Church must be welcoming. To evangelize, the Church must go out and reach out to the youth.

The exposition on the **agents of youth evangelization** highlights the universal call to evangelize the youth today. This vocation is not limited to the ordained ministers of the Church, but by the sacrament of Baptism, every Christian is

40 PCP II, 193-201. Quoted in NCDP 79.

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called to greater evangelization. Consequently, even the youth themselves are evangelizers of one another.

Synodality and accompaniment are key elements in Pope Francis' papacy. In simpler words, they mean walking and journeying together. The Church, with her ministers and laity, gather together to listen to one another and to the promptings of the Holy Spirit working in everyone. Simply put, the faithful gather, dialogue with each other, and discern not only for their own sake but, more importantly, for the world in which the Church is tasked to evangelize. The youth need to be accompanied, encouraged to use their talents and skills creatively, and motivated to take up roles and responsibilities in the Church. They need people who will walk and journey with them.

The theme of the **"Culture of Encounter"** is also emphasized. To evangelize, an encounter is essential and significant. Pope Francis in his "encounter" with the Filipino youth, looked at them, listened to them, and allowed himself to be moved with compassion. He initiated a *culture of encounter*. Francis says: "Every encounter is fruitful. Each encounter returns people and things to their place."[41] The youth today need to be approached with the "grammar of love, not by being preached at" (CV 211).

Finally, the **joy of the Gospel** is underscored as that evangelical joy that must be present in all the disciples of the Lord. Following Christ's footsteps is not always a journey to Golgotha. Instead, evangelizing the youth must be an active and joyful mission, attractive and appealing to them, and creative and artistic in its ways and means.

41 Pope Francis, "For a Culture of Encounter," Vatican Archive, September 13, 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20160913_for-a-culture-of-encounter.html (accessed July 9, 2021).

Through the theological and pastoral implications that are explored in this work, this article hopes to encourage and influence readers driven by these three main insights and findings: (1) a missionary and synodal Church, (2) towards a ministry of presence and encounter, and (3) sensitivity to the signs of the times.

A Missionary and Synodal Church. Pope Francis advocates a Church that is missionary and synodal. It is a Church that is willing to walk and journey with the people. This Church evangelizes *from below* and takes risks because of its mission. It is a community of believers who is not afraid to go out and preach the Gospel of Christ. Thus, this missionary and synodal Church highlights its *mission to evangelize the youth* through accompaniment and encounter.

Towards a Ministry of Presence and Encounter. While this study affirms the idea that *youth evangelization is a vocation for all people in the Church,* the author observes that ministering to the youth must involve a ministry of presence and encounter for everyone. This ministry is a very common feature of Pope Francis' papacy. After seeing through the contexts and realities of the youth today, the Church can conclude that the *youth need to be accompanied*. They need the elders' presence, welcome, and offer of friendship. They need pastoral care and evangelizers who can journey and relate with them. Since every member of the Church shares in this vocation, ministering to the youth necessitates that evangelizers must first be willing to listen and understand them.

Sensitivity to the Signs of the Times. Being sensitive to the signs of the times is commonly attributed to Jesus' words in the Gospel (cf. Mt 16:3). It does not tell people how they should act in a particular situation but invites them to make a personal discernment in each particular case. Thus,

to evangelize the youth, the evangelizers must be sensitive to the signs of the times. There must always be the element of discernment in approaching various contexts.