



POST-SYNODAL APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION

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TO YOUNG PEOPLE AND TO THE ENTIRE PEOPLE OF GOD

CHAPTER SEVEN

Youth Ministry

202. Youth ministry, as traditionally carried out, has been significantly affected by social and cultural changes. Young people frequently fail to find in our usual programmes a response to their concerns, their needs, their problems and issues. The proliferation and growth of groups and movements predominantly associated with the young can be considered the work of the Holy Spirit who constantly shows us new paths. Even so, there is a need to look at the ways such groups participate in the Church's overall pastoral care, as well as a need for greater communion among them and a better coordination of their activities. 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.

A pastoral care that is synodal

203. I want to state clearly that young people themselves are agents of youth ministry. Certainly they need to be helped and guided, but at the same time left free to develop new approaches, with creativity and a certain audacity. So I will not attempt here to propose a kind of manual of youth ministry or a practical pastoral guide. I am more concerned with helping young people to use their insight, ingenuity and knowledge to address the issues and concerns of other young people in their own language.

204. The young make us see the need for new styles and new strategies. For example, while adults often worry about having everything properly planned, with regular meetings and fixed times, most young people today have little interest in this kind of pastoral approach. Youth ministry needs to become more flexible: inviting young people to events or occasions that provide an opportunity not only for learning, but also for conversing, celebrating, singing, listening to real stories and experiencing a shared encounter with the living God.

205. At the same time, we should take into greater consideration those practices that have shown their value – the methods, language and aims that have proved truly effective in bringing young people to



Christ and the Church. It does not matter where they are coming from or what labels they have received, whether “conservative” or “liberal”, “traditional” or “progressive”. What is important is that we make use of everything that has borne good fruit and effectively communicates the joy of the Gospel.

206. Youth ministry has to be synodal; it should involve a “journeying together” that values “the charisms that the Spirit bestows in accordance with the vocation and role of each of the Church’s members, through a process of co-responsibility... Motivated by this spirit, we can move towards a participatory and co-responsible Church, one capable of appreciating its own rich variety, gratefully accepting the contributions of the lay faithful, including young people and women, consecrated persons, as well as groups, associations and movements. No one should be excluded or exclude themselves”.[\[111\]](#)

207. In this way, by learning from one another, we can better reflect that wonderful multifaceted reality that Christ’s Church is meant to be. She will be able to attract young people, for her unity is not monolithic, but rather a network of varied gifts that the Spirit ceaselessly pours out upon her, renewing her and lifting her up from her poverty.

208. In the Synod, many concrete proposals emerged for renewing youth ministry and freeing it from approaches that are no longer effective because they are incapable of entering into dialogue with contemporary youth culture. Naturally, I cannot list them all here. A number of them can be found in the Final Document of the Synod.

Main courses of action

209. I wish simply to emphasize that youth ministry involves two main courses of action. One is *outreach*, the way we attract new young people to an experience of the Lord. The other is *growth*, the way we help those who have already had that experience to mature in it.

210. As for *outreach*, I trust that young people themselves know how best to find appealing ways to come together. They know how to organize events, sports competitions and ways to evangelize using social media, through text messages, songs, videos and other ways. They only have to be encouraged and given the freedom to be enthused about evangelizing other young people wherever they are to be found. When the message is first brought up, whether at a youth retreat, in a conversation at a bar, on school holidays, or in any of God’s mysterious ways, it can awaken a deep experience of faith. What is most important, though, is that each young person can be daring enough to sow the seed of the message on that fertile terrain that is the heart of another young person.



211. In this outreach, we need to use above all the language of closeness, the language of generous, relational and existential love that touches the heart, impacts life, and awakens hope and desires. Young people need to be approached with the grammar of love, not by being preached at. The language that young people understand is spoken by those who radiate life, by those who are there for them and with them. And those who, for all their limitations and weaknesses, try to live their faith with integrity. We also have to give greater thought to ways of incarnating the *kerygma* in the language of today's youth.

212. As for *growth*, I would make one important point. In some places, it happens that young people are helped to have a powerful experience of God, an encounter with Jesus that touched their hearts. But the only follow-up to this is a series of "formation" meetings featuring talks about doctrinal and moral issues, the evils of today's world, the Church, her social doctrine, chastity, marriage, birth control and so on. As a result, many young people get bored, they lose the fire of their encounter with Christ and the joy of following him; many give up and others become downcast or negative. Rather than being too concerned with communicating a great deal of doctrine, let us first try to awaken and consolidate the great experiences that sustain the Christian life. In the words of Romano Guardini, "when we experience a great love... everything else becomes part of it".^[112]

213. Any educational project or path of growth for young people must certainly include formation in Christian doctrine and morality. It is likewise important that it have two main goals. One is the development of the *kerygma*, the foundational experience of encounter with God through Christ's death and resurrection. The other is growth in fraternal love, community life and service.

214. This was something I emphasized in *Evangelii Gaudium*, and I consider it worth repeating here. It would be a serious mistake to think that in youth ministry "the kerygma should give way to a supposedly more 'solid' formation. Nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation. All Christian formation consists of entering more deeply into the kerygma"^[113] and incarnating it ever more fully in our lives. Consequently, youth ministry should always include occasions for renewing and deepening our personal experience of the love of God and the living Christ. It can do this in a variety of ways: testimonies, songs, moments of adoration, times of spiritual reflection on the sacred Scriptures, and even an intelligent use of social networks. Yet this joyful experience of encounter with the Lord should never be replaced by a kind of "indoctrination".

215. On the other hand, any programme of youth ministry should clearly incorporate various means and resources that can help young people grow in fraternity, to live as brothers and sisters, to help one another, to build community, to be of service to others, to be close to the poor. If fraternal love is the "new commandment" (*Jn* 13:34), "the fullness of the Law" (*Rom* 13:10) and our best way of showing our



love for God, then it has to have a primary place in every project of youth formation and growth to maturity.

Suitable environments

216. We need to make all our institutions better equipped to be more welcoming to young people, since so many have a real sense of being orphaned. Here I am not referring to family problems but to something experienced by boys and girls, young people and adults, parents and children alike. To all these orphans – including perhaps ourselves – communities like a parish or school should offer possibilities for experiencing openness and love, affirmation and growth. Many young people today feel that they have inherited the failed dreams of their parents and grandparents, dreams betrayed by injustice, social violence, selfishness and lack of concern for others. In a word, they feel uprooted. If the young grow up in a world in ashes, it will be hard for them to keep alive the flame of great dreams and projects. If they grow up in a desert devoid of meaning, where will they develop a desire to devote their lives to sowing seeds? The experience of discontinuity, uprootedness and the collapse of fundamental certainties, fostered by today's media culture, creates a deep sense of orphanhood to which we must respond by creating an attractive and fraternal environment where others can live with a sense of purpose.

217. In a word, to create a “home” is to create “a family”. “It is to learn to feel connected to others by more than merely utilitarian and practical bonds, to be united in such a way as to feel that our life is a bit more human. To create a home is to let prophecy take flesh and make our hours and days less cold, less indifferent and anonymous. It is to create bonds by simple, everyday acts that all of us can perform. A home, as we all know, demands that everyone work together. No one can be indifferent or stand apart, since each is a stone needed to build the home. This also involves asking the Lord to grant us the grace to learn how to be patient, to forgive one another, to start over each day. How many times should I forgive and start over? Seventy times seven times, as many times as necessary. To create strong bonds requires confidence and trust nurtured daily by patience and forgiveness. And that is how the miracle takes place: we feel that here we are reborn, here we are all reborn, because we feel God's caress that enables us to dream of a more human world, and therefore of a world more divine”.^[114]

218. Along these lines, our institutions should provide young people with places they can make their own, where they can come and go freely, feel welcome and readily meet other young people, whether at times of difficulty and frustration, or of joy and celebration. Some of this is already happening in oratories and other youth centres, which in many cases offer a friendly and relaxed setting where friendships can grow, where young men and women can meet one another, where they can share music, games, sports, but also reflection and prayer. In such places, much can be offered, without great



expenditure of funds. Then too, the person-to-person contact indispensable for passing on the message can happen, something whose place cannot be taken by any pastoral resource or strategy.

219. “Friendship and discussion, often within more or less structured groups, offer the opportunity to strengthen social and relational skills in a context in which one is neither analysed nor judged. Group experience is also a great resource for sharing the faith and for mutual help in bearing witness. The young are able to guide other young people and to exercise a genuine apostolate among their friends”.^[115]

220. This is not to say that they should become isolated and lose all contact with parish communities, movements and other ecclesial institutions. But they will be better integrated into communities that are open, living their faith, eager to radiate Christ, joyful, free, fraternal and committed. These communities can be settings where they feel that it is possible to cultivate precious relationships.

Youth ministry in educational institutions

221. Schools are unquestionably a platform for drawing close to children and young people. Precisely because they are such privileged places of personal development, the Christian community has always been concerned to train teachers and administrators, and to found its own schools of various kinds and levels. In this field of educating the young, the Spirit has raised up countless charisms and examples of holiness. Yet schools are in urgent need of self-criticism, if we consider the results of their pastoral outreach, which in many cases focuses on a kind of religious instruction that proves often incapable of nurturing lasting experiences of faith. Some Catholic schools seem to be structured only for the sake of self-preservation. Fear of change makes them entrenched and defensive before the dangers, real or imagined, that any change might bring. A school that becomes a “bunker”, protecting its students from errors “from without” is a caricature of this tendency. Yet this image reflects, in a chilling way, what many young people experience when they graduate from certain educational institutions: an insurmountable disconnect between what they were taught and the world in which they live. The way they were instructed in religious and moral values did not prepare them to uphold those values in a world that holds them up to ridicule, nor did they learn ways of praying and practicing the faith that can be easily sustained amid the fast pace of today’s society. For one of the greatest joys that any educator can have is to see a student turn into a strong, well-integrated person, a leader, someone prepared to give.

222. Catholic schools remain essential places for the evangelization of the young. Account should be taken of a number of guiding principles set forth in *Veritatis Gaudium* for the renewal and revival of missionary outreach on the part of schools and universities. These include a fresh experience of the kerygma, wide-ranging dialogue, interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches, the promotion of a



culture of encounter, the urgency of creating networks and an option in favour of those who are least, those whom society discards.^[116] Similarly important is the ability to integrate the knowledge of head, heart and hands.

223. On the other hand, we cannot separate spiritual from cultural formation. The Church has always sought to develop ways of providing the young with the best education possible. Nor should she stop now, for young people have a right to it. “Today, above all, the right to a good education means protecting wisdom, that is, knowledge that is human and humanizing. All too often we are conditioned by trivial and fleeting models of life that drive us to pursue success at a low price, discrediting sacrifice and inculcating the idea that education is not necessary unless it immediately provides concrete results. No, education makes us raise questions, keeps us from being anaesthetized by banality, and impels us to pursue meaning in life. We need to reclaim our right not to be sidetracked by the many sirens that nowadays distract from this pursuit. Ulysses, in order not to give in to the siren song that bewitched his sailors and made them crash against the rocks, tied himself to the mast of the ship and had his companions plug their ears. Orpheus, on the other hand, did something else to counter the siren song: he intoned an even more beautiful melody, which enchanted the sirens. This, then, is your great challenge: to respond to the crippling refrains of cultural consumerism with thoughtful and firm decisions, with research, knowledge and sharing”.^[117]

Areas needing to be developed

224. Many young people have come to appreciate silence and closeness to God. Groups that gather to adore the Blessed Sacrament or to pray with the word of God have also increased. We should never underestimate the ability of young people to be open to contemplative prayer. We need only find the right ways and means to help them embark on this precious experience. When it comes to worship and prayer, “in many settings, young Catholics are asking for prayer opportunities and sacramental celebrations capable of speaking to their daily lives through a fresh, authentic and joyful liturgy”.^[118] It is important to make the most of the great moments of the liturgical year, particularly Holy Week, Pentecost and Christmas. But other festive occasions can provide a welcome break in their routine and help them experience the joy of faith.

225. Christian service represents a unique opportunity for growth and openness to God’s gifts of faith and charity. Many young people are attracted by the possibility of helping others, especially children and the poor. Often this service is the first step to a discovery or rediscovery of life in Christ and the Church. Many young people grow weary of our programmes of doctrinal and spiritual formation, and at times demand a chance to be active participants in activities that benefit others.



226. Nor can we overlook the importance of the arts, like theatre, painting, and others. “Music is particularly important, representing as it does a real environment in which the young are constantly immersed, as well as a culture and a language capable of arousing emotion and shaping identity. The language of music also represents a pastoral resource with a particular bearing on the liturgy and its renewal”.^[119] Singing can be a great incentive to young people as they make their way through life. As Saint Augustine says: “Sing, but continue on your journey. Do not grow lazy, but sing to make the way more enjoyable. Sing, but keep going... If you make progress, you will continue your journey, but be sure that your progress is in virtue, true faith and right living. Sing then, and keep walking”.^[120]

227. “Equally significant is the emphasis that young people place on sports; the Church should not underestimate the potential of sports for education and formation, but instead maintain a strong presence there. The world of sport needs to be helped to overcome some of its problematic aspects, such as the idolization of champions, subservience to commercial interests and the ideology of success at any cost”.^[121] At the heart of the experience of sport is “joy: the joy of exercising, of being together, of being alive and rejoicing in the gifts the Creator gives us each day”.^[122] Some Fathers of the Church used the example of the training of athletes to encourage the young to develop their strength and to overcome idleness and boredom. Saint Basil the Great, writing to young people, used the effort demanded by athletics to illustrate the value of self-sacrifice as a means of growth in virtue: “These men endure sufferings beyond number, they use many means to build their strength, they sweat constantly as they train... in a word, they so discipline themselves that their whole life prior to the contest is but a preparation for it... How then can we, who have been promised rewards so wondrous in number and in splendour that no tongue can recount them, even think of winning them if we do nothing other than spend our lives in leisure and make but half-hearted efforts?”^[123]

228. Nature holds a special attraction for many adolescents and young people who recognize our need to care for the environment. Such is the case with the scouting movement and other groups that encourage closeness to nature, camping trips, hiking, expeditions and campaigns to improve the environment. In the spirit of Saint Francis of Assisi, these experiences can be a real initiation into the school of universal fraternity and contemplative prayer.

229. These and various other opportunities for evangelizing the young should not make us forget that, despite the changing times and sensibilities of young people, there are gifts of God that never grow old, for they contain a power transcending all times and places. There is the word of the Lord, ever living and effective, the nourishing presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the sacrament of Reconciliation, which brings us freedom and strength. We can also mention the inexhaustible spiritual riches preserved by the Church in the witness of her saints and the teaching of the great spiritual masters. Although we have to respect different stages of growth, and at times need to wait patiently for the right moment, we



cannot fail to invite young people to drink from these wellsprings of new life. We have no right to deprive them of this great good.

A “popular” youth ministry

230. In addition to the ordinary, well-planned pastoral ministry that parishes and movements carry out, it is also important to allow room for a “popular” youth ministry, with a different style, schedule, pace and method. Broader and more flexible, it goes out to those places where real young people are active, and fosters the natural leadership qualities and the charisms sown by the Holy Spirit. It tries to avoid imposing obstacles, rules, controls and obligatory structures on these young believers who are natural leaders in their neighbourhoods and in other settings. We need only to accompany and encourage them, trusting a little more in the genius of the Holy Spirit, who acts as he wills.

231. We are speaking of truly “popular” leaders, not elitists or those closed off in small groups of select individuals. To be able to generate a “popular” ministry to youth, “they need to learn to listen to the sense of the people, to become their spokespersons and to work for their promotion”.^[124] When we speak of “the people”, we are not speaking about the structures of society or the Church, but about all those persons who journey, not as individuals, but as a closely-bound community of all and for all, one that refuses to leave the poor and the vulnerable behind. “The people wants everyone to share in the common good and thus agree to keep pace with its least members, so that all can arrive together”.^[125] “Popular” leaders, then, are those able to make everyone, including the poor, the vulnerable, the frail and the wounded, part of the forward march of youth. They do not shun or fear those young people who have experienced hurt or borne the weight of the cross.

232. Similarly, especially in the case of young people who do not come from Christian families or institutions, and are slowly growing to maturity, we have to encourage all the good that we can.^[126] Christ warned us not to see only the good grain (cf. *Mt* 13:24-30). At times, in the attempt to develop a pure and perfect youth ministry, marked by abstract ideas, protected from the world and free of every flaw, we can turn the Gospel into a dull, meaningless and unattractive proposition. Such a youth ministry ends up completely removed from the world of young people and suited only to an elite Christian youth that sees itself as different, while living in an empty and unproductive isolation. In rejecting the weeds, we also uproot or choke any number of shoots trying to spring up in spite of their limitations.

233. Instead of “overwhelming young people with a body of rules that make Christianity seem reductive and moralistic, we are called to invest in their fearlessness and to train them to take up their responsibilities, in the sure knowledge that error, failure and crisis are experiences that can strengthen their humanity”.^[127]



234. The Synod called for the development of a youth ministry capable of being inclusive, with room for all kinds of young people, to show that we are a Church with open doors. Nor does one have to accept fully all the teachings of the Church to take part in certain of our activities for young people. It is enough to have an open mind towards all those who have the desire and willingness to be encountered by God's revealed truth. Some of our pastoral activities can assume that a journey of faith has already begun, but we need a "popular" youth ministry that can open doors and make room for everyone, with their doubts and frustrations, their problems and their efforts to find themselves, their past errors, their experiences of sin and all their difficulties.

235. Room should also be made for "all those who have other visions of life, who belong to other religions or who distance themselves from religion altogether. All the young, without exception, are in God's heart and thus in the Church's heart. We recognize frankly that this statement on our lips does not always find real expression in our pastoral actions: often we remain closed in our environments, where their voice does not penetrate, or else we dedicate ourselves to less demanding and more enjoyable activities, suppressing that healthy pastoral restlessness that would urge us to move out from our supposed security. The Gospel also asks us to be daring, and we want to be so, without presumption and without proselytizing, testifying to the love of the Lord and stretching out our hands to all the young people in the world".^[128]

236. Youth ministry, when it ceases to be elitist and is willing to be "popular", is a process that is gradual, respectful, patient, hopeful, tireless and compassionate. The Synod proposed the example of the disciples of Emmaus (cf. *Lk* 24:13-35) as a model of what happens in youth ministry.

237. "Jesus walks with two disciples who did not grasp the meaning of all that happened to him, and are leaving Jerusalem and the community behind. Wanting to accompany them, he joins them on the way. He asks them questions and listens patiently to their version of events, and in this way he helps them *recognize* what they were experiencing. Then, with affection and power, he proclaims the word to them, leading them to *interpret* the events they had experienced in the light of the Scriptures. He accepts their invitation to stay with them as evening falls; he enters into their night. As they listen to him speak, their hearts burn within them and their minds are opened; they then recognize him in the breaking of the bread. They themselves *choose* to resume their journey at once in the opposite direction, to return to the community and to share the experience of their encounter with the risen Lord".^[129]

238. Various manifestations of popular piety, especially pilgrimages, attract young people who do not readily feel at home in ecclesial structures, and represent a concrete sign of their trust in God. These ways of seeking God are seen particularly in young people who are poor, but also those in other sectors



of society. They should not be looked down on, but encouraged and promoted. Popular piety “is a legitimate way of living the faith”^[130] and “an expression of the spontaneous missionary activity of the People of God”.^[131]

Always missionaries

239. Here I would point out that it doesn't take much to make young people missionaries. Even those who are most frail, limited and troubled can be missionaries in their own way, for goodness can always be shared, even if it exists alongside many limitations. A young person who makes a pilgrimage to ask Our Lady for help, and invites a friend or companion along, by that single gesture is being a good missionary. Inseparable from a “popular” youth ministry is an irrepressible “popular” missionary activity that breaks through our customary models and ways of thinking. Let us accompany and encourage it, but not presume to overly regulate it.

240. If we can hear what the Spirit is saying to us, we have to realize that youth ministry is always missionary. Young people are greatly enriched when they overcome their reticence and dare to visit homes, and in this way make contact with people's lives. They learn how to look beyond their family and their group of friends, and they gain a broader vision of life. At the same time, their faith and their sense of being part of the Church grow stronger. Youth missions, which usually take place during school holidays after a period of preparation, can lead to a renewed experience of faith and even serious thoughts about a vocation.

241. Young people can find new fields for mission in the most varied settings. For example, since they are already so familiar with social networks, they should be encouraged to fill them with God, fraternity and commitment.

Accompaniment by adults

242. Young people need to have their freedom respected, yet they also need to be accompanied. The family should be the first place of accompaniment. Youth ministry can present the ideal of life in Christ as the process of building a house on rock (cf. *Mt 7:24-25*). For most young people, that house, their life, will be built on marriage and married love. That is why youth ministry and the pastoral care of families should be coordinated and integrated, with the aim of ensuring a continuous and suitable accompaniment of the vocational process.

243. The community has an important role in the accompaniment of young people; it should feel collectively responsible for accepting, motivating, encouraging and challenging them. All should regard



young people with understanding, appreciation and affection, and avoid constantly judging them or demanding of them a perfection beyond their years.

244. At the Synod, “many pointed to the shortage of qualified people devoted to accompaniment. Belief in the theological and pastoral value of listening entails rethinking and renewing the ways that priestly ministry is ordinarily exercised, and reviewing its priorities. The Synod also recognized the need to train consecrated persons and laypeople, male and female, to accompany young people. The charism of listening that the Holy Spirit calls forth within the communities might also receive institutional recognition as a form of ecclesial service”.[\[132\]](#)

245. There is also a special need to accompany young men and women showing leadership potential, so that they can receive training and the necessary qualifications. The young people who met before the Synod called for “programmes for the formation and continued development of young leaders. Some young women feel that there is a lack of leading female role models within the Church and they too wish to give their intellectual and professional gifts to the Church. We also believe that seminarians and religious should have an even greater ability to accompany young leaders”.[\[133\]](#)

246. The same young people described to us the qualities they hope to find in a mentor, and they expressed this with much clarity. “The qualities of such a mentor include: being a faithful Christian who engages with the Church and the world; someone who constantly seeks holiness; someone who is a confidant without judging. Similarly, someone who actively listens to the needs of young people and responds in kind; someone deeply loving and self-aware; someone who recognizes his or her limits and knows the joys and sorrows of the spiritual journey. An especially important quality in mentors is the acknowledgement of their own humanity – the fact that they are human beings who make mistakes: not perfect people but forgiven sinners. Sometimes mentors are put on a pedestal, and when they fall, it may have a devastating impact on young people’s ability to continue to engage with the Church. Mentors should not lead young people as passive followers, but walk alongside them, allowing them to be active participants in the journey. They should respect the freedom that comes with a young person’s process of discernment and equip them with tools to do so well. A mentor should believe wholeheartedly in a young person’s ability to participate in the life of the Church. A mentor should therefore nurture the seeds of faith in young people, without expecting to immediately see the fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit. This role is not and cannot be limited to priests and consecrated life, but the laity should also be empowered to take on such a role. All such mentors should benefit from being well-formed, and engage in ongoing formation”.[\[134\]](#)

247. The Church’s educational institutions are undoubtedly a communal setting for accompaniment; they can offer guidance to many young people, especially when they “seek to welcome all young people,



regardless of their religious choices, cultural origins and personal, family or social situations. In this way, the Church makes a fundamental contribution to the integral education of the young in various parts of the world".^[135] They would curtail this role unduly were they to lay down rigid criteria for students to enter and remain in them, since they would deprive many young people of an accompaniment that could help enrich their lives.