

Presentation of the post-synodal apostolic exhortation CHRISTUS VIVIT of Pope Francis

A call to live with Christ in friendship

By Sister Nathalie Becquart, X.M.C.J.

Auditor at the 2018 synod and general coordinator of the Pre-synod gathering of young adults

INTRODUCTION

1. *“Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world. The very first words, then, that I would like to say to every young Christian, are these: Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive!”*

Thus begins the post-synodal apostolic exhortation of the Holy Father, *Christus vivit*, dedicated to young people and to the entire people of God. This text, released publicly on April 2, 2019—five months after the end of the synod of Bishops on “Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment” which took place in Rome last October—is the fourth exhortation of this pontificate. It comes after *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love) and *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad). Originally written in Spanish in a very personal style, one can clearly recognize the pen of Pope Francis. At the same time this magisterial text is also the result of a whole synodal process.

In the introduction, the Holy Father tells us that he was “inspired by the wealth of reflections and conversations that emerged from last year’s synod.” So the text quotes extensively from the final document of the synod (FD) as well as from the final document of the pre-synod. But if this Letter particularly targets young people between 16 and 29, it is also addressed more broadly to all baptized at this particular time, one marked by the crisis of sexual abuse and abuse of authority. And it is delivered to all as a roadmap for a church that strongly needs to be renewed and reformed. I encourage you to enter step by step into this nine-chapter post-synodal exhortation, a work that can be considered a true treatise on spiritual and pastoral life.

CHAPTERS 1 & 2

This exhortation **starts with a biblical journey** that allows us to meditate on **“What does the word of God have to say about young people?”** as the title of **Chapter 1** indicates. Through different figures from the Old Testament—Joseph, Gideon, Samuel, David, Solomon—and the New Testament then followed in **Chapter 2 by a reflection on “Jesus ever young”** Pope Francis leads us to a meditation on the youth of the church called to always renew itself. Because youth is an attitude of the heart: “Youth is more than simply a period of time; it is a state of mind” (34), the church is called to let herself be renewed by rediscovering the essential, the impulse of first love.

“The church is young when she is herself, when she receives ever anew the strength born of God’s word, the Eucharist, and the daily presence of Christ and the power of his Spirit in our lives. The church is young when she shows herself capable of constantly returning to her source” (35). For this reason, the church must be attentive to the signs of the times that she can read eminently when she is “humbly acknowledging that some things concretely need to change, and if that is to happen, she needs to appreciate the vision but also the criticisms of young people” (39).

Thus, to be a living church in today's world and to respond to a strong demand from young people denouncing the too many discriminations against women in society and in the church, the church must overcome its fears and “can react by being attentive to the legitimate claims of those women who seek greater justice and equality” (42). And the pope concludes this chapter with a meditation

on Mary, the young woman of Nazareth, before presenting a series of young saints because “Mary shines forth. She is the supreme model for a youthful church that seeks to follow Christ with enthusiasm and docility” (43). The emphasis is therefore placed on a spiritual vision of the church that calls everyone to follow Christ on a path of conversion.

CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3, entitled “**You are the now of God**” presents a more sociological vision of young people by looking at who they are today, their characteristics and life situations. Although he begins with the positive elements, he spends time highlighting all the many problems and challenges facing young people in this world in crisis following the synod Fathers reports. For by listening to the young adults throughout the synodal process, the church has heard their many cries and sufferings as they are often the first victims of violence, wars, poverty, exclusion. So the church has to recognize the tragedies of young people and look at these painful realities with a compassionate heart full of tears. It is also interesting to note in §81 the focus on body and sexuality that “have an essential importance for their lives and for their process of growth in identity.”

Here is quoted one of the paragraphs of the final document on these topics among the most debated in the synod hall: “Nonetheless, young people also express” an explicit desire to discuss questions concerning the difference between male and female identity, reciprocity between men and women, and homosexuality” (81) before addressing the impact of current developments in science and technology on the relationship to the body. This is followed by a focus on *three major themes* that appeared during the synod:

- *The digital environment* (86 - 90) recognizes that our contemporaries youth are immersed in a digital culture that shapes their minds and behaviors, and provides an analysis of the opportunities and threats that it presents.
- *Migrants as an epitome of our time* (91 - 94), as the issue of migration has been particularly mentioned in the Synodal Assembly. So is mentioned here the importance of migration as a present structural phenomena with the awareness that the church need to face it with a global approach that brings together countries of origin and receiving countries.
- *The fight against abuses* (95 - 102) in a long section entitled “**Ending every form of abuse**” which, while denouncing the scourge of abuses, also returns to the analysis of their causes and emphasize the strong need to act to prevent them. Here are cited not only the Final Document of the synod but also the address at the *Meeting on the Protection of Minors in the church 25-26 February 2019* and the *Letter to the People of God* released last August 2018. This part ends with a more direct message to young people, in any situation “that in all the dark or painful situations that we mentioned, there is a way out” (104) by which in a more spiritual and poetic form the pope witnesses to them the Paschal hope at the heart of our faith and invites them to turn with confidence to Jesus, full of life.

CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4, “**A great message for all young people**,” takes the form of a biblical catechesis to announce to young people the core of the Christian faith: God is love, God loves everyone infinitely. God is a Father that “will be your firm support, but you will also realize that he fully respects your freedom” (112). “For God you have worth” (115). Then the Pope continues his announcement of the kerygma: Christ saves you and He is alive! Christ is thus presented to the young people as a Friend

with whom we can get through everything, the Friend who makes everyone live and makes everyone more alive. Thus in 129:

If in your heart you can learn to appreciate the beauty of this message, if you are willing to encounter the Lord, if you are willing to let him love you and save you, if you can make friends with him and start to talk to him, the living Christ, about the realities of your life, then you will have a profound experience capable of sustaining your entire Christian life. You will also be able to share that experience with other young people.

Finally, in a Trinitarian dynamic, this chapter concludes with an invitation to constantly invoke the “Spirit of life” as “the source of youth at its best.” Here is quoted a beautiful passage from Pedro Arrupe in *Enamórate*.

CHAPTER 5

Then comes the central **Chapter 5** entitled “**Paths of Youth**” in which it is strongly affirmed that “youth is a gift of God” because “God is the giver of youth and he is at work in the life of each young person. Youth is a blessed time for the young and a grace for the church and for the world. It is joy, a song of hope and a blessing (135). There is following a beautiful anthropological reflection on what is fundamentally this particular period of life : *A time of dreams and decisions*. The young person is the one who walks inhabited by a promise of life. The challenge for him or her is to find concrete joy and a full life by daring to make the right choices. And here Pope Francis indicates clearly the way to follow: “Jesus is the way: welcome him into your ‘boat’ and put out into the deep! He is the Lord! He changes the way we see life. Faith in Jesus leads to greater hope, to a certainty based not on our qualities and skills, but on the word of God, on the invitation that comes from him. “Put out into the deep. Go out of yourselves” (141).

In a very existential approach that starts from the reality of young people, Pope Francis relies on this essential dimension of their life that is friendship. In this very powerful part entitled “*In friendship with Christ*” he presents this relationship as “stable, firm and faithful” and explains the way of prayer both as a challenge and an adventure, choosing words that are fully meaningful. In the way the Holy Father reasons, we can recognize the pedagogy of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Thus Pope Francis proposes to live one’s youth as an interior experience of growth to bear more fruit by daring to let oneself be fully reached by Christ who wants for each young person a greater life that allows him or her to be more and to give him or herself to others. In paragraphs 156 - 162 on growth and maturation, the pope quotes one of his reference theologians Romano Guardini and also gives a touching personal testimony: “At every moment in life, we can renew our youthfulness. When I began my ministry as pope, the Lord broadened my horizons and granted me renewed youth” (160).

Finally, this long central chapter ends by evoking the community and social dimension of following Christ, with a section called “*Paths of Fraternity*” and another called “*Young and committed*.” The Pope seeks to open the dimension of social and political commitment: “I ask young people to go beyond their small groups and to build” social friendship, where everyone works for the common good” (169). He emphasizes how “social commitment is a specific feature of today’s young people” (170) even if it takes different forms than those of previous generations. In the continuation of his many speeches to young people, especially at World Youth Day, Pope Francis encourages young people to commit themselves to building a better world, calling them to be “protagonists of change” and “courageous missionaries,” that is, “Lovers of Christ, ... called to witness to the Gospel everywhere, through their own lives.”

“The Gospel is for everyone, not just for some” (177, he says). And he concludes with this key message: ‘Young friends, don’t wait until tomorrow to contribute your energy, your audacity and

your creativity to changing our world. Your youth is not an “in-between time.” “You are the *now* of God, and he wants you to bear fruit (178).”

CHAPTER 6

Chapter 6, entitled “**Young people with roots**,” gives a light at the opposite of our current world which often values instantaneity and appearance through a cult of youth and a superficial frame of life. The pope tries to “propose another way, one born of freedom, enthusiasm, creativity and new horizons, while at the same time cultivating the roots that nourish and sustain us” (184). It is a path that calls us to nourish and care for our roots of culture and history. And accordingly he takes up and deploys one of his favorite themes: the essential and fruitful encounter between the young and the elderly.

Thus Pope Francis recommends that young people build relationships with the elderly people and listen to them in order to discover the past. He again quotes Joel’s prophecy: “*I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Then your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will have visions and your old men will have dreams*” (Jl. 3:1) which he had already mentioned in his opening speech at the pre-synod and recalled at the beginning of the synod. At the same time he asks the elders to be “memory keepers.” The elders dream and the young people have visions, and if the two complement each other in a good way, if the meeting between the generations is fruitful:

If we journey together, young and old, we can be firmly rooted in the present, and from here, revisit the past and look to the future. To revisit the past in order to learn from history and heal old wounds that at times still trouble us. To look to the future in order to nourish our enthusiasm, cause dreams to emerge, awaken prophecies and enable hope to blossom (199).

This is the major challenge of the today’s church and society “so that we may seek together a better world, under the ever new impetus of the Holy Spirit.”

The youth synod allowed this wonderful, mutual, intergenerational encounter to happen. Pope Francis invites us to get in the same boat and move forward together. He shares an inspiring image, mentioned by Joe, a young synod listener from the Samoa Islands, who spoke of:

“...the church as a canoe, in which the elderly help to keep on course by judging the position of the stars, while the young keep rowing, imagining what waits for them ahead. Let us steer clear of young people who think that adults represent a meaningless past, and those adults who always think they know how young people should act. Instead, let us all climb aboard the same canoe and together seek a better world, with the constantly renewed momentum of the Holy Spirit” (201).

CHAPTER 7

Chapter 7 is then devoted to **Youth Ministry**. He pleads for *a pastoral care that is synodal* because the synod has clearly highlighted that synodality is the key to the evangelization of young people, the very way of transmitting the faith today. And the key words to live this pastoral care with and for young people with new styles and new approaches are: audacity, creativity, flexibility, proximity, gratuity, participation, co-responsibility. “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 (206) to “reflect that wonderful multi-faceted reality that Christ’s church is meant to be” (207).

Pope Francis then outlined *three main courses of action*:

- 1) *outreach* based on young people themselves because they will know how to find ways to reach other young people ;
- 2) *growth* in order to help young people take root in Christian life beyond occasional experiences by allowing them to grow in the love of Christ and in fraternal love; and
- 3) the issue of announcing the *kerygma*.

This pastoral care must be deployed and adjusted according to then different suitable environments, and it focuses on *youth ministry in educational institutions*: " Catholic schools remain essential places for the evangelization of the young" (222). Then in 224-229, he presents different areas to be develop for this pastoral care: prayer and liturgy, service to others, artistic expressions, sport, environmental protection (here are mentioned the Scouts) the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

This is followed by a plea for a "*popular*" *youth ministry* that is able to reach out to young people of the peripheries because it "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 (234). The third axis given in 240 is that youth ministers have to be **always missionaries**. But if "young people can find new fields for mission in the most varied settings" (241) they truly need **the accompaniment of adults**: "Young people need to have their freedom respected, yet they also need to be accompanied (242). The last paragraphs of this chapter, therefore, describe what this accompaniment should be: a personal and community accompaniment that requires trained mentors reflecting the diversity of the people of God, also giving its place to "leading female role models," allowing young people to discern and be actors in their journey.

CHAPTER 8

Chapter 8 deals with the important theme of **vocation** "**understood in a broad sense** as a calling from God, including the call to life, the call to friendship with him, the call to holiness, and so forth" (248). In the light of the Bible and of the Second Vatican Council, vocation is presented here as a call for everyone; every existence is vocation, *God's call to friendship with Christ*.

Here we find the key of friendship as a central notion in this exhortation. But above all, Pope Francis emphasizes here the understanding of "vocation in the strict sense, as a call to missionary service to others" (253). This understanding coincides with his vision described in *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) of a church called to live a missionary transformation because it is fundamentally a communion-in-mission. The challenge is then to see "that every form of pastoral activity, formation and spirituality should be seen in the light of our Christian vocation" (254). Our challenge, therefore, is to unfold what the final document of the synod had called "a pastoral vocational youth ministry."

Explaining this statement given in *Evangelii Gaudium* (273): "*I am a mission on this earth, and for this reason I am in this world,*" Pope Francis explains to young people in a very pedagogical way that discerning his vocation "is a recognition of why I was made, why I am here on earth, and what the Lord's plan is for my life" (256). Vocation discernment is, therefore, a way "to foster and develop all that we are" and "to bring out the best in yourself for the glory of God and the good of others" (257).

The fundamental vocation of every human being is *a call to love*. Relying on *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), the exhortation first presents the *vocation to marriage*. While being aware that it is not easy to commit to marriage in the culture of the provisional which prevails today, Pope Francis does not hesitate to say clearly to young people: "I have great confidence in you, and for this very reason, I urge you to opt for marriage" (264). Then in 267, a section devoted to singles, he reminds us "that the first and most important vocation is the vocation we have received in baptism."

Then another dimension of vocation is pointed out, that of *work*, so important for Pope Francis and so often mentioned during his pontificate. Taking up a text from the bishops of the United States (throughout the exhortation various episcopal conferences are quoted), the pope emphasizes the importance of work for young people: “Work defines and influences a young adult’s identity and self-concept and is a prime place where friendships and other relationships develop because generally it is not done alone” (268). He also invites young people to discern their calling for work so that they can give deep meaning to it. Finally, he focuses on *the vocation to special consecration*, encouraging that young people in their discerning “not dismiss the possibility of devoting yourself to God in the priesthood, the religious life, or in other forms of consecration (276).

CHAPTER 9

Chapter 9, the final chapter, is devoted to “**the way we discern** our own vocation in the world.” It begins with a look at the foundation of the formation of consciousness “which allows discernment to grow in depth and in fidelity to God” (281). Then Pope Francis concretely advises young people how to discern their vocation. The process of discernment requires first a personal effort to discover our own vocation “since this is a very personal decision that others cannot make for us” (283), and it especially involves the means of silence and prayer. The pope also lists the right questions to ask:

Do I know myself, quite apart from my illusions and emotions? Do I know what brings joy or sorrow to my heart? What are my strengths and weaknesses? These questions immediately give rise to others: How can I serve people better and prove most helpful to our world and to the Church? What is my real place in this world? What can I offer to society? (285)

But the challenge is to center these questions on others because what is received—gifts, qualities, charisms—are not for oneself but for others. We then find the recurring theme of the relationship with Jesus as a close friend: “To discern our personal vocation, we have to realize that it is a calling from a friend, who is Jesus” (287). Then the pope explains the classical means of discernment: accompaniment by mentors capable of attentive and disinterested listening, mentors who help to determine what comes from the good or bad spirit and who are able to enter into a disposition of deep listening, allowing the other to move forward under the impulse of the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

To conclude Pope Francis expresses a final desire to young people:

Dear young people, my joyful hope is to see you keep running the race before you, outstripping all those who are slow or fearful. Keep running, “attracted by the face of Christ, whom we love so much, whom we adore in the Holy Eucharist and acknowledge in the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters. May the Holy Spirit urge you on as you run this race. The church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them! And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us. (299)

With this text, Pope Francis offers young people, but also all of us, God's people on the move, a precious compass for the road and even more an invitation to dare the path of friendship with Christ. For this text, which often quotes the very words of young people, is more than a text; it gathers a living experience, that of young people in today's world, full of resources but also confronted with multiple difficulties and challenges, that of the synodal journey, the pre-synod, and the synod lived in great joy and fraternity. This exhortation is the fruit of a common listening to the Spirit, associating the Pope, the bishops, the young people and the whole church. This text comes from a spiritual and

ecclesial experience and aims to stimulate this experience in each reader: the experience of the ever deeper personal encounter with Christ presented fundamentally as a friend. It is an intrinsically personal and communal experience. May *Christus Vivit* help us and help the whole church to be ever more faithful to its vocation to be at the service of the humanization of the world.

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