

Introduction

“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (Jn 15:11). This is God’s plan for all men and women in every age, including all the young men and women of the Third Millennium, without exception.

Proclaiming the joy of the Gospel is the mission entrusted by the Lord to his Church. The Synod on the New Evangelization and the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* treated how to accomplish this mission in today’s world. The two synods on the family and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* were, instead, dedicated to helping families find this joy.

In keeping with this mission and introducing a new approach through a Synod with the topic, “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment”, the Church has decided to examine herself on how she can lead young people to recognize and accept the call to the fullness of life and love, and to ask young people to help her in identifying the most effective ways to announce the Good News today. By listening to young people, the Church will once again hear the Lord speaking in today’s world. As in the days of Samuel (cf. 1 Sam 3:1-21) and Jeremiah (cf. Jer 1:4-10), young people know how to discern the signs of our times, indicated by the Spirit. Listening to their aspirations, the Church can glimpse the world which lies ahead and the paths the Church is called to follow.

For each person, the vocation to love takes concrete form in everyday life through a series of choices, which find expression in the states of life (marriage, ordained ministry, consecrated life, etc.), professions, forms of social and civil commitment, lifestyle, the management of time and money, etc. Whether these choices are willfully made or simply accepted, either consciously or unconsciously, no one is excluded from making these choices. The purpose of vocational discernment is to find out how to transform them, in the light of faith, into steps towards the fullness of joy to which everyone is called.

The Church knows the basis of “the strength and beauty of young people, [namely] the ability to rejoice at the beginning of undertakings, to give oneself totally without going back, to pick oneself up and begin again in search of new conquests” (Message of Vatican II to Young People, 8 December 1965). The riches of the Church’s spiritual tradition provide many resources in guiding the formation of conscience and an authentic freedom.

With this in mind, the present Preparatory Document begins the synod’s phase of consultation of the entire People of God. This document — addressed to the synods and councils of patriarchs of the Eastern Catholic Churches *sui iuris*, the episcopal conferences, the dicasteries of the Roman Curia and the Union of Superiors General — concludes with a series of questions. The consultation will also include all young people through a website with questions on their expectations and their lives. The answers to both series of questions will be the basis for drafting the “work-

document” or *Instrumentum laboris*, which will be the reference point in the discussion of the synod fathers.

This Preparatory Document suggests a reflection in three steps, beginning with summarily outlining some of the social and cultural dynamics of the world in which young people grow and make their decisions and proposing that these be read in the light of faith. The document then retraces the fundamental steps of the process of discernment, which the Church feels is the basic means she can offer young people so they can discover, in the light of faith, their vocation. Finally, the document treats key points in a pastoral vocational programme for youth. The document, therefore, is not exhaustive, but serves as a kind of guide to encourage further discussion, whose fruits will be available only at the conclusion of the Synod.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BELOVED DISCIPLE

The Gospel-image of John the Apostle can serve as an inspiration at the beginning of this process. In the traditional reading of the Fourth Gospel, he is both an example of a young person who chooses to follow Jesus and “the disciple Jesus loved” (Jn 13:23; 19:26; 21:7).

“...and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon, and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, “So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter) (Jn 1:36-39).”

In the search for meaning in their lives, the two disciples of John the Baptist hear Jesus make the penetrating question: “What do you seek?” To their reply, “Rabbi (which means Teacher), where do you live?”, the Lord responds with an invitation: “Come and see” (Jn 1:38-39). At the same time, Jesus calls them to embark on an inner journey and to be prepared to move forward in a practical way, without really knowing where this will lead them. It will be a memorable encounter, so much so that they even remember the exact time of day (cf. Jn 1:39).

As a result of their courage to go and see, the disciples will experience the abiding friendship of Christ and will be able to pass each day with him. They will ponder his words and be inspired by them; and will be deeply affected and moved by his actions. John, in particular, will be called to be a witness of the Passion and Resurrection of his Master. At the Last Supper (cf. Jn 13.21 to 29), the intimate nature of their relationship will lead him to rest his head on Jesus' chest and to trust his every word. In following Simon Peter to the house of the high priest, John will

face the night of suffering and loneliness (cf. Jn 18:13-27). At the foot of the Cross, he will endure the profound grief of his Mother, entrusted to him, while accepting the responsibility of taking care of her (cf. Jn 19:25-27). On Easter morning, he will share with Peter the frenzied yet hope-filled race towards the empty tomb (cf. Jn 20:1-10). Finally, during the miraculous draught of fish at the Sea of Galilee (cf. Jn 21:1-14), he will recognize the Risen Lord and will give testimony to the entire community. John's example can be of assistance in understanding that the vocational experience is a gradual process of inner discernment and growth in the faith, which leads to discovering the fullness of the joy of life and love, making a gift of oneself and participating in the proclamation of the Good News.

I YOUNG PEOPLE IN TODAY'S WORLD

This chapter is not a comprehensive analysis of society or the young people's world, but the results of research in the social sphere which is useful in addressing the issue of vocational discernment, so that [by] "letting them touch us deeply [they can] provide a concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual journey" (Laudato Si', 15).

On the global level, approaching the subject will require adaptation to the specific circumstances of each region. Judging from global trends, the differences among the various areas of the planet are important. In many ways, it is fair to say that there is a multiplicity of worlds, when speaking of young people, not a single one. Among these, some are particularly noteworthy. The first results from demographics which divides countries with high birth-rates, where young people make up a significant and growing proportion of the population, from those countries where the population is diminishing. A second difference is based on history which separates countries and continents of ancient Christian tradition and culture — which should not be lost — from countries and continents whose culture is marked, instead, by other religious traditions in which Christianity is in the minority and oftentimes only recently present. Finally, not to be forgotten are the differences arising according to gender, masculine and feminine. On the one hand, gender determines different perceptions of reality, on the other, gender is the basis of various forms of domination, exclusion and discrimination, which all societies need to overcome.

In the following pages, the word "youth" refers to persons who are roughly 16 to 29 years old, while bearing in mind that the term needs to be adapted to local circumstances. In any case, it is good to remember that the term "youth", in addition to referring to persons, is a stage of life that each generation understands in an unequal, original manner.

1. A Rapidly-Changing World

A rapid process of change and transformation is the main characteristic of contemporary societies and cultures (cf. Laudato Si', 18). The highly complex nature and pace of this process is creating a situation of fluidity and uncertainty never

before experienced. Without judging a priori whether this state of affairs is a problem or an opportunity, the situation demands complete attention and an ability for long-term planning, while bearing in mind its endurance and the consequences of today's choices for the future.

The growth of uncertainty results in a state of vulnerability, that is, a combination of social unease and economic difficulties as well as insecurity in the lives of a large part of the population. With regards to work, this situation brings to mind unemployment, an increase in flexibility in the labour market and exploitation, especially of minors, or the overall series of civil, economic and social causes, including those of the environment, which explain the overwhelming increase in the number of refugees and migrants. Compared to a privileged few, who can take advantage of the opportunities offered by the processes of economic globalization, many people live in a precarious and insecure situation, which has an impact on the course and choices taken in life.

Globally, the contemporary world is marked by a culture based on "science", oftentimes dominated by technology and the endless possibilities science promises, within which "sadness and loneliness appear to be on the rise, not least among young people" (*Misericordia et misera*, 3). As taught in the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, the intertwining of a technocratic standard and a frantic search for short-term profits is the basis of the "throw-away" culture which excludes millions of people, including many young people, and leads to the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation, threatening the future of upcoming generations (cf. 20-22).

It should not be overlooked that many societies are increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious. In particular, the presence of different religious traditions is a challenge and an opportunity. The situation can lead to uncertainty and the temptation of relativism, but, at the same time, can provide for increased possibilities for fruitful dialogue and mutual enrichment. From the vantage point of faith, the situation is seen as a sign of our times, requiring greater listening, respect and dialogue.

2. New Generations

Today's generation of young people live in a world which is different from that of their parents and educators. Economic and social changes have affected the gamut of obligations and opportunities. Young people's aspirations, needs, feelings and manner of relating to others have changed as well. Furthermore, from a certain point of view, young people, because of globalization, tend to be more homogeneous in all parts of the world. Nevertheless, they remain in their local surroundings and their unique cultural and institutional settings, which have repercussions in the process of socializing and forming a personal identity.

The challenge of multi-culturalism is present in a special way in the world of young people; for example, with the special features of “second generations” (that is, those young people who grow up in a society and a culture different from those of their parents, as a result of migration) or, in a certain sense, the children of “mixed” parents (from the vantage point of ethnicity, culture and / or religion).

In many parts of the world, young people are experiencing particular hardships which pose difficulties for them in making real choices in life, because they have not even the minimal possibility to exercise freedom. This situation includes young people experiencing poverty and exclusion; those who grow up without parents or family, or are unable to go to school; children and young boys and girls who live on the street in many suburbs; the young who are unemployed, displaced persons and migrants; those who are victims of exploitation, trafficking and slavery; children and young people forcefully recruited in criminal gangs or as guerilla fighters; and child brides or girls forced to marry against their will. Too many in the world pass directly from childhood to adulthood and a burden of responsibility they were unable to choose. Oftentimes female children, little girls and young women face even greater difficulties than their peers.

Studies conducted at the international level can help identify some characteristic features of young people in our times.

Belonging and Participation

Young people do not see themselves as a disadvantaged class or a social group to be protected or, consequently, as passive recipients of pastoral programmes or policies. Many wish to be an active part in the process of change taking place at this present time, as confirmed by the experiences of involvement and innovation at the grass-root level, which see young people as major, leading characters together with other people.

Young people, on the one hand, show a willingness and readiness to participate and commit themselves to concrete activities in which the personal contribution of each might be an occasion for recognizing one’s identity. On the other hand, they show an intolerance in places where they feel, rightly or wrongly, that they lack opportunities to participate or receive encouragement. This can lead to resignation or fatigue in their will to desire, to dream and to plan, as seen in the diffusion of the phenomenon of NEET (“not in education, employment or training”, namely, young people are not engaged in an activity of study or work or vocational training). The discrepancy between young people who are passive and discouraged and those enterprising and energetic comes from the concrete opportunities offered to each one in society and the family in which one develops, in addition to the experiences of a sense of meaning, relationships and values which are formed even before the onset of youth. Besides passivity, a lack of confidence in themselves and their abilities can manifest itself in an excessive concern for their self-image and in a submissive conformity to passing fads.

Personal and Institutional Points of Reference

Various research studies show that young people have a need for persons of reference, who are close-by, credible, consistent and honest, in addition to places and occasions for testing their ability to relate to others (both adults and peers) and dealing with their feelings and emotions. Young people look for persons of reference who are able to express empathy and offer them support, encouragement and help in recognizing their limits, but without making them feel they are being judged.

From this vantage point, the role of parents and families is crucial yet sometimes problematic. The older generations often tend to underestimate young people's potential. They emphasize their weaknesses and have trouble understanding the needs of those who are very young. Parents and adult educators can also be aware of their own mistakes and know what they would not want young people to do. However, oftentimes they do not have a clear idea of how to help young people focus on the future. In this regard, the two most common reactions are preferring not to say anything and imposing their own choices. Absent or overprotective parents make their children more unprepared to face life and tend to underestimate the risks involved or are obsessed by a fear of making mistakes.

Young people, however, are not seeking reference persons among adults only; they have a strong desire for reference persons among their peers. Consequently, they need opportunities for free interaction with them, to be able to express their feelings and emotions, to learn in an informal manner and to experiment with roles and abilities without stress and anxiety.

Young people, cautious by nature of those who are outside their circle of personal relationships, oftentimes nourish mistrust, indifference or anger towards institutions. This is not just about society but increasingly affects educational institutions and the Church as an institution. They would like the Church to be closer to people and more attentive to social issues, but realize that this will not happen immediately.

All this takes place in a context where sectarian membership and religious practice more and more characterize young people. Though young people are not in open "opposition", they learn to live "without" the God presented by the Gospel and "without" the Church and to rely on alternative and minimally-institutionalized forms of religion and spirituality or to take refuge in sects or religious experiences with a strong affiliation. In many places, the presence of the Church is becoming less widespread and, consequently, more difficult to encounter, while the dominant culture is the bearer of needs oftentimes at odds with Gospel values, whether it be elements of their tradition or the local reality of globalization, which is characterized by consumerism and an overemphasis on the individual.

Towards a Hyper-Connected Generation

Today, the younger generation is characterized by its relationship with the modern technologies of communication and what is normally called the “virtual world”, which has very real effects. This “virtual world” provides potential access to a range of opportunities which previous generations did not enjoy, but not without its risks. Nevertheless, it is very important to focus on how the experience of technologically mediated relations might structure the conception of the world, reality and interpersonal relationships. On this basis, the Church is called upon to evaluate her pastoral activity, which needs to develop an appropriate culture.

3. Young People and Choices

Within the fluidity and insecurity previously outlined, the transition to adult life and the building of a personal identity increasingly require a “reflective course of action.” People are forced to reorient their life’s journeys and continually take possession of their choices. Moreover, together with the spread of western culture, a conception of freedom as the possibility of having access to ever-new opportunities is emerging. Young people refuse to continue on a personal journey of life, if it means giving up taking different paths in the future: “Today I choose this, tomorrow we’ll see.” In affective relationships as in the world of work, the horizon consists of options which can always be reversed rather than definitive choices.

In this context, the old approaches no longer work and the experience passed on by previous generations quickly becomes obsolete. Valuable opportunities and enticing risks are intertwined in an entanglement which is not easily extricable, thus requiring suitable cultural, social and spiritual means, so that the process of decision-making does not stall and end up, perhaps for fear of making mistakes, undergoing change rather than guiding it. To use Pope Francis words: “How can we reawaken the greatness and the courage of comprehensive choices, of the impulses of the heart in order to face academic and emotional challenges?”. The phrase I use very often is: take a risk! Take a risk. Whoever does not risk does not walk. ‘But what if I make a mistake?’. Blessed be the Lord! You will make more mistakes if you remain still” (Discourse at Villa Nazareth, 18 June 2016).

The search for ways to reawaken courage and the impulses of the heart must necessarily take into account that the person of Jesus and the Good News proclaimed by him continue to fascinate many young people.

Young people’s ability to choose is hampered by difficulties related to precarious conditions, namely, their struggle to find work or the dramatic absence of opportunities to work; obstacles in their achieving economic independence; and their inability to continue in one career. Generally speaking, these obstacles are even more difficult for young women to overcome.

The economic and social hardship of families, the way in which young people adopt certain characteristics of contemporary culture and the impact of new technologies

require a major capacity in responding, in its broadest sense, to the challenge in educating the young. This is the educational emergency highlighted by Pope Benedict XVI in his Letter to the City and the Diocese of Rome on the Urgency of Educating Young People (21 January 2008). On the global level, inequalities between countries need to be taken into account as well as their effect on the opportunities offered to young people in fostering inclusion in different societies. Furthermore, cultural and religious factors can lead to exclusion by, for example, gender inequality or discrimination against ethnic or religious minorities, which drive the most enterprising among the young to revert to emigration.

This situation makes particularly urgent the promotion of personal skills by putting them at the service of a solid plan for common growth. Young people appreciate the choice of working together in real projects which measure their ability to get results, of exercising leadership directed to improving the environment in which they live and of seeking opportunities to acquire and refine, in a practical way, useful skills for life and work.

Social innovation expresses a positive involvement which turns upside-down the condition of new generations, transforming losers seeking protection from the risks of change to agents of change who create new opportunities. It is significant that young people — often withdrawn into a stereotype of passivity and inexperience — propose and practice alternatives which show how the world or the Church could be. If society or the Christian community want to make something new happen again, they have to leave room for new people to take action. In other words, devising change according to the principles of sustainability requires enabling new generations to experience a new model of development. This is particularly problematic in those countries and institutions where the age of those who occupy positions of responsibility is high and slows down the pace of generational change.

II FAITH, DISCERNMENT, VOCATION

Through every phase of this Synod, the Church wants again to state her desire to encounter, accompany and care for every young person, without exception. The Church cannot, nor does she wish to, abandon them to the isolation and exclusion to which the world exposes them. That young people's lives might be a good experience; that they do not lose themselves in violence or death; and that disappointment does not imprison and alienate them, all of this has to be of great concern to one who has received life, been baptized in the faith and is aware that these are great gifts.

Because of these gifts, being born opens a person to the promise of a full life and being accepted and cared for is the basic experience which places in the heart of each person not only the confidence of not being abandoned to a lack of a sense of meaning or to the darkness of death but the hope of being able to express one's individuality in a journey towards the fullness of life.

The wisdom of the Eastern Church is helpful in seeing how this confidence might be based in an analogy of “three births”: natural birth, that is, one is born female and male in a world which can accommodate and support life; birth in baptism “when someone becomes a child of God through grace”; and then a third birth, that is, the passage “from bodily life in this world to the spiritual life in the next”, which opens a person to the full exercise of freedom (cf. Discourse of Philoxenus of Mabbug, a fifth century Syrian bishop, 9).

Offering others the gifts that one has received means accompanying them and walking beside them on this journey as they deal with the weaknesses and difficulties in their lives, and especially supporting them in the exercise of freedom which is still being formed. Consequently, the Church, beginning with her Pastors, is called to make a self-examination and to rediscover her vocation of caring for others in the manner recommended by Pope Francis at the beginning of his pontificate: “...caring [and] protecting demand goodness; [they] call for a certain tenderness. In the Gospels, Saint Joseph appears as a strong and courageous man, a working man, yet in his heart we see great tenderness, which is not the virtue of the weak but rather a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love.” (Homily at the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome, 19 March 2013).

From this perspective, some ideas will now be presented regarding accompanying young people, beginning with the faith and listening to the tradition of the Church, with the clear objective of supporting them in their vocational discernment and their making fundamental choices in life, starting from an awareness that some of these choices are permanent.

1. Faith and Vocation

Faith is seeing things as Jesus does (cf. *Lumen fidei*, 18). Faith is the source of vocational discernment, because faith provides vocational discernment with its fundamental contents, specific development, personal style and pedagogy. Joyously and willingly accepting this gift of grace requires making it fruitful through concrete and consistent choices in life.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another” (Jn 15:16-17). If the vocation to the joy of love is the fundamental call that God has placed in the heart of every young person so that each one’s existence will bear fruit, faith is both a gift from on high and a response to feeling oneself chosen and loved.

Faith “is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God’s faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness” (*Lumen fidei*, 53). This faith “becomes a light

capable of illumining all our relationships in society”, contributing to building “a universal brotherhood” among the men and women of our time (ibid., 54).

The Bible has numerous accounts of young people receiving a vocational call and their making a response. In the light of faith, they gradually become aware of the God’s plan of profound love for each person. This is God’s intention in every one of his actions, from the time of creating the world as a place that is “good”, a place capable of accepting life and a place offered as a gift in a network of relations to be trusted.

To believe is to listen to the Spirit and, with all one’s powers of mind and emotion, to dialogue with the Word, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (cf. Jn 14:6) and to learn to trust in the Word, “embodying It” in the concrete instances of everyday life, in moments when the cross is encountered and when one experiences the joy in seeing the signs of resurrection, just as the “beloved disciple” did. This challenge must be faced by each Christian community and the individual believer.

The place for this dialogue is the conscience. As taught by the Second Vatican Council, conscience “is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths” (Gaudium et spes, 16). Conscience is therefore an inviolable place where a promising invitation is present. To discern the voice of the Spirit from other calls and decide how to respond is the task of each person. Others may accompany and affirm a person, but they can never take another person’s place in this regard.

Life and history teach that human beings cannot easily recognize the concrete form of that joy to which God calls each one and to which each one aspires, let alone at the present time of change and widespread uncertainty. At other times, persons have to deal with discouragement or the pressure of other emotional attachments that stalls a person on the path to the fulfilment. Many people experience this; for example, the young man who had too many riches which kept him from accepting the call of Jesus, and because of this, went away sad, rather than full of joy (cf. Mk 10:17-22). Human freedom, despite the fact that it always needs to be purified and perfected, never loses the fundamental capacity to recognize the good and carrying it out. “Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning” (Laudato Si', 205).

2. The Gift of Discernment

Making decisions and guiding one’s actions in situations of uncertainty and in the face of conflicting inner forces is the place for exercising discernment, a classic term in the tradition of the Church which applies to a variety of situations. Indeed, one form of discernment is exercised in reading the signs of the times which leads to recognizing the presence and action of the Spirit in history. Moral discernment, instead, distinguishes what is good from what is bad. Still another form, spiritual

discernment, aims to recognize temptation so as to reject it and proceed on the path to fullness of life. The connection of the various meanings of these forms is evident, a connection which can never be completely separated one from the other.

With this in mind, the focus in the case of the synod is on vocational discernment, that is, the process by which a person makes fundamental choices, in dialogue with the Lord and listening to the voice of the Spirit, starting with the choice of one's state in life. The question of how a person is not to waste the opportunities for self-realization is part-and-parcel of every man and woman. For the believer, the question becomes even more intense and profound, namely, how does a person live the good news of the Gospel and respond to the call which the Lord addresses to all those he encounters, whether through marriage, the ordained ministry or the consecrated life? Where can a person's talents be put to good use: a professional life, volunteer work, service to the needy or involvement in civil and political life?

The Spirit speaks and acts through the happenings in the life of each person, which in themselves are inexplicit or ambiguous, insofar as they are open to different interpretations. Discernment is required to reveal their meaning and to make a decision. The three verbs in *Evangelii gaudium*, 51, used to describe discernment, namely, "to recognize," "to interpret" and "to choose", can be of assistance in mapping out a suitable itinerary for individuals or groups and communities, fully aware that, in practice, the boundaries in the different phases are never clearly delineated.

Recognizing

Above all, "recognizing" concerns how life's happenings, the people one meets, and the words one hears or reads affect the interior life, namely, the various "desires, feelings and emotions" (*Amoris laetitia*, 143) and their diverse expressions: sadness, gloom, fulfilment, fear, joy, peace, a feeling of emptiness, tenderness, anger, hope, apathy, etc. A person feels attracted or pushed in a variety of directions, without enough clarity to take action, a time of ups and downs and, in some cases, a real internal struggle. "Recognizing" requires making this emotional richness emerge and ascertaining these feelings without making a judgment. It also requires capturing the "flavour" that remains, that is, the consonance or dissonance between what is experienced and what is in the depths of the heart.

At this stage the Word of God is of great importance. Meditating on it, in fact, mobilizes the passions as in all experiences which touch one's inner self, but, at the same time, offers the possibility of making them emerge and identifying with them in the events it narrates. The stage of "recognizing" focuses on the ability to listen and on one's feelings and emotions, without avoiding the arduous effort of silence, a critical step in personal growth, particularly for young people who are experiencing with greater pressure the intensity of various desires and cannot remain frightened by them, and thereby, renouncing even the great advances to which they are drawn.

Interpreting

“Recognizing” what has been tried is not enough. The next step is “interpreting”, in other words, to understand what the Spirit is calling the person to do through what the Spirit stirs up in each one. Oftentimes, a person stops to recount an experience, noting that the experience made a “deep impression.” Greater difficulty is encountered in understanding the origin and meaning of the desires and emotions one experiences and verifying whether they lead in a constructive direction or whether they lead to withdrawing into oneself.

This interpretative stage is very sensitive, requiring patience, vigilance and even a certain knowledge. A person needs to be capable of taking into consideration the effects of social and psychological conditioning, which even requires the involvement of one’s intellectual faculties, without falling into the trap of constructing abstract theories about what would be good or nice to do. Even in discernment, “realities are greater than ideas” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 231). Likewise, “interpreting” cannot fail to confront reality and to consider the possibilities that realistically are available.

“Interpreting” desires and inner movements requires an honest confrontation, in light of God’s Word, with the moral demands of the Christian life, always seeking to apply them in the concrete situation that is being experienced. This effort leads the one who does it, not to settle for the legalistic logic of the bare minimum, but instead to seek a way to make the most of one’s gifts and possibilities, which results in an attractive and inspiring message for young people.

The work of interpretation is carried out in an internal dialogue with the Lord, fully engaging a person’s abilities. The assistance of an experienced person in listening to the Spirit, however, is a valuable support that the Church offers, a support which would be unwise to disregard.

Choosing

Once all the desires and emotions are recognized and interpreted, the next step in making a decision is an exercise of authentic human freedom and personal responsibility, which, of course, is always connected to a concrete situation and therefore limited. The choice is subjected, then, to the blind force of impulse, to which a certain contemporary relativism ends up by assigning as ultimate criterion, norms imprisoning a person in continual change. At the same time, a person is freed from subjection to forces outside oneself, namely heteronomy. All of this requires coherency with one’s life.

For a long time throughout history, basic decisions in life have not been made by the individuals concerned, a situation which still endures in some parts of the world, as previously mentioned in the first chapter. Promoting truly free and responsible choices, fully removed from practices of the past, remains the goal of every serious

pastoral vocational programme. Discernment is the main tool which permits safeguarding the inviolable place of conscience, without pretending to replace it (cf. *Amoris laetitia*, 37).

A decision needs to be proven by facts to see whether it is a right decision. A choice cannot remain imprisoned in an interiority which is likely to remain virtual or unrealistic — a real danger accentuated in contemporary culture — but is called to be translated into action, to take flesh, to embark on a path, accepting the risk of a confrontation with the reality which caused the desires and emotions. Other desires and emotions will arise in this stage; “recognizing” and “interpreting” them will allow the possibility of seeing whether the decision is good or whether it is advisable to re-evaluate it. Consequently, “going out” is important, even with the fear of making a mistake, which, as previously seen, can be crippling.

3. Paths Towards Vocation and Mission

Vocational discernment is not accomplished in a single act, even if, in recounting the development of a vocation, identifying specific moments or decisive encounters is possible. As for all important things in life, vocational discernment is a long process unfolding over time, during which one continues to monitor the signs used by the Lord to indicate and specify a vocation that is very personal and unique. The Lord asked Abraham and Sarah to leave their country, but only in a gradual process — not without mistaken steps — which clarified what was initially a mysterious “land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Mary herself makes progress in the awareness of her vocation through meditating on the words she hears and the events which took place, even those she did not understand (cf. Lk 2:50-51).

Time is fundamental in verifying the effectiveness of a decision made. As taught in every page of the Bible, every vocation is directed towards a mission undertaken with reluctance or enthusiasm.

Accepting the mission implies the willingness to risk one’s life and to travel the way of the cross, in the footsteps of Jesus, who firmly set out on his journey to Jerusalem (cf. Lk 9:51) to offer his life for humanity. Only by giving up being selfishly occupied with one’s needs does a person become open to accommodate God’s plan in family life, the ordained ministry or consecrated life and seriously to carry out one’s profession as well as sincerely to seek the common good. Particularly in places where the culture is more deeply marked by individualism, choices need to be examined to see whether the pursuit of self-fulfilment might be the result of narcissism or instead includes a willingness to live one’s life logically in compliance with the generosity of the gift of self. Consequently, contact with poverty, vulnerability and need are of great importance on the road to vocational discernment. Above all, members of the formation staff in seminaries should confirm and foster in seminarians a willingness to become imbued with the “smell of the sheep.”

4. Accompaniment

Three basic beliefs underlie the process of discernment, beliefs which are ingrained in every human being's experience understood in the light of the faith and Christian tradition. The first is that the Spirit of God works in the heart of every man and woman through feelings and desires that are bound to ideas, images and plans. Listening carefully, the human being has the possibility to interpret these signals. The second belief is that the human heart, because of its weakness and sin, is normally divided because it is attracted to different and even contrary feelings. The third belief is that every way of life imposes a choice, because a person cannot remain indefinitely in an undetermined state. A person needs to adopt the instruments needed to recognize the Lord's call to the joy of love and choose to respond to it.

Among these instruments, the Church's spiritual tradition emphasizes the importance of personal accompaniment. In accompanying another person, the study of the teachings on discernment is not enough; one needs the hard, personal experience of interpreting the movements of the heart to recognize the action of the Spirit, whose voice can speak to the uniqueness of each individual. Personal accompaniment demands the constant refinement of one's sensitivity to the voice of the Spirit and leads to discovering a resource and richness in a person's individual character.

It is a question of fostering a person's relationship with God and helping to remove what might hinder it. Herein lies the difference between accompaniment in discerning and psychological support, which, when open to transcendence, oftentimes has a basic importance. The psychologist supports those in difficulties and helps them become aware of their weaknesses and potential. Spiritual guidance re-orientates a person towards the Lord and prepares the ground for an encounter with him (cf. Jn 3:29-30).

Jesus' encounter with the people of his time, as recorded in the Gospels, highlight certain elements which are part of the ideal profile of the person accompanying a young person in vocational discernment, namely, a loving look (the calling of the first disciples, cf. Jn 1:35-51); an authoritative word (teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, cf. Lk 4:32); an ability to "become the neighbour" (the parable of the Good Samaritan, cf. Lk 10:25-37); a choice to "walk beside" (the disciples of Emmaus, cf. Lk 24:13-35); and an authentic witness, fearlessly going against preconceived ideas (the washing of the feet at the Last Supper, cf. Jn 13:1-20).

In the task of accompanying the younger generation, the Church accepts her call to collaborate in the joy of young people rather than be tempted to take control of their faith (cf. 2 Cor 1:24). Such service is ultimately founded in prayer and in asking for the gift of the Spirit, who guides and enlightens each and everyone.

III PASTORAL ACTIVITY

How does the Church help young people accept their call to the joy of the Gospel, especially in these times of uncertainty, volatility and insecurity?

The purpose of this chapter is to focus on how earnestly to respond to the challenge of pastoral care and vocational discernment, taking into consideration those involved in this task, the places where this guidance takes place and the resources which are available. In this sense, the pastoral and vocational care of young people, though overlapping, have distinct differences. The following overview is not intended to treat the subject fully, but to provide indications which are to be elaborated further, based on the experience of each local Church.

1. Walking with Young People

Accompanying young people requires going beyond a preconceived framework, encountering young people where they are, adapting to their times and pace of life and taking them seriously. This is to be done as young people seek to make sense of the reality in which they live and to utilize the message which they have received in words and deeds in their daily attempts to create a personal history and in the more-or-less conscious search for meaning in their lives.

Every Sunday, Christians keep alive the memory of the crucified and risen Lord in their encounter with him in the celebration of the Eucharist. Many children are baptized in the faith of the Church and are engaged in the journey of Christian initiation. Nonetheless, this is not the same as making a mature choice for a life of faith. Arriving at this point requires a journey which sometimes includes unpredictable paths and uncustomary places which are far removed from ecclesial communities. In this regard, Pope Francis said: "Vocational pastoral ministry is learning the style of Jesus, who passes through the places of daily life, stops without being hurried and, by looking at our brothers with mercy, leads them to encounter God the Father (Address to Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocations, 21 October 2016). Walking with young people builds up the entire Christian community.

Precisely because the proposed message involves the freedom of young people, every community needs to give importance to creative ways of addressing young people in a personal way and supporting personal development. In many cases, the task involves learning to allow for something new and not stifling what is new by attempting to apply a preconceived framework. No seed for vocations can be fruitful if approached with a closed and "complacent pastoral attitude that says: 'We have always done it this way'" and without people being "bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities" (*Evangelii gaudium*, 33). Three verbs from the Gospel, which describe the way Jesus encountered the people of his time, can be of assistance in adopting this pastoral style: "going out", "seeing" and "calling."

Going Out

Pastoral vocational care, in this sense, means to accept the invitation of Pope Francis: “going out”, primarily, by abandoning the rigid attitudes which make the proclamation of the joy of the Gospel less credible; “going out”, leaving behind a framework which makes people feel hemmed-in; and “going out”, by giving up a way of acting as Church which at times is out-dated. “Going out” is also a sign of inner freedom from routine activities and concerns, so that young people can be leading characters in their own lives. The young will find the Church more attractive, when they see that their unique contribution is welcomed by the Christian community.

Seeing

To “go out” into the world of young people requires a willingness to spend time with them, to listen to the story of their lives and to be attentive to their joys, hopes, sadness and anxieties; all in an effort to share them. This leads to the inculturation of the Gospel and for the Gospel to enter every culture, even among young people. In the accounts of Jesus’ encounters with the men and women of his time, the Gospel precisely highlights his ability to spend time with them and his appeal to those with whom he exchanged glances. The same is the case with every true shepherd of souls, who is able to peer into the depths of the heart without being intrusive or threatening. This is the true look of discernment, which does not want to take possession of another’s conscience nor pre-determine the path of God’s grace, but begins by setting aside one’s own mental framework.

Calling

In the Gospel accounts, Jesus’ look of love is transformed into a word, that is, a call to newness of life which is to be accepted, explored and built up. Above all, calling means awakening a desire and jarring people from what blocks them or from the complacency which slows them down. Calling means asking questions which have no ready-made answers. In this way, and not by passively respecting norms, people are impelled to embark on a journey and to encounter the joy of the Gospel.

2. Agents

All Young People, Without Exception

In pastoral activity, young people are not objects but agents. Oftentimes, society sees them as non-essential or inconvenient. The Church cannot reflect such an attitude, because all young people, without exception, have the right to be guided in life’s journey.

Consequently, each community is called to be attentive to young people, especially those who are experiencing poverty, marginalization or exclusion and lead them to become involved in life. Being close to young people, who are living amidst great

poverty and hardship, violence, war, disease, disability and suffering, is a special gift of the Spirit, which can truly manifest a proper manner of acting by a Church which is “going out”. The Church herself is called to learn from young people. Many saints among youth give shining testimony to this fact and continue to be an inspiration for everyone.

A Responsible Community

The entire Christian community should feel the responsibility of educating new generations. In fact, many Christians involved in this work deserve recognition, beginning with those who have assumed this responsibility within ecclesial life. The efforts of those who bear testimony everyday to the goodness of the Gospel life and the joy that flows from it should equally be admired. Finally, the Church needs to give major importance to young people’s involvement in the structures of participation in diocesan and parish communities, starting with pastoral councils, inviting young people to make their creative contribution and accepting their ideas, even when they appear challenging.

Everywhere in the world, parishes, religious congregations, associations, movements and ecclesial realities exist which can devise and offer young people significant experiences of growth and discernment. Sometimes, the aspect of planning shows signs of unpreparedness and a lack of skill, a situation which needs to be avoided by more earnestly undertaking the task of thinking, realizing, coordinating and implementing the pastoral programme for young people in a correct, consistent and effective manner. Such a task will also require a specific and continual preparation of those responsible for formation.

People of Reference

The role of credible adults and their cooperation is basic in the course of human development and vocational discernment. This requires authoritative believers, with a clear human identity, a strong sense of belonging to the Church, a visible spiritual character, a strong passion for education and a great capacity for discernment. Sometimes, however, unprepared and immature adults tend to act in a possessive and manipulative manner, creating negative dependencies, severe disadvantage and serious counter-witness, which can even intensify to the level of abuse.

Having credible people of reference requires training and supporting them and even providing them with major pedagogical skills. In a particular way, this applies to those who have the task of accompanying persons in their vocational discernment to accept a call to the ordained ministry and the consecrated life.

Parents and Family: the irreplaceable educational role played by parents and other family members needs to be acknowledged in every Christian community. In the first place, parents in families express each day God’s care for every human being

through a love which binds them to each other and to their children. In this regard, Pope Francis has offered valuable information in a specific chapter on the subject in *Amoris laetitia* (cf. 259-290).

Shepherds of Souls: meetings with clergy, who have the ability of a genuine involvement with youth by dedicating their time and resources, and consecrated women and men through their unselfish witness, are decisive in the growth of new generations. In this regard, Pope Francis said: "I ask this especially of the Pastors of the Church, the Bishops and the Priests: you are the ones principally responsible for Christian and priestly vocations, and this task cannot be relegated to a bureaucratic office. You too have experienced an encounter that changed your life, when another priest — a parish priest, a confessor, a spiritual director — helped you experience the beauty of God's love. Thus, you too: going out, listening to young people — it takes patience! — you can help them understand the movements of their heart and guide their steps" (Address to Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocations, 21 October 2016).

Teachers and other Persons in Education: many Catholic teachers are involved as witnesses in universities and schools in every grade and level. Many are also ardently and competently involved in the workplace. Still other believers are engaged in civil life, attempting to be the leaven for a more just society. Many engaged in volunteer work in society devote their time for the common good and the care of creation. A great many are enthusiastically and generously involved in free-time activities and sports. All of these people bear witness to the human and Christian vocation which is accepted and lived with faithfulness and dedication, arousing in those who see them a desire to do likewise. Consequently, responding generously to one's proper vocation is the primary way of performing pastoral vocational work.

3. Places

Daily Life and Social Commitment

Becoming an adult means learning to manage independently the aspects of life which are, at one and the same time, fundamental and part-and-parcel of everyday life, namely, the use of time and money, a life-style and a sound way of using goods and services, study and leisure, clothing and food, the affective life and sexuality. For young people, learning these things, inevitably a struggle, is also an opportunity to put some order in their lives and priorities, experimenting in choosing courses of action which can become an exercise in discernment and a reinforcement in life's orientation in making very important decisions. The more authentic the faith, the more the faith challenges everyday life and allows itself to be challenged. Experiences in the world of work, oftentimes difficult or problematic, as well as lack of employment deserve special mention. These too are opportunities to accept or ponder in-depth one's vocation.

The poor cry out, and with them, the earth. The commitment to listen to both can be a real opportunity to encounter the Lord and the Church and to discover one's vocation. Pope Francis teaches that the actions of a community in the care of the common home and the quality of the life of the poor, "when they express self-giving love, can also become intense spiritual experiences" (Laudato Si', 232) and, consequently, also an opportunity in life's journey and vocational discernment.

Specific Places in Pastoral Activity

The Church offers young people specific places for meeting, cultural formation, education, evangelization, celebration and service, putting herself first and foremost in openly receiving each and everyone. The challenge of these places and the pastoral workers involved in them is increasingly to proceed in developing an integrated network of messages to young people, and to adopt a suitable operating style of "going out", "seeing" and "calling".

— World Youth Days stand out on the world level. Episcopal conferences and dioceses are increasingly feeling the responsibility of offering specific events and experiences for young people.

— Parishes offer events, activities, times and itineraries for younger generations. The sacramental life offers fundamental opportunities to grow in an ability to accept the gift of God in their lives and is an invitation to become actively involved in the Church's mission. Youth centres and oratories are an indication of the Church's concern for young people.

— Universities and Catholic schools, with their valuable cultural and educational services, are still another indication of the Church's presence among the young.

— Social activities and volunteer work provide opportunities for unselfish service. In this regard, meeting with those who are poor and on the margins of society can be a propitious opportunity for spiritual growth and vocational discernment, because, from this vantage point, the poor can teach a lesson, indeed they, in themselves, are bearers of the good news that salvation is experienced in weakness.

— Associations and ecclesial movements, as well as many centres of spirituality, offer young people specific programmes for discernment. Missionary experiences become an altruistic service and a fruitful exchange. The rediscovery of pilgrimages as a form and manner of proceeding on life's journey has value and is very promising. In many places, popular piety sustains and nourishes the faith of young people.

— Seminaries and houses of formation have a strategic importance, because, they have the task of providing young people who respond to God's call, with experiences, including an intense community life, which will make them, in turn, able to accompany others.

The Digital World

Because of all that has been previously mentioned, the world of the new media deserves special attention, since, especially in the case of younger generations, it really occupies a major place in their lives. The new media offer many new opportunities, especially with regard to access to information and creating relations with those in distant places. However, they also pose risks (such as cyber-bullying, gambling, pornography, hidden dangers in chat rooms, ideological manipulation, etc.). Despite the differences in this field among various regions, the Christian community is still developing her presence in this new Areopagus, where young people certainly have something to teach her.

4. Resources

The Means of Expression in Pastoral Work

Although many fruitful encounters take place in the Church's activity and the expectations of young people in areas of the Bible, liturgy, art, catechesis and the media, the Church sometimes has a difficult time finding the proper language and expressions to speak to young people. Many dream of a Church capable of significantly involving young people in her activity through her use, among others, of young people's means of expression and by showing appreciation and the importance of young people's creativity and talents.

In a particular sense, sports are an educational resource, because they offer opportunities in many ways. Music and other artistic expressions are in themselves a privileged means with which young people can manifest their individuality.

Educative Care and the Path of Evangelization

Pastoral activity with young people, which is called upon to start processes more than to dominate spaces, shows, above all, the importance of service to the human growth of each individual and the educational and formative resources that can support it. A productive genetic connection exists between evangelization and education, a connection which, in these times, must take into account the gradual maturation of freedom.

As opposed to situations in the past, the Church needs to get accustomed to the fact that the ways of approaching the faith are less standardized, and therefore she must become more attentive to the individuality of each person. Together with those who continue to follow the traditional stages of Christian initiation, many come to encounter the Lord and the community of believers in other ways and later in life, for example, coming from a commitment to justice, or from contacts outside the Church with someone who is a credible witness. The challenge for communities is to receive everyone, following the example of Jesus who could speak with Jews and

Samaritans and with pagans in Greek culture and Roman occupiers, seizing upon the deep desires of each one of them.

Silence, Contemplation and Prayer

Finally and most importantly, no discernment is possible without cultivating a familiarity with the Lord and a dialogue with his Word. In particular, *Lectio divina* is a valuable method, which Church tradition has always followed.

In an increasingly noisy society, which offers a plethora of stimuli, one fundamental objective in the pastoral care of young people is to provide the young with opportunities to enjoy the value of silence and contemplation and to receive formation in understanding one's experiences and to listen to one's conscience.

5. Mary of Nazareth

The synodal process is entrusted to Mary. In the course of this process, the Church is self-examining herself on how to accompany young people to accept God's call to the joy of love and the fullness of life. Mary, the young woman of Nazareth, who in every stage of her existence accepted the Word, and preserve it, pondering it in her heart (cf. Lk 2:19) was the first to fulfill this journey.

Each young person can discover in Mary's life the way to listen, the courage that faith generates, the depths of discernment and dedication to service (cf. Lk 1:39-45). In her "lowliness," the Virgin betrothed to Joseph, experienced human weakness and difficulty in understanding the mysterious will of God (cf. Lk 1:34). She also was called to live by an exodus from herself and her plans by learning to trust and to confide.

Recalling the "great things" which the Almighty accomplished in her (cf. Lk 1:49), the Virgin did not feel alone, but fully loved and supported by the "Fear not" of the Angel (cf. Lk 1:30). Knowing that God is with her, Mary opened her heart to "Here I am", and thus began the Gospel journey (cf. Lk 1:38). Woman of Intercession (cf. Jn 2:3), at the foot of the cross of her Son, united to the "beloved disciple", again accepted the call to be fruitful and generate life in human history. In her eyes every young person can rediscover the beauty of discernment; in her heart every young person can experience the tenderness of intimacy and the courage of witness and mission.

QUESTIONS

The aim of the questions is to assist the customary ecclesial bodies "by right" to express their understanding of the world of young people and assess their experience of vocational accompaniment, in order to gather information for drafting the work- document or *Instrumentum laboris*.

So as to take into account the various situations on the different continents and regions, three specific questions for each geographic area have been inserted after question 15, to generate response from the interested ecclesial bodies.

To facilitate and make tenable this work, the respective bodies are requested to limit their response to approximately one page for the question on statistics, one page each for the questions assessing the situation and one page for the three experiences for the continents and regions. If necessary or desired, other texts can be attached to support or supplement the contents of the responses.

1. Gathering Statistics

Please indicate, where possible, the source of the statistics and make reference to the year. Other pertinent information can be attached to better understand the situation in various countries.

- Number of inhabitants in the country / countries and the birth rate.
- Number and percentage of young people (ages 16-29) in the country / countries.
- Number and percentage of Catholics in the country / countries.
- Average age (for the last 5 years) for marrying (distinguishing between men and women), for entering the seminary and the consecrated life (distinguishing between men and women).
- In the 16-29 age group, the percentage of students, workers (if possible specify the type of work), unemployed, NEET.

2. Evaluating the Situation

a) Young People, the Church and Society

These questions refer both to young people who take part in Church programmes, as well as those who do not take part or have no interest to participate.

1. In what manner does the Church listen to the lived situations of young people?
2. What are the main challenges and most significant opportunities for young people in your country / countries today?
3. What kinds and places of group gatherings of youth, institutionalized or otherwise, have a major success within the Church, and why?
4. What kinds and places of group gatherings of youth, institutionalized or otherwise, have a major success outside the Church, and why?

5. What do young people really ask of the Church in your country / countries today?

6. What possibilities for participation exist in your country / countries for young people to take part in the life of the ecclesial community?

7. How and in what manner is contact made with young people who do not frequent Church surroundings?

b) Pastoral Vocational Programmes for Young People

8. How are families and communities involved in the vocational discernment of young people?

9. How do schools and universities or other educational institutions (civil or ecclesial) contribute to young people's formation in vocational discernment?

10. In what manner are you taking into account the cultural changes resulting from the development of the digital world?

11. How can World Youth Days or other national or international events become a part of ordinary pastoral practice?

12. In what manner is your diocese planning experiences for the pastoral vocational programme for young people?

c) Pastoral Care Workers with Young People

13. How much time and in what manner do clergy and other formators provide for personal spiritual guidance?

14. What initiatives and opportunities for formation are in place for those who provide pastoral vocational guidance?

15. What personal guidance is offered in seminaries?

AMERICA

a. How does your community care for young people who experience extreme violence (guerrilla warfare, gangs, prison, drug addiction, forced marriages) and accompany them in various ways in their life?

b. What formation is offered to support the engagement of young people in society and civil life, for the common good?

c. In a world which is greatly secularized, what pastoral activities are most effective for continuing the journey of faith after the Sacraments of Christian Initiation?

3. Sharing Activities

1. List the main types of pastoral activity in accompaniment and vocational discernment in your present situation.

2. Choose three activities you consider the most interesting and relevant to share with the universal Church, and present it according to the following format (no more than one page for each experience).

a) Description: In a few sentences, roughly describe the activity. Who are the leading characters? How does the activity take place? Where? Etc.

b) Analysis: Evaluate the activity, even in layman's terms, for a better understanding of the important elements: what are the goals? What is the theoretical basis? What are the most interesting insights? How have they developed? Etc.

c) Evaluation: What are the goals? If not achieved, why? Strengths and weaknesses? What are the consequences on the social, cultural and ecclesial levels? Why and in what way is the activity important / formative? etc.