

From Krakow to Panama
The Synod journeying with young people
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PRESENTATION OF PART III OF THE PREPARATORY DOCUMENT
FOR THE 15th ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS
“YOUTH, FAITH AND VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT”

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INTRODUCTION

Part III of the **Preparatory Document** (PD), **Pastoral Activity**, could be an easy victim of a purely operational interpretation of the ongoing process towards the Synod *Young People, the Faith and Vocation Discernment*. Such a summary conclusion is not complete; it is just superficial. Seen in its entirety, Part III of the PD presupposes and builds on the first two parts. Being convinced that pastoral action cannot be thought of as if it were a thing to do, we ask ourselves how can this part help us strengthen the pastoral work as an answer within the overall pastoral journey?

Part III lays open before us several specific challenges that must be read and discussed in the light of the broader journey of the Church. I offer some thoughts around 4 points that help us capture well this Part III and take advantage of the proposals it contains. I propose that we read Part III in the light of 4 perspectives that correspond to sub-titles it contains.

1. Empathy

The first point carries the theme ***Walking with Young People***. It is crucial to see the subject in light of the EG. The three verbs used – *going out, seeing, calling* – are the synthesis of EG. And it is precisely in the light of the EG that the journey of youth ministry should be thought and lived.

And here we have a first challenge: **the urgent need for us to keep EG as our compass**. The importance of studying it well so that it remains a light that guides our pastoral steps: "going beyond a preconceived framework, encountering young people where they are, adapting to their times and pace of life and taking them seriously" is a result of pastoral empathy choice.

Pastoral empathy that shows up in the "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."

Going out, seeing, calling as a pastoral attitude that becomes both a method and a journey. A life's choice that is the result of the courage to get out of outdated and rigid patterns, the usual "we have always done so." A choice that joyfully realizes the aspirations and hopes of the young, but also a choice that allows one to be challenged by the suffering and disappointments that they, the young people are paying too high a price.

Only when we prophetically go out and with humility we encounter the story of our young people, then we can be credible. Our words, our proposals have already been listened to and evaluated by young people before they are even spoken or heard. They are experts in judging whether our presence among them is the result of real empathy or just a barren and dry physical one. Walking with the young is beautiful but also demanding. They ask us to accompany them to the truth, but with charity. Our journey with young people is the expression of the journeying Church, the bride of Christ. It is like Christ that we as a Church journey with the young.

These two points, patient and empathic listening, and the journey of the Church, are well summarized in the EG:

As adults, we find it hard to listen patiently to them, to appreciate their concerns and demands, and to speak to them in a language they can understand. For the same reason, our efforts in the field of education do not produce the results expected. The rise and growth of associations and movements mostly made up of young people can be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit, who blazes new trails to meet their expectations and their search for a deep spirituality and a more real sense of belonging. **There remains a need, however, to ensure that these associations actively participate in the Church's overall pastoral efforts (EG n.105).**

2. Communion and pastoral leadership

Real youth ministry does not imagine or perceive young people as patients needing care! In the pastoral journey of the Church young people are at the same time **objects and subjects** of ministry, like the Church itself, which evangelized by Christ while and evangelizing Christ!

First, we must look to the young, especially the poorest and those most in need, even the most wretched among them, with the certainty that in the heart of each one there is an accessible point of goodness. It is the duty of each educator and evangelizer to discover this space of goodness, this

sensitive cord of the heart and make it vibrate, because even in the most unfortunate cases, the most rebellious and difficult young people, there are strings can vibrate life.

Second, it is important that we are guided by the conviction that bringing the good news is not a privilege of a few, but the invitation offered to all. In the EG Pope Francis acknowledges that “even if it is not always easy to approach young people, progress has been made in **two areas**: the awareness that **the entire community is called to evangelize and educate the young**, and the urgent need for **the young to exercise greater leadership**” (106). With this conviction, today more than ever, we can never give up the goal that sees young people as apostles of other youth.

One of the features that is deeply felt in the youth charismatic experiences is the growth within the hearts of young people not only of the joy of faith in Jesus Christ, but more so the desire that the faith received is also shared, from evangelized to evangelizing. It is a consoling duty to offer young people this high standard of ordinary Christian living as commented by Saint John Paul II at the end of the Holy Year in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (NMI)

The time has come to re-propose wholeheartedly to everyone this *high standard of ordinary Christian living*: the whole life of the Christian community and of Christian families must lead in this direction. It is also clear however that the paths to holiness are personal and call for a genuine “*training in holiness*”, adapted to people's needs. This training must integrate the resources offered to everyone with both the traditional forms of individual and group assistance, **as well as the more recent forms of support offered in associations and movements recognized by the Church** (NMI n.31).

3. Processes

A youth ministry that leaves its mark in the lives of young people is a youth that is definitely based on processes in the various **places** where it happens. We know that the we always run the risk of limiting our youth ministry proposal built only around events. It is a constant temptation. A valuable youth ministry is inspired and guided by the belief that the constant and systematic group experience is one that ultimately leaves an imprint on the ordinary life of the young. The group experience favours an environment that educates, a community that accompanies, a proposal that supports and strengthens those small choices that every day we are called to make.

The idea of the journey, the group experience, the feeling of being identified with other young people, creates an environment in which convergence between the Gospel and culture is born. In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Blessed Paul VI has identified here the central challenge, that between the Gospel and everyday life, between the Gospel and culture, defining it as “the tragedy of our time” (EN 20).

Consequently, when we talk about processes we are referring to all those places, spaces and opportunities where the group experience has the potential to gradually generate a culture of a living faith, joyful, beautiful. One way of being able to gradually interpret history in the light of the Gospel.

It is within these seemingly small processes, in a very silent manner, where the seeds of a frame of mind and belief are sown, that later find in great gatherings, like the World Youth Days, a visibility that strengthens those small moments of everyday ministry. In addition, this daily routine should be strengthened by the backbone of generosity to the poor, by the experiences of volunteering, among which we find the experience of missionary volunteering.

Let us not be misled by the false fear that can convince us that our young people are not ready to respond to demanding and solid pastoral and spiritual proposals. Rather, we must have the courage to ask ourselves if sometimes it is not us adults who project on our young people those fears that we do not recognize, let alone deal with.

Here we need to encounter the challenge of the digital world. It is prophetic how more than 40 years ago Blessed Paul VI in EN commented the issue of adaptation and fidelity of language:

Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life (EN n.63).

4. Courage

Taking up this last point – *the means of expression in pastoral work, educative care and the path of evangelization, silence, contemplation and prayer* – here we have a challenge that Pope Francis deals with in EG:

Youth ministry, as traditionally organized, has also suffered the impact of social changes. Young people often fail to find responses to their concerns, needs, problems and hurts in the usual structures. As adults, we find it hard to listen patiently to them, to appreciate their concerns and demands, and to speak to them in a language they can understand. For the same reason, our efforts in the field of education do not produce the results expected (EG 105).

With this reflection, we close the circle that we started commenting on the first point: *walking with young people*. Being part of the journey of the young means understanding their language which is much more than pure vocabulary. The language of ministry on the one hand demands from us to inhabit and get in tune with the world of young people, but even more so it asks us also to tune with their searching hearts. If we are called to understand the language of young people, we must first be able to understand and decipher their silence, their loneliness, the sense of their research. To live with the humility of the pilgrim and the patience of being a true companion is the greatest and the most appreciated gift young people are looking for.

From this humble incarnation in their world that we propose paths of evangelization that can educate towards the sense of the sacred, an evangelization which offers a pedagogy that leads to the discovery of the divine. The sacred and the transcendent are rooted in the hearts of young people. It is up to us educators to promote the right conditions for this desire not to be overtaken by shallowness, suffocated by banality or betrayed by proposals that are only seemingly spiritual.

In a dialogue with young people during his apostolic visit to the United Kingdom, in 2010, Pope Benedetto XVI comments how the hearts of young people are already predisposed towards the goodness and beauty:

Not only does God love us with a depth and an intensity that we can scarcely begin to comprehend, but he invites us to respond to that love. You all know what it is like when you meet someone interesting and attractive, and you want to be that person's friend. You always hope they will find you interesting and attractive, and want to be your friend. **God wants your friendship. And once you enter into friendship with God, everything in your life begins to change.** As you come to know him better, you find you want to reflect something of his infinite goodness in your own life. You are attracted to the practice of virtue (17th September 2010).

In this sense, and with this in mind, we must reflect on the following challenge: how to propose to young people, gradually and with respect to their rhythms, experiences of silence and contemplation, prayer and adoration? It would be helpful for us to ask ourselves where do fear and resistance, that sometimes we encounter at this stage, originate from?

CONCLUSION

I conclude with the same invitation that leaves us the Blessed Paul VI at the end of EN with a very simple and direct language:

May the world of our time, trying, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received in the joy of Christ, and who are willing to stake their lives so that the kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the heart of the world

May the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world (EN n.80).

QUESTIONS

1. What are the proposals that on the level of the local Church are we proposing so that the *Evangelii Gaudium* remains as the compass of our pastoral journey?

2. What are the pastoral choices we are offering and / or we can propose so that everyone, young and old, parents and teachers, catechists and leaders, feel part of a community that educates to the faith, a community that evangelizes?

3. What are the difficulties that would undermine the continuity and consistency of pastoral processes? What are the proposals that can strengthen the continuity and consistency of pastoral processes?