

United States Response to the XV Ordinary Synod of Bishops on *Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment*

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Our Context

As you may know, the Church in the United States has had a long engagement with youth and young adults – from before WWI (with Catholic Youth Organization [CYO] initiatives), and amplified by our experience of World Youth Day in Denver in 1993, which was a watershed moment for our country’s work with young people.

Youth Ministry, Campus Ministry, Young Adult Ministry, and Pastoral Juvenil Hispana, and the work with young people among our movements, apostolates, and religious communities has had a long history. This is our setting that we approach the Synod.

And before proceeding, a note about the language I will use. In the USA, we speak about the following groupings: “youth,” meaning those young people approximately 13 to 18; “young adults,” meaning those in their 20s and 30s, along with a specific outreach to young adults on college and university campuses from ages 18 to 24; and a particular focus on “jovenes,” the growing population of Hispanic-Latino young people ages 16 to 30 (immigrants and second and third generation Latinos). Because the age range of the 2018 Synod covers portions of all those groups, all of these ministries and these various groupings of young people will be involved.

To give you an accurate snapshot of our situation, this past month, I informally reached out to key leaders working with youth, collegians, jovenes, and young adults across our country. The responses we received have challenged me and those of us working at the bishops conference. And so, I want to pass on that challenge to you, to the Synod offices, and to help inform this process locally and internationally.

Practically speaking, the document and the questions have been sent out far and wide by the president of our episcopal conference (we actually printed a booklet to assist our dioceses and pastoral leaders) – to the bishops of each of our 192 dioceses and eparchies, to over 150 national organizations and networks, to our 16

permanent commissions or committees at the USA episcopal conference, and it will be a key discussion item at the USCCB summer general assembly in June this year. Each diocesan bishop, organizational lead, and committee chair can approach the document and questions at their discretion. The president of our conference has opted not to give too much direction to each group, allowing local creativity in the response to the questionnaire. We will then receive those responses, analyze and summarize them, and pass them along to the Synod office this fall. Yet because of the far-and-wide consultation, collaboration is key – and in our preparation efforts, we are blessed in the USCCB that our offices for marriage and family, priesthood and consecrated life, social justice and pro-life, child and youth protection, ecumenical and interreligious affairs, etc., are already laying the groundwork for the collaborative work that this Synod process recommends.

In addition, this July (2017), the United States will host a one-of-a-kind national gathering, a Convocation of key Catholic leaders and bishops together, to look at Pope Francis' vision, as laid out in *Evangelii Gaudium* and how it applies to the USA. We are certain discussion about the Synod and its topics will be part of this major national event, as the need for *emerging leaders* is a central theme of our work at this gathering, and because young people are close to the Holy Father's heart.

Also, our country is already engaged in a four-year Encuentro process (2016-2019), hosted by the USCCB, bringing the needs of the growing Hispanic-Latino population to the forefront, especially those of the younger generations. This process will help shape the direction of our country's work – and the Synod will surely play into the local and national discussions because of its emphasis on the young people.

Finally, even before the Synod was announced, a *National Dialogue on Catholic Pastoral Ministry with Youth and Young Adults* was put into motion – to bring about unity to the field (as I noted, in the USA, the work with youth and young adults has become very big and very diversified), and to help the bishops implement whatever comes from the Synod: key insights, recommendations, and apostolic exhortation.

So What Have We Heard Thus Far?

We have heard that the realities that the Synod raises are different than the realities faced in the United States: not so much the sociological data in the preparatory document's Section 1 (as this was very well received by leaders and young people), but the age ranges (i.e. youth and young adults) and the geographical diversity within our country (as our country is so vast, across a whole continent, representing different cultures and regional realities). So the Synod process will be a challenge because we need to “translate the translation” to our lived local experience, and to the realities of young people in the United States.

That said, we hear there is much excitement among leaders about the very fact that the Synod on Young People is actually happening – and that young people will be part of a Vatican initiative aside from World Youth Day.

We hear excitement from leaders:

- that Pope Francis wrote the wonderful introductory letter – in fact, that letter was appreciated even more than the document itself.
- that youth and young adults must be listened to, and that they have a voice.
 - *Some leaders noted that it would be wonderful if young people were part of the Synod itself in Rome, so it is not just a meeting of bishops, but bishops, young people, and those who work with them together in one place*
- that youth and young adults are being treated as “agents not objects”
- that the three-fold model of discernment (recognize, interpret, and choose, or see, judge act) is raised up as a key journey for young people.

However, the leaders of our young people noted some concerns (and hopes that these will be addressed in the Instrumentum Laboris and in the Synod hall):

- that it depends what translation one receives: the Spanish was received quite well by the Hispanic-Latino youth ministries in the USA, but the English translation had a mixed reaction, feeling that the language was dry, uneven, stiff, removed; the English translation was not generally appreciated (going forward, when the Instrumentum Laboris and expected apostolic exhortation are developed, the English translation might consider greater attention to the lived language of English-speaking young people and pastoral leaders)
- there should be more about the family and parents of young people
- there should be more about the role of technology and digital media, not just as a means of communication, but as a source of community/communication
- there should be more specifics, less generalizations, esp. in Section 1
- very important to many leaders: that there should be some treatment of the single life and the baptismal call to holiness for all young people, and most especially, that the vocation to *marriage* should receive greater emphasis than it was treated in this document; the pathway to marriage is a key component.
- that evangelization should be a key element of the Synod, and that our Church should go to the peripheries to engage young people, not just those who engage regularly – how do we reach them? The document, leaders noted, seemed to leap over the evangelization stage of the process between encounter with young people and the beginning of vocational discernment.

One point that was raised by a number of leaders, but something that we have also noticed at the national level: aside from priests and seminary formation, there should be more in the Synod process, documents, and questions about the role of non-ordained pastoral workers. This is a major reality in the USA – that ministry with youth and young adults is mostly carried out by lay ecclesial ministers, catechists, paid professional youth, campus, and young adult ministers, and young missionaries themselves. It is these men and women who are on the front lines in pastoral ministry with youth and young adults, but these people are often forgotten in our documents, in our speeches, in our work nationally in our country and internationally. Lay leaders are often caught between young people, both those active and inactive in their faith, who challenge them – and their leaders in the Church, who often forget them or the incredible work they are doing.

We are not sure if this is true for other countries, but for the United States, the role of the lay pastoral worker cannot be forgotten in this process. I raise them up because many of them are so committed, they would not dream of taking attention away from the young people they serve. But we at the national level are raising them up, and would like to make sure they have a place at this table.

- *It would be wonderful if lay pastoral leaders were part of the Synod itself, since their expertise would be helpful to guide the conversation about the young people they serve.*

And what of the reaction from young people themselves?

Suness Jones is with me from the United States. She is a lay missionary with the NET Ministries apostolate – and I will let her share her perspective as a young adult.

We are grateful that this Synod is happening. Thank you to the Synod office for making youth and young adults such a priority. Even though the United States has had a strong history of good, well-resourced youth and young adult ministries, this Synod will be an occasion for us to re-evaluate our situation, to unite a diversified field, and to re-imagine new ways of reaching youth and young adults.

It is also a chance for our young people to see the global experience of Church that Suness and I have been blessed to see here, that a few people get to see at WYD, but that most youth and young adults, especially those less engaged with Church, do not have a chance to truly know. That, too, is especially exciting for us – as our nation is so vast, we can sometimes become insulted, isolated, and detached from the Universal Church and the people of other countries.

Thank you, Pope Francis, for your vision. Thank you, Synod office, for your initiative. And thank you, all of you, for listening – and for journeying with us in this process!