



## **International Congress on Youth Ministry (Rome, 22-25 May 2024)**

### **Conclusion**

Dr Gleison De Paula Souza  
Secretary of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life

I pass on the greeting and thanks of our Prefect, Card. Kevin Farrell. I thank all the guest speakers, but especially the participants of the Congress. Their listening, sharing in groups, common reflection, proposals presented during the plenary meetings – all of this has been very important.

In fact, the intention was not to hold an academic conference, but to have communal reflection and discernment on how to continue the journey together with young people and at the service of young people.

We revisited memories of the days of grace experienced at World Youth Day (WYD) in Lisbon. Your questionnaires showed that the most apparent fruits you noticed amongst the young people include:

- Having had an encounter with God.
- Having had, perhaps for the first time, a strong experience of belonging to the Christian community (the Church) alongside young pilgrims and in communion with all the other young people.
- WYD led many young people to request the sacraments of Christian initiation.
- For some, WYD meant the discovery of vocation (or at least inspired one to consider beginning their vocational discernment journey).
- WYD exemplifies the desire to be involved in the Church: with the youth group, in the parish, in various forms of service.

Card. Américo Aguiar and his colleagues have shared with us the challenges in the preparation of and the long process of reflection on the themes; the new ways to introduce them as, for example, was done with the catechesis sessions; and on the logistics that led to the realisation of WYD. We learn from them and gather feedback on the things that need to be improved for future editions.

I would like to thank the organisers of WYD in Seoul: His Excellency Msgr Peter Taick-Chung; His Excellency Msgr Paul Lee; their team; and the Ambassador of Korea to the Holy See, Her Excellency Ms Hyunjoo Oh. All of them have transported us to a new context – Asia – and introduced us to the fascinating history and culture of Korea, and to a Church that is courageous (the legacy of the martyrs) and above all young, both in terms of its history (just over 200 years of life), and its momentum and the presence of many young people.

We realise that they are already projecting, with all their hearts and minds, towards 2027 (even though it is still three years away!) and that they have already ‘infected’ us with their great enthusiasm. This is important because we must also ‘infect’ young people with this enthusiasm and motivate them to travel to Korea.

During the days of the Congress, we have spoken about ongoing pastoral care and work. The importance of thinking about continuity between one WYD and another emerged – giving ‘weight’ to the ministry of ‘daily life’ and continuing to walk together with young people so as not to leave ‘gaps’ after an experience as strong as WYD. Therefore, it is important to keep thinking about what can be done and how, for example:

- Thinking about cycles of catechesis on the topics that most closely concern the lives of young people (emotions, insecurities, self-acceptance, relations with others, the future, vocation, family) and treating all these topics in light of the answers that come from faith, or taking a cue from the Pope’s messages to young people.
- Enhancing the diocesan WYDs.
- Helping WYD participants become animators and missionaries to other young people.

His Excellency Msgr Rino Fisichella, Pro-Prefect of the Dicastery for Evangelisation, sought to direct the work with young people in the preparation for the Jubilee to the great theme of hope – not the ‘little hope’ (material, immediate, rapidly ending), but the ‘great hope’ which *comes* to us from Jesus Christ and which *is* Jesus Christ. He reminded us that hope is ‘eternal life’, that is, life in its fullness which is given to us at Baptism and which does not only concern life after death, but begins now. It is the beginning of a full life that already participates in Christ’s victory over sin and death, and thus removes us from despair, sadness, meaninglessness, existential slavery, and fear. This is what young people need!

I would like to thank Dr Sandra Chaoul for helping us better understand the nature and method of spiritual conversation. It is a method we have tried to apply in this Congress. It is not easy. We need to train people and train ourselves to practise it well. We are used to other methods:

- Debate – everyone puts forward their own ideas and responds to those of others.
- Parliamentary vote – there are several proposals on the table and we vote to see what the majority decides.

This is not spiritual conversation! On an individual level, one seeks via discernment to know what God’s will for one’s life is (a state of life to embrace or a decision to make). The same thing is done in spiritual conversation, only you do it together! That is, at the community level.

What we do in spiritual conversation is not an accumulation of ideas, or a confrontation of opinions (as it is in debate), or trying to arrive at a majority consensus on a decision to be made (as it is in a parliamentary vote). Rather, it is discerning God’s will for us by listening to what the Spirit proposes to the community and to the Church.

Learn how to practise this method! Practise it in your groups! Also try to teach it to young people!

Rev. Prof. Gustavo Cavagnari, sdb, then pointed out two major challenges for youth ministry which specifically concern the situation of young people at the present time (which has already changed since the Youth Synod and the publication of *Christus vivit* in 2019):

1. Addressing the psycho-emotional distress that existed before but has been greatly amplified among young people as a consequence of the pandemic; and
2. Tackling the detachment of young people from the Church.

Rev. Prof. Cavagnari suggested four methods for addressing these challenges:

1. Focusing more on the ministry associated with the explicit proclamation of Christ to young people, and not limiting them to topics that others can also propose to them (e.g. respect for others, solidarity, the environment, etc.) at school, in society, everywhere.
2. Standardising effective paths of youth spirituality – let them offer real spiritual experiences, otherwise young people will seek them elsewhere!
3. Proposing opportunities for fraternity – young people need an initiation into Christian life but through a *community* dimension, which is essential in Christianity.
4. Orienting the search for meaning (which is very present amongst young people) in a Christian direction – how does faith respond to the fundamental questions of life?

Rev. Fr Christopher Ryan, speaking on synodal and missionary youth leadership, emphasised two fundamental elements of youth ministry:

- Outreach (the first encounter): The true missionary moment for every young person who needs to have his or her ‘first encounter’ with the love of Christ; an encounter that relativises everything else (as Saint Paul says: “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ” [cf. Philippians]) and, at the same time, gives meaning to all other things in life. There are three key aspects:
  1. The importance of the joyful testimony of other young people;
  2. Approaching young people with the “grammar of love”; and
  3. The centrality of the kerygma.
- Growth: This is the moment that follows the first encounter, and is the continuous and thorough formation of Christian life. There are three key aspects:
  1. Consolidating the encounter;
  2. Always connecting catechesis to the original kerygma (which is characterised as a gift of proclamation, of joy, and of grace); and
  3. Formation that includes solidarity, service, and closeness to the vulnerable (which does not remain only theoretical).

All youth ministry must be synodal in nature, that is, based on the participation of everyone – various pastoral leaders, young people themselves, etc. Synodal participation is the practical way to experience communion, and synodality must always be at the service of the mission.

Dr Brenda Noriega spoke to us about formation and spiritual accompaniment of youth leaders. The formation of youth leaders is not concerned with passing on ‘pastoral notions’, but with instilling a deep sense of mission. It involves forming apostles, not professors! In particular, the ‘synodal’ style that we have seen emerge in recent years (with the pre-Synod, the Synod, and *Christus vivit*) goes far beyond the stereotypical ‘natural born leader’ (confident, resourceful, energetic, charismatic, etc.). Just think of some of the characteristics of spiritual accompaniment listed in *Christus vivit*: an accompanier who demonstrates a “maternal” presence, the readiness to welcome and listen, the ability to be “popular” (not elite), and the ability to make everyone feel part of the people of God. All of this is a far cry from the image of the charismatic leader.

The 'synodal' style of spiritual accompaniment also goes beyond the purely individualistic model (it does not concentrate everything on one person). It is, in fact, the Christian community as a whole that is the primary subject of accompaniment, a community capable of transmitting the authentic proclamation of the Gospel to young people, avoiding the two extremes of 'minimalist proposals' and, on the other hand, the excessive moralistic rules.

The model of spiritual accompaniment that has emerged in recent years is that of 'spiritual friendship' founded on the certainty of the divine presence in friendships based on faith and the sharing of gifts of grace. God works in such relationships (as the history of spiritual friendship in so many saints shows!).

*Youth Ministry in the Digital Environment* was the subject of the address by Fr Franco Galdino, Coordinator of the Youth Office of our Dicastery. Considering the digital world as a 'land of mission', that is, a place where one can become closer with young people who inhabit the 'land', many of whom are far from the Church and any kind of faith.

Like any 'land of mission', the digital one is also a place full of pitfalls. However, that does not mean one should run away from it!

The mission in the digital world should not be understood as a 'substitute' for regular pastoral care and work, but as an integration of it. The model one can think of is that of 'first aid' (referring to Pope Francis' image of the Church as a "field hospital"). This means that the first contact with young people takes place in the digital world – it is in this world that you get to know their questions and problems; you get in tune with them; if possible, you make a first announcement of hope which provides a glimpse of light. Then, once this contact is established with the young inhabitants of the digital world, we can accompany them little by little to experience the Church and to be present in the real Christian community.

Therefore, the digital world is not a 'definitive' place, but a place of 'transition'. It is a world of knowledge; of a first joyful testimony; of a first kerygma; of a first audience that listens to young people and can help project them into the 'real' (non-digital) life of the Church where the reality of incarnation is alive (God has entered into our material world) and which consists of sacraments, celebrations, fraternal bonds, communal listening to the Word of God, service, and 'getting one's hands dirty' with others.

### **To conclude**

I would like to thank Sr Nathalie Becquart, Under-Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, for enriching us with her presence and for helping us to understand how to embark on the journey of synodality.

On behalf of the whole Dicastery, thanks again to all of you. With this Congress we want to continue the Church's journey with young people, the young people of our time (as the Prefect reminded us at the beginning), not those of 10 or 20 or 30 years ago, or those who exist only in our minds!

The meeting with the Holy Father, and the words he addressed to us this morning, are an encouragement to continue on this journey of ours. Let us carry his words in our hearts when we return to our homes.

We, as the Dicastery of the Holy See that deals with young people, are well aware that you (more than us!) are on the ‘front line’ of working with young people – in dioceses, in parishes, in movements. Because of this, you come up against life’s difficulties on a daily basis – the crises of so many young people, their problems, their resistance.

We know that there are various challenges and difficulties in our own service, but we would like to urge you never to be discouraged. In the Church, we do not follow the criteria of efficiency, or external success, or of seeking consensus at all costs. Rather, we follow the example of Jesus and his word – He too began with a few people, with 12, then 72, then others. He too experienced many challenges and disappointments. But Jesus left us the image of the mustard seed: everything that is done for His Kingdom (and therefore also in youth ministry) starts with something every small – something that can hardly be seen – and yet becomes a large tree that “birds of the air come and make nests in”, as per the parable. These birds of the air seeking refuge are the many young people who are in search of their own identity; of the meaning of life; of a place in the world; of a safe path to follow that will lead them to happiness. They are in search of a love that does not disappoint and of a truth that never goes out of fashion. All this can be found in Jesus and in the Church! And they can find it precisely thanks to you! You who for these young people have become Samaritans who have healed their wounds; siblings who have welcomed them; friends who have listened to them; fathers and mothers who have educated and formed them.

At the conclusion of this Congress, I wish to thank all those who contributed to the success of this event – the officials of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life; the volunteers; the translators; the staff of the venue who welcomed us; and the choir who animated all our liturgical moments.

May the Lord always accompany and support you in this beautiful mission!