

Catholic Youth Ministry – Legacy, Challenges, and New Opportunities

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Dear friends,

It is a joy to be with you at this significant moment in the journey of Jesus Youth.

Today your program places us under the theme of *Mission – Love Beyond Borders*. Dr. Philip Milligan has just shown how Pope Leo calls ecclesial movements to keep Christ at the center and to place their charisms at the service of the Church’s unity and mission.

I would like to ask a related question. Coming from our roots and legacy, and facing the challenges of young people today, what kind of human formation makes Christian mission possible among young people today?

Or, more concretely: What does it mean today to help a young person discover the fullness of his or her humanity in Christ – free enough to love, courageous enough to answer a vocation in service, and mature enough to be sent: to witness, to share, and to proclaim.

Legacy – A way of seeing the young person

The deepest legacy of Catholic youth ministry is not a method or program. It is a way of seeing the young person.

I would therefore like to place a few biblical and magisterial texts beside one another – not to construct an exhaustive history, but to allow a distinctively Christian vision of the young person to emerge. These texts do more than give us principles; they form our gaze.

Perhaps every authentic work of evangelization must begin with a conversion of our gaze.

Before the Church looks at the human person, God has already looked upon him or her: “God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Again: “God created mankind in his image” (Gen 1:27).

We are created in the image of God. It is God’s gaze upon us as his image that bestows our dignity upon us. Human dignity is the intrinsic gift of being created in God’s image. It gives human life a direction: toward God, toward others, and toward the world entrusted to our care.

And the New Testament gives this language its Christological center: Jesus Christ is “*the image of the invisible God*” (Col 1:15).

This biblical vision has shaped the Church’s understanding of the human person across generations. In our more recent magisterial legacy, the Second Vatican Council gave it one of its clearest and most

consequential formulations. *Gaudium et spes* (GS 22) makes the decisive claim that Christ, the new Adam, “fully reveals man to man himself” and makes his supreme calling clear.

By revealing the mystery of the Father and his love, Christ also reveals what humanity is meant to become.

Saint John Paul II develops this in *Redemptor hominis*: “Man cannot live without love” (RH 10), and the human person is the fundamental way of the Church (RH 14).

Pope Francis continues the same line in *Christus vivit* with regard to young people: young people are the present (CV 64) and themselves “agents of youth ministry” (CV 203).

With *Magnifica humanitas* Pope Leo XIV brings this tradition into our technological age: human dignity precedes abilities, wealth, position and achievement (MH 49–50), and the Holy Father links our humanity to the capacity to reflect critically, choose and love freely, and form authentic relationships (MH 233).

This is not an anthropological appendix to the Gospel. It is Christology with pastoral consequences. In Christ, humanity discovers its truth, its dignity and its vocation.

The young person – seen, loved and called by God

Perhaps this is the deepest legacy entrusted to Catholic youth ministry:

Never allow a young person to be belittled or reduced:

Not to a consumer.

Not to a profile.

Not to a problem.

Not even just to a future volunteer for the Church.

A young person is someone seen, loved and called by God – capable of truth, freedom, communion, vocation, holiness and mission.

And *Gaudium et spes* (GS 24) completes this vision: the human person “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”

The two belong together:

Christ reveals the human person to himself – and the human person discovers himself by becoming gift.

That is already a theology of mission – of youth ministry. And this is not merely an idea. It has taken concrete form in the history of the Church’s ministry with young people. Later, I will return to one particularly powerful example: World Youth Day, instituted by Saint John Paul II in 1985 – not because it offers a ready-made pastoral solution for every context, but because it gives us a concrete ecclesial experience of what can happen when young people are seen in the light of Christ, gathered in communion, and sent forth in mission.

Challenges – Fragmentation

But this Christian vision encounters a culture in which the person can easily be fragmented or reduced.

One of the central appeals of *Magnifica humanitas* is therefore simple and demanding: in the age of artificial intelligence, our task is to “remain profoundly human” (MH 15).

What does that mean in young lives?

Think first of loneliness.

A young person can have hundreds of contacts and still wonder whom to call in the middle of the night. One can watch the lives of others and still feel unseen. Connection is not necessarily communion.

Then there is uncertainty.

School, study, work, vocation and family are discerned in a world that often feels provisional. *Magnifica humanitas* therefore calls for social networks and educational communities that accompany life choices (MH 167–169).

There is also the digital environment.

Algorithms learn what catches attention and what provokes desire, fear or anger. *Magnifica humanitas* warns of the “digital attention economy” (MH 170).

So the deeper pastoral question is not simply: How much screen time? It is: Who forms my desires? What receives my attention? How do I distinguish what is true? Who am I becoming?

Prayer requires attention. Discernment requires attention. Friendship requires attention. Love requires the freedom to be truly present to another.

And then there is performance.

Be successful. Be attractive. Be productive. Be visible. Turn even yourself into a project of constant improvement. *Magnifica humanitas* names precisely this temptation: the human person becomes “a project to be optimized” (MH 112).

This concern about the reduction of the human person also runs through the Encyclical’s treatment of artificial intelligence. Pope Leo XIV approaches AI not primarily as a technical question, but as an anthropological one: technological development must remain at the service of human dignity, freedom, responsibility and authentic human relationships.

This seems particularly important when we speak about young people. The question is not only what AI can do for them, but also how it affects and shapes their capacity for judgment, their relationships, their freedom and their integral development as persons.

This human-centered perspective needs to remain an important part of our further reflection on AI and young people.

Christianity proposes another logic. The reason is this: our faith proposes another logic, another “logos”.

Christian courage is not performance; it is response. Jesus does not say: be strong enough to conquer the world. He says: “Take courage; I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

Christian maturity is not self-optimization; it is relationship. Jesus says: “I have called you friends” – and then: “I chose you [...] to go and bear fruit” (Jn 15:15–16). Relationship becomes vocation; communion becomes fruitfulness.

And Christianity is not self-salvation; it is the acceptance of being saved. “For by grace you have been saved through faith” (Eph 2:8). Grace comes before achievement.

This is why vulnerability matters. Pope Leo XIV insists that finitude and weakness are not merely defects to eliminate; when accepted, they can open us to recognizing the face of God and others (MH 118–122).

And this reaches its center in the Incarnation. God does not save humanity by bypassing weakness. The Word becomes flesh. In the vulnerable flesh of Christ, the grandeur of humanity is revealed (MH 231–233).

There is also war and fear.

Some experience conflict directly; others grow up amid polarization and rigid enemy-images. *Magnifica humanitas* warns of the normalization of war and a friend-or-foe mentality (MH 188–192). Youth ministry must therefore also form peacemakers.

I will return to this later through a very concrete example: Pope Leo’s recent appeal to the young people of Europe in Metz. Although addressed to Europe, the values he names – peace, non-violence, respect for life and human dignity, responsibility for the common good, and the building of community – reach far beyond Europe. These values, I believe, belong to the formation and mission of young people everywhere.

All this leads to one central conviction:

The pastoral challenge is not simply how to bring young people back into our structures. It is how to help them remain fully human in a culture that constantly risks fragmenting the human person.

New opportunities – Six Pillars against fragmentation

If that is the challenge, many of the greatest opportunities are surprisingly “ancient”: encounter with Christ, prayer, truth, belonging, accompaniment, discernment, service and mission.

And here you, Jesus Youth, have something very concrete to offer. Your own global listening process describes the heart of the movement as a youthful and missionary way of life rooted in personal encounter with Christ, fellowship and evangelization through friendship (Jesus Youth, *A Synodal Movement in Mission*, 2026, p. 11).

It asks for trust and vulnerability in community, accompaniment rather than control, real ownership for young people – and says decisively: formation must lead to mission (pp. 11–13).

And here I would like to look explicitly at your Six Pillars. They are not simply markers of an established spirituality. They contain resources for responding to some of the deepest human questions of our time.

Prayer forms attention in a distracted age.

The Word of God forms our imagination and our capacity to distinguish truth from noise.

The Sacraments teach us the logic of grace: we receive before we achieve.

Fellowship answers isolation with communion – with presence, friendship, forgiveness, honest conversation and belonging.

Evangelization prevents communion from closing in upon itself. What has been received becomes witness.

And the Option for the Poor keeps faith embodied and brings us close to the wounded flesh of Christ.

Perhaps this is one way of seeing the contemporary missionary strength of your Six Pillars: each of them answers a particular form of fragmentation with a path towards a more integrated, fulfilled human and Christian life.

Distraction meets Prayer. Confusion and noise meet the Word of God. Self-optimization meets the grace of the Sacraments. Isolation meets Fellowship. Self-reference is opened by Evangelization. Indifference meets the poor – and, in them, the wounded Christ.

Mission is broader than explicit proclamation: it includes service, presence and care for the poor.

But it cannot lose the desire that another person may encounter the living Christ. *Christus vivit* speaks of young people evangelizing other young people (CV 210), approaching them with the “grammar of love” (CV 211), without proselytizing (cf. CV 235).

So: Mission is not recruitment. It is the overflow of a life received from Christ. And mission is not a prize for perfect Christians.

Christus vivit says that even young people who are “frail, limited and troubled” can be missionaries in their own way (CV 239). This means: Mission begins not where weakness ends, but where grace is received.

And therefore: Christian formation reaches its maturity in mission.

Four movements for the future

For the future, I would suggest four movements.

First: from event to everyday.

Powerful gatherings matter, but no event can substitute for a Christian life.

This is where what we might call “pastoral sustainability” becomes decisive: helping extraordinary moments bear ordinary, everyday fruit. It means helping young people bring what they have received – grace, friendship, renewed faith, a sense of vocation and mission – into the ordinary rhythm of Christian life. The real question is not only what happens during the event, but what happens

afterwards: in prayer, in the parish, in friendship, in study, at work, in the family, and in service. An event, a gathering, or a pilgrimage should not end when people return home. Its grace should continue in a life that is received, lived, served and shared.

Prayer after the rally. Community after the conference. Mission on Monday morning.

Your own listening process calls this “Mission as a Lifestyle in the Ordinary” (Jesus Youth, A Synodal Movement in Mission, 2026, p. 24).

Home, school, university, workplace, parish and neighborhood are mission fields. And so is the family. This year marks the tenth anniversary of *Amoris laetitia*. In his message for that anniversary, Pope Leo XIV explicitly called the Church to help young people rediscover the beauty of marriage and family life as a vocation. We speak readily to young people about priesthood and consecrated life as vocations – and rightly so. But marriage and family life must also be proposed again, with equal seriousness and beauty, as a genuine Christian vocation: a path of holiness, self-gift and mission. The family is not merely one more place where mission happens. For many young people, it will become the form their mission takes.

Second: from audience to protagonists.

Pope Francis says: “do not be bystanders in life. Get involved!” (CV 174). Accompaniment is not control. The goal is mature freedom, discernment and responsibility. This closely matches your own call for real ownership, peer mentoring and peer-led evangelization. Young people should not only be invited into programs. They should help shape the Church’s response to the world they inhabit.

Third: from digital consumption to digital mission.

Digitality shapes perception, relationships and the search for truth. We need Catholic content online, and even more, a formed Christian presence online. *Magnifica humanitas* calls the digital world a “new continent to be evangelized” (MH 238). Jesus Youth, for its part, speaks of digital mission and creative evangelization (A Synodal Movement in Mission, 2026, p. 22).

Fourth: from protected spaces to the real frontiers of young lives.

Your listening process names mental health, vocational uncertainty, migration and cultural tensions as new mission fields, and points toward schools, professional life, the arts, media, sport and gaming as places of friendship and witness (A Synodal Movement in Mission, 2026, pp. 20–23).

Into the “construction sites of history”

Pope Leo XIV gives us a striking image: Christians should enter the “construction sites of history” rather than remain passive spectators of social and cultural fractures (MH 241).

So perhaps the shift can be expressed like this: Young people need the Church to entrust them with a mission and to send them into the construction sites of our age.

Not alone. Accompanied. Rooted in prayer and the sacraments. Formed for discernment. Part of a community. But truly sent.

Go! – Paths for which we have no maps

And this brings us back to the word that stands at the heart of this 40th-anniversary conference: “Go!” In Assisi on 6 August this year, Pope Leo invited young people to “become fully human with the freedom of Jesus Christ” and described Go! as “a mission, a sending forth onto paths for which we have no maps.” We do not have maps for everything ahead of us. But Christians have never depended first of all on maps. We have Christ, his Word, the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit, one another – and young people themselves, with gifts that the Church needs.

Two concrete examples: Pope Leo’s recent appeal to young people in Europe, and World Youth Day Seoul 2027

Before I conclude, let me briefly step outside the numbered sequence and look at two concrete examples that bring together several of the threads we have been following: Pope Leo’s recent appeal to young people in Europe, and World Youth Day Seoul 2027.

Conclusion

So perhaps our three words can become three convictions.

Our legacy: never reduce the young person; see each one in the light of Christ.

Our challenge: safeguard and form the human person wherever attention is fragmented, relationships are weakened, fear is intensified and worth is measured by performance.

Our opportunity: form communities in which young people encounter Christ, grow in freedom, discern their vocation, assume responsibility – and are entrusted with a mission in the midst of today’s digital environment and AI.

The future of Catholic youth ministry will not be measured only by how many young people we gather. It will also be seen in what happens within them – and through them:

Do they experience that Christ is alive? Do they discover that their life is a gift? Do they know that they belong to his Church? And are they ready to carry what they have received into the real places where human lives are being formed?

“Go to the Ends of the Earth” begins there.

Receive the gift.

Become fully human in Christ.

And then, as your conference says: “Go!” – with courage, with the Church, and with love.

Thank you very much!

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