

Christ is alive

“Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world. The very first words, then, that I would like to say to every young Christian are these: Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive!”

Thus begins the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, “Christus vivit”, by Pope Francis, signed on Monday 25 March in the Holy House of Loreto and addressed to young people, and to “the entire People of God”. In the document, composed of nine chapters divided into 299 paragraphs, the Pope explains that he allowed himself to be “inspired by the wealth of reflections and conversations of the Synod” on Young People, celebrated in the Vatican in October 2018.

Chapter one: “What does the Word of God have to say about young people?”

Francis recalls that “in an age when young people were not highly regarded, some texts show that God sees them differently” (6). He briefly presents figures of young people from the Old Testament: Joseph, Gideon (7), Samuel (8), King David (9), Solomon and Jeremiah (10), the very young Jewish servant of Naaman, and the young Ruth (11). Then he moves on to the New Testament. The Pope recalls that “Jesus, who is eternally young, wants to give us hearts that are ever young” (13) and adds: “Let us also keep in mind that Jesus had no use for adults who looked down on the young or lorded it over them. On the contrary, he insisted that “the greatest among you must become like the youngest” (Lk 22:26). For him age did not establish privileges, and being young did not imply lesser worth or dignity”. Francis affirms: “We should never repent of spending our youth being good, opening our heart to the Lord, and living differently” (17).

Chapter two: “Jesus, ever young”

The Pope addresses the theme of Jesus’ youthful years and remembers the Gospel story that describes Jesus “as an adolescent, when he had returned with his parents to Nazareth, after being lost and found in the Temple” (26). We should not think, Francis writes, that “Jesus was a withdrawn adolescent or a self-absorbed youth. His relationships were those of a young person who shared fully in the life of his family and his people”, “no one regarded him as unusual or set apart from others” (28). The Pope points out that, “thanks to the trust of his parents”, the adolescent Jesus, “can move freely and learn to journey with others” (29). These aspects of Jesus’ life should not be ignored in youth ministry, “lest we create projects that isolate young people from their family and the larger community, or turn them into a select few, protected from all contamination”. Rather, we need “projects that can strengthen them, accompany them and impel them to encounter others, to engage in generous service, in mission” (30).

Jesus “does not teach you, young people, from afar or from without, but from within your very youth, a youth he shares with you” and in him many aspects typical of young hearts can be recognized (31). With “him at our side, we can drink from the true wellspring that keeps alive all our dreams, our projects, our great ideals, while impelling us to proclaim what makes life truly worthwhile” (32); “The Lord is calling us to enkindle stars in the night of other young people” (33).

Francis then speaks of the youth of the Church and writes: “Let us ask the Lord to free the Church from those who would make her grow old, encase her in the past, hold her back or keep her at a standstill. But let us also ask him to free her from another temptation: that of thinking she is young

because she accepts everything the world offers her, thinking that she is renewed because she sets her message aside and acts like everybody else. No! The Church is young when she is herself, when she receives ever anew the strength born of God's word, the Eucharist, and the daily presence of Christ and the power of his Spirit in our lives" (35).

It is true that *"as members of the Church, we should not stand apart from others", yet at the same time, "we must dare to be different, to point to ideals other than those of this world, testifying to the beauty of generosity, service, purity, perseverance, forgiveness, fidelity to our personal vocation, prayer, the pursuit of justice and the common good, love for the poor, and social friendship" (36). The Church can be tempted to lose her enthusiasm and revert "to seeking a false, worldly form of security. Young people can help keep her young" (37).*

The Pope then goes back to one of the teachings most dear to him and, explaining that the *figure of Jesus must be presented "in an attractive and effective way"*, says: *"the Church should not be excessively caught up in herself but instead, and above all, reflect Jesus Christ. This means humbly acknowledging that some things concretely need to change" (39).*

The Exhortation recognizes that there are young people who feel the presence of the Church *"a nuisance, even an irritant"*. This attitude that has its roots *"in serious and understandable reasons: sexual and financial scandals; a clergy ill-prepared to engage effectively with the sensitivities of the young; ... the passive role assigned to the young within the Christian community; the Church's difficulty in explaining her doctrine and ethical positions to contemporary society" (40).*

There are young people who *"want a Church that listens more, that does more than simply condemn the world. They do not want to see a Church that is silent and afraid to speak, but neither one that is always battling obsessively over two or three issues. To be credible to young people, there are times when she needs to regain her humility and simply listen, recognizing that what others have to say can provide some light to help her better understand the Gospel" (41).* For example, a Church that is too fearful can be constantly critical of *"efforts to defend the rights of women, and constantly point out the risks and the potential errors of those demands"*, while a Church that is *"a living Church, can react by being attentive to the legitimate claims of women"*, while *"not agreeing with everything some feminist groups propose" (42).*

Francis then presents **"Mary, the young woman from Nazareth"**, and her Yes as that of *"someone willing to take a risk, ready to stake everything she had, with no more security than the certainty of knowing that she was the bearer of a promise. So I ask each one of you: do you see yourselves as the bearers of a promise?" (44)* For Mary, *"challenges were no reason to say "no" "*, and thus putting herself at stake, she became *"the influencer of God"*. The heart of the Church is also full of **young saints**. The Pope remembers Saint Sebastian, Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Joan of Arc, Blessed Martyr Andrew Phû Yê, Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, Saint Dominic Savio, Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus, Blessed Ceferino Namuncurá, Blessed Isidoro Bakanja, Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, Blessed Marcel Callo, the young Blessed Chiara Badano.

Chapter three: "You are the 'now' of God"

We cannot just say that "young people are the future of our world", says Pope Francis. "They are its present; even now, they are helping to enrich it" (64). For this reason it is necessary to listen to

them even if “there is a tendency to provide prepackaged answers and ready-made solutions, without allowing their real questions to emerge and facing the challenges they pose” (65).

“Today, we adults can often be tempted to list all the problems and failings of today’s young people... But what would be the result of such an attitude? Greater distance, less closeness, less mutual assistance” (66). Whoever is called to be a father, pastor and youth guide should have the ability “to discern pathways where others only see walls, to recognize potential where others see only peril. That is how God the Father sees things; He knows how to cherish and nurture the seeds of goodness sown in the hearts of the young. Each young person’s heart should thus be considered “holy ground”” (67). Francis also invites us not to generalize, because “the worlds of today’s ‘youth’ are so many” (68).

Speaking of what happens to young people, the Pope recalls those who live in contexts of war, those who are exploited, the victims of kidnappings, organized crime, human trafficking, slavery and sexual exploitation, rape. And also those who live by committing crimes and acts of violence (72). “Many young people are taken in by ideologies, used and exploited as cannon fodder or a strike force to destroy, terrify or ridicule others. Worse yet, many of them end up as individualists, hostile and distrustful of others; in this way, they become an easy target for the brutal and destructive strategies of political groups or economic powers” (73). Even more numerous are those who suffer forms of marginalization and social exclusion for religious, ethnic or economic reasons. Pope Francis cites adolescents and young people who “become pregnant, the scourge of abortion, the spread of HIV, various forms of addiction (drugs, gambling, pornography and so forth), and the plight of street children without homes, families or economic resources” (74), situations that are made doubly painful and difficult for women. “As a Church, may we never fail to weep before these tragedies of our young. May we never become inured to them... The worst thing we can do is adopt that worldly spirit whose solution is simply to anesthetize young people with other messages, with other distractions, with trivial pursuits” (75). The Pope invites young people to learn to weep for their peers who are worse off than they are (76).

It is true, Pope Francis explains, “that people in power offer some assistance, but often it comes at a high price. In many poor countries, economic aid provided by some richer countries or international agencies is usually tied to the acceptance of Western views of sexuality, marriage, life or social justice. This ideological colonization is especially harmful to the young” (78). The Pope also warns against today’s culture that presents the youthful model of beauty and uses young bodies in advertising: “it has very little to do with young people. It only means that adults want to snatch youth for themselves” (79).

Referring to “**desires, hurts, and longings**”, Pope Francis speaks about sexuality and its “essential importance” for young peoples’ lives and for their “process of growth in identity”. The Pope writes that: “in a world that constantly exalts sexuality, maintaining a healthy relationship with one’s body and a serene affective life is not easy”. For this and other reasons, sexual morality often tends to be a source of “incomprehension and alienation from the Church, inasmuch as she is viewed as a place of judgment and condemnation”, despite the fact there are young people who want to discuss these issues (81). Faced with developments in science, biomedical technologies and neuroscience, the Pope recalls how these can “make us forget that life is a gift, and that we are creatures with innate limits, open to exploitation by those who wield technological power” (82).

The Exhortation then turns to the theme of the **“digital world”** which has created *“a new way to communicate”, and which can “facilitate the circulation of independent information”*. In many countries, the web and social networks *“already represent a firmly established forum for reaching and involving young people”* (87). *But they can also be a place of “loneliness, manipulation, exploitation and violence, up to the extreme case of the ‘dark web’*. Digital media can expose people to the risk of addiction, isolation and gradual loss of contact with concrete reality... New forms of violence are spreading through social media, for example cyber-bullying. The internet is also a channel for spreading pornography and the exploitation of persons for sexual purposes or through gambling” (88). It should not be forgotten that in the digital world *“there are huge economic interests”, capable of creating “mechanisms for the manipulation of consciences and of the democratic process”*. There are closed circuits that *“facilitate the spread of fake news and false information, fomenting prejudice and hate... The reputation of individuals is put in jeopardy through summary trials conducted online. The Church and her pastors are not exempt from this phenomenon”* (89). In a document prepared by 300 young people from all over the world before the Synod it is stated that *“online relationships can become inhuman”, and immersion in the virtual world has favored “a kind of “digital migration”, involving withdrawal from their families and their cultural and religious values, and entrance into a world of loneliness”* (90).

The Pope goes on to present **“migrants as an epitome of our time”**, and recalls the many young people involved in migration. *“The Church’s concern is focused especially on those fleeing from war, violence, political or religious persecution, from natural disasters including those caused by climate change, and from extreme poverty”* (91): they search for an opportunity, a dream of a better future. Other migrants are *“attracted by Western culture, sometimes with unrealistic expectations that expose them to grave disappointments. Unscrupulous traffickers, frequently linked to drug cartels or arms cartels, exploit the weakness of migrants... The particular vulnerability of migrants who are unaccompanied minors is worth noting... In some host countries, migration causes fear and alarm, often fomented and exploited for political ends. This can lead to a xenophobic mentality, as people close in on themselves, and this needs to be addressed decisively”* (92). Young migrants often also experience a cultural and religious uprooting (93). Francis asks young people *“not to play into the hands of those who would set them against other young people, newly arrived in their countries, and who would encourage them to view the latter as a threat”* (94).

The Pope also speaks of **child abuse**, makes the Synod’s commitment to the adoption of rigorous measures of prevention his own, and expresses gratitude *“to those who had the courage to report the evil they experienced”* (99). He recalls that, *“thank God”*, those who committed these *horrible crimes are not the majority of priests, who carry out their ministry with fidelity and generosity”*. He asks young people, if they see a priest at risk because he has taken the wrong path, to have the courage to remind him of his commitment to God and to his people (100).

Abuse, however, is not the only sin in the Church. *“Our sins are before the eyes of everyone; they appear all too clearly in the lines on the age-old face of the Church, our Mother and Teacher”, but the Church does not resort to any cosmetic surgery, “she is not afraid to reveal the sins of her members”*. *“Let us never forget that we must not abandon our Mother when she is wounded”* (101). *but stand beside her, so that she can summon up all her strength and all her ability to begin ever anew. This dark moment, with the help of the young people, “can truly be an opportunity for a reform of epoch-making significance”, opening us to a new Pentecost* (102).

Pope Francis reminds young people that **“there is a way out”** in all dark and painful situations. He recalls the Good News given on the morning of the Resurrection. He explains that even though the

digital world can expose us to many risks, there are young people who know how to be creative and brilliant in these areas. Like the Venerable Carlo Acutis, who “knew how to use the new communication technologies to transmit the Gospel” (105), he did not fall into the trap and said: “Everyone is born as an original, but many people end up die as photocopies”. “Don’t let that happen to you” (106), warns the Pope. “Don’t let them rob you of hope and joy, or drug you into becoming a slave to their interests” (107), seek the great goal of holiness. “Being young is not only about pursuing fleeting pleasures and superficial achievements. If the years of your youth are to serve their purpose in life, they must be a time of generous commitment, whole-hearted dedication” (108). “If you are young in years, but feel weak, weary or disillusioned, ask Jesus to renew you” (109). But always remember that “it is very difficult to fight against...the snares and temptations of the devil, and the selfishness of the world...if we grow too isolated” (110). That’s when we need a life of community.

Chapter four: “A great message for all young people”

To all young people the Pope announces three great truths. A “**God who is love**”. “God loves you, never doubt this” (112). You can “find security in the embrace of your heavenly Father” (113). Pope Francis affirms that the memory of the Father “is not a ‘hard disk’ that ‘saves’ and ‘archives’ all our data. His memory is a heart filled with tender compassion, one that finds joy in ‘deleting’ from us every trace of evil... Because he loves you. Try to keep still for a moment and let yourself feel his love” (115). His love is one that “has to do more with raising up than knocking down, with reconciling than forbidding, with offering new changes than condemning, with the future than the past” (116).

The second truth is that “**Christ saves you**”. Never forget that “He forgives us seventy times seven. Time and time again, He bears us on his shoulders” (119). Jesus loves us and saves us because “only what is loved can be saved. Only what is embraced can be transformed. The Lord’s love is greater than all our problems, frailties and flaws” (120). And “His forgiveness and salvation are not something we can buy, or that we have to acquire by our own works or efforts. He forgives us and sets us free without cost” (121).

The third truth is that “**He is alive!**”. “We need to keep reminding ourselves of this...because we can risk seeing Jesus Christ simply as a fine model from the distant past, as a memory, as someone who saved us two thousand years ago. But that would be of no use to us: it would leave us unchanged, it would not set us free” (124). If He lives, “there can be no doubt that goodness will have the upper hand in your life... then we can stop complaining and look to the future, for with him this is always possible” (127).

In these truths, the Father appears and Jesus appears. And where they are, there is also the Holy Spirit. “Invoke the Holy Spirit each day... You have nothing to lose, and He can change your life, fill it with light and lead it along a better path. He takes nothing away from you, but instead helps you to find all that you need, and in the best possible way” (131).

Chapter 5: Paths of Youth

“The love of God and our relationship with the living Christ do not hold us back from dreaming; they do not require us to narrow our horizons. On the contrary, that love elevates us, encourages us and inspires us to a better and more beautiful life. Much of the longing present in the hearts of young people can be summed up in the word ‘restlessness’” (138). Thinking of a young person, the Pope sees him or her as someone “who wants to fly on their two feet, always with one foot forward, ready to set out, to spring ahead. Always racing onward” (139). Youth cannot remain “on hold”, because it is the “age of choice” in the professional, social, political spheres, and also in the choice of the partner or in having one’s first children. “Anxiety can work against us by making us give up whenever we do not see instant results. Our best dreams are only attained through hope, patience and commitment, and not in haste. At the same time, we should not be hesitant, afraid to take

chances or make mistakes” (142). Pope Francis invites young people not to observe life from the balcony, not to spend their lives in front of a screen, not to be reduced to abandoned vehicles and not to look at the world as tourists: **“Make a ruckus! Cast out the fears that paralyze you...live!”** (143) He invites them to *“live the present”* enjoying with gratitude every little gift of life without *“being insatiable”* and *“obsessively seeking new pleasures”* (146). In fact, living the present *“is not the same as embarking irresponsibly on a life of dissipation that can only leave us empty and perpetually dissatisfied”* (147).

“No matter how much you live the experience of these years of your youth, you will never know their deepest and fullest meaning unless you encounter each day your best friend, the friend who is Jesus” (150) Friendship with Him is indissoluble because He does not abandon us (154). *“With a friend, we can speak and share our deepest secrets. With Jesus too, we can always have a conversation”*. When we pray, *“we open everything we do” to him, and we give him room “so that He can act, enter and claim victory”* (155). **“Do not deprive your youth of this friendship. You will be able to feel him at your side”**. That is what the disciples of Emmaus experienced (156). Saint Oscar Romero said: *“Christianity is not a collection of truths to be believed, rules to be followed, or prohibitions. Seen that way, it puts us off. Christianity is a person who loved me immensely, who demands and asks for my love. Christianity is Christ”*.

The Pope, speaking of **growth and maturity**, indicates the importance of seeking *“a spiritual development”*, of *“seeking the Lord and keeping his Word”*, of maintaining the *“connection” with Jesus... since you will not grow happy and holy by your own efforts and intelligence alone*” (158).

Adults too must mature without losing the values of youth: **“In every moment of life we can renew and increase our youth. When I began my ministry as Pope, the Lord broadened my horizons and granted me renewed youth. The same can happen to a couple married for many years, or to a monk in his monastery”** (160). Growing older means *“preserving and cherishing the most precious things about our youth, but it also involves having to purify those things that are not good”* (161). **“But I would also remind you that you won’t become holy and find fulfilment by copying others... You have to discover who you are and develop your own way of being holy”** (162). Pope Francis proposes **“paths of fraternity”** to live the faith, remembering that *“the Holy Spirit wants to make us come out of ourselves, to embrace others... That is why it is always better to live the faith together and to show our love by living in community”* (164), overcoming the temptation *“to dwell on ourselves and our problems, our hurt feelings and our grievances”* (166). *“God loves the joy of young people. He wants them especially to share in the joy of fraternal communion”* (167).

The Pope then speaks of being **“young and committed”**, stating that young people can sometimes be *“tempted to withdraw into small groups... They may feel that they are experiencing fraternity and love, but their small group may in fact become nothing other than an extension of their own ego. This is even more serious if they think of the lay vocation simply as a form of service inside the Church... They forget that the lay vocation is directed above all to charity within the family and to social and political charity”* (168).

Pope Francis proposes that young people **“go beyond their small groups and to build social friendship, where everyone works for the common good. Social enmity, on the other hand, is destructive. Families are destroyed by enmity. Countries are destroyed by enmity. The world is destroyed by enmity. And the greatest enmity of all is war. Today we see that the world is destroying itself by war”** because we are unable to sit down and speak” (169).

“Social engagement and direct contact with the poor remain fundamental ways of finding or deepening one’s faith and the discernment of one’s vocation” (170). The Pope cites the positive example of young people from parishes, schools and movements who *“often go out to spend time with the elderly and the infirm, or to visit poor neighbourhoods”* (171).

“Other young people take part in social programs that build houses for the homeless, or reclaim contaminated areas or offer various kinds of assistance to the needy. It would be helpful if this shared energy could be channeled and organized in a more stable way”. University students *“can apply their knowledge in an interdisciplinary way, together with young people of other churches or religions”* (172). Pope Francis encourages young people to make this commitment: *“I have been following news reports of the many young people throughout the world who have taken to the streets to express the desire for a more just and fraternal society... The young want to be protagonists of change. Please, do not leave it to others to be protagonists of change!”* (174).

Young people are called to be **“courageous missionaries”**, witnessing everywhere to the Gospel with their own lives, which does not mean *“speaking about the truth, but living it”* (175). The word, however, must not be silenced: *“Learn to swim against the tide, learn how to share Jesus and the faith he has given you”* (176). Where does Jesus send us? *“There are no borders, no limits: he sends us everywhere. The Gospel is for everyone, not just for some. It is not only for those who seem closer to us, more receptive, more welcoming. It is for everyone”* (177). And one cannot expect *“the mission to be soft and easy”* (178).

Chapter six: “Young people with roots”

Pope Francis says that it hurts him to see *“young people sometimes being encouraged to build a future without roots, as if the world were just starting now”* (179). *“If someone tells young people to ignore their history, to reject the experiences of their elders, to look down on the past and to look forward to a future that he holds out, doesn’t it then become easy to draw them along so that they only do what he tells them? He needs the young to be shallow, uprooted and distrustful, so that they can trust only in his promises and act according to his plans. That is how various ideologies operate: they destroy (or deconstruct) all differences so that they can reign unopposed”* (181).

The manipulators also use the cult of youth: *“The youthful body becomes the symbol of this new cult; everything associated with that body is idolized and lusted after, while whatever is not young is despised. But this cult of youth is simply an expedient that ultimately proves degrading to the young”* (182). *“Dear young friends, do not let them exploit your youth to promote a shallow life that confuses beauty with appearances”* (183). Because there is beauty in the labourer who returns home grimy and unkempt, in the elderly wife who takes care of her sick husband, in the fidelity of couples who love each other in the autumn of life.

Today instead we promote *“a spirituality without God, an affectivity without community or concern for those who suffer, a fear of the poor, viewed as dangerous and a variety of claims to offer a future paradise that nonetheless seems increasingly distant”* (184). The Pope invites young people not to allow themselves to be dominated by this ideology which leads to *“cultural colonization”* (185) which eradicates young people from the cultural and religious affiliations from which they come and tends to homogenize them by transforming them into *“a new line of malleable goods”* (186).

Fundamental is **“your relationship with the elderly”**, says the Pope, which helps young people to discover the living richness of the past. *“The Word of God encourages us to remain close to the elderly, so that we can benefit from their experience”* (188). *“This does not mean having to agree with everything adults say or approving all their actions”.* *“It is really a matter of being open to receiving a wisdom passed down from generation to generation”* (190). *“The world has never benefitted, nor will it ever benefit, from a rupture between generations... It is the lie that would have you believe that only what is new is good and beautiful”* (191).

Speaking of **“dreams and visions”**, Pope Francis observes: *“When young and old alike are open to the Holy Spirit, they make a wonderful combination. The old dream dreams, and the young see visions”* (192). *“If young people sink roots in those dreams, they can peer into the future”* (193). That

is why we need “**to take risks together**”, walking together, young and old. “*Roots are not anchors chaining us*” but “*a fixed point from which we can grow and meet new challenges*” (200).

Chapter seven: “Youth ministry”

The Pope explains that youth ministry has been affected by social and cultural changes and “*young people frequently fail to find in our usual programmes a response to their concerns, their needs, their problems and issues*” (202). The young people themselves “*are agents of youth ministry. Certainly they need to be helped and guided, but at the same time left free to develop new approaches, with creativity and a certain audacity*”. We need to help young people to “*use their insight, ingenuity and knowledge to address the issues and concerns of other young people in their own language*” (203).

Youth ministry needs to be flexible, and it is necessary to invite “*young people to events or occasions that provide an opportunity not only for learning, but also for conversing, celebrating, singing, listening to real stories and experiencing a shared encounter with the living God*” (204).

Youth ministry **has to be synodal**, that is, capable of shaping a “journey together” and this involves **two broad lines of action**: the first is **outreach**, the second is **growth**. For the first, Pope Francis trusts in the ability of young people themselves to “*find appealing ways to come together*”. “*They only have to be encouraged and given the freedom to be enthused*”. **What is most important, though, “is that each young person can be daring enough to sow the seed of the message on that fertile terrain that is the heart of another young person”** (210). Priority should be given to “*the language of closeness, the language of generous, relational and existential love that touches the heart*”. Young people need to be approached “*with the grammar of love, not by being preached at*” (211).

As far as growth is concerned, Pope Francis warns against proposing to young people touched by an intense experience of God “*meetings of ‘formation’ in which only doctrinal and moral questions are dealt with... The result is that many young people get bored, they lose the fire of their encounter with Christ and the joy of following Him*” (212).

Any educational project or path of growth for young people “*must certainly include formation in Christian doctrine and morality*”, that must be **centred on the kerygma**, “*the foundational experience of encounter with God through Jesus’ death and resurrection*”, and on “*growth in fraternal love, community life and service*” (213).

Therefore, “*youth ministry should always include occasions for renewing and deepening our personal experience of the love of God and the living Christ*” (214). It should help young people “*to live as brothers and sisters, to help one another, to build community, to be of service to others, to be close to the poor*” (215).

Church institutions should therefore provide “**suitable environments**”, “*places young people can make their own, where they can come and go freely, feel welcome and readily meet other young people, whether at times of difficulty and frustration, or of joy and celebration*” (218).

Pope Francis then describes “**Youth Ministry in educational institutions**”, affirming that schools are in “*urgent need of self-criticism*”. He recalls that “*some Catholic schools seem to be structured only for the sake of self-preservation... A school that becomes a ‘bunker’, protecting its students from errors ‘from without’ is a caricature of this tendency*”. When young people leave, they feel “*an insurmountable disconnect between what they were taught and the world in which they live*”, while “*one of the greatest joys that any educator can have is to see a student turn into a strong, well-integrated person*” (221).

We cannot separate spiritual from cultural formation... “*This, then, is your great challenge: to respond to the crippling refrains of cultural consumerism with thoughtful and firm decisions, with*

research, knowledge and sharing” (223). Among the areas of “**pastoral development**”, the Pope indicates the “*importance of the arts*” (226), the “*potential of sports*” (227), and “*care for the environment*” (228).

There is a need for “**popular youth ministry**”, “*broader and more flexible, which stimulates those natural guides and charisms which the Holy Spirit has already sown among young people, in the different places in which young people concretely move. It tries to avoid imposing obstacles, rules, controls and obligatory structures on these young believers who are natural leaders in their neighbourhoods and in other settings. We need only to accompany and encourage them*” (230).

By focusing on a “*pure and perfect youth ministry, marked by abstract ideas, protected from the world and free of every flaw, we can turn the Gospel into a dull, meaningless and unattractive proposition. Such a youth ministry ends up completely removed from the world of young people and suited only to an elite Christian youth that sees itself as different, while living in an empty and unproductive isolation*” (232).

Pope Francis invites us to be a “*Church with open doors. Nor does one have to accept fully all the teachings of the Church to take part in certain of our activities for young people*” (234). Room should also be made for “*all those who have other visions of life, who belong to other religions or who distance themselves from religion altogether*” (235). The icon for this approach is offered to us by the Gospel episode of the disciples at Emmaus: *Jesus questions them, listens to them patiently, helps them to recognize what they are living, to interpret in the light of Scripture what they have lived, accepts to stay with them, enters their night. It is they themselves who choose to resume without delay the journey in the opposite direction* (237).

“**Always missionaries**”. For young people to become missionaries there is no need to make “a long journey”. “*A young person who makes a pilgrimage to ask Our Lady for help, and invites a friend or companion along, by that single gesture is being a good missionary*” (239). “*Youth ministry is always missionary*” (240). Young people need to have their freedom respected, “*yet they also need to be accompanied*”. The family should be the first place of accompaniment (242), and then the community. “*All should regard young people with understanding, appreciation and affection, and avoid constantly judging them or demanding of them a perfection beyond their years*” (243). There is a lack of experienced people dedicated to accompaniment (244) and “*some young women feel that there is a lack of leading female role models within the Church*” (245). The same young people “*described to us*” the qualities they hope to find in a mentor: “*being a faithful Christian who engages with the Church and the world; someone who constantly seeks holiness; someone who is a confidant without judgement. Similarly, someone who actively listens to the needs of young people and responds in kind; someone deeply loving and self-aware; someone who recognizes his or her limits and knows the joys and sorrows of the spiritual journey. An especially important quality in mentors is the acknowledgement of their own humanity – the fact that they are human beings who make mistakes: not perfect people but forgiven sinners*” (246). They should know how to “*walk alongside them*”, respecting their freedom.

Chapter eight: “**Vocation**”

“*The first thing we need to discern and discover is this: Jesus wants to be a friend to every young person*” (250). Vocation is a call to missionary service to others, “*for our life on earth reaches full stature when it becomes an offering*” (254). “*To respond to our vocation, we need to foster and develop all that we are. This has nothing to do with inventing ourselves or creating ourselves out of nothing. It has to do with finding our true selves in the light of God and letting our lives flourish and bear fruit*” (257). “*This ‘being there for others’ normally has to do with two basic issues: forming a new family and working*” (258).

As for “**love and family**”, the Pope writes that: “*Young people intensely feel the call to love; they dream of meeting the right person with whom they can form a family*” (259). The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony “*envelops this love in the grace of God; it roots it in God Himself*” (260). **God created us as sexual beings. He himself created sexuality, which is a marvellous gift. “It is not taboo”.** It is a gift the Lord gives us. It has “*two purposes: to love and to generate life. It is passion... True love is passionate*” (262).

Pope Francis observes that the “*increase of separations, divorces... can cause great suffering and a crisis of identity in young people. Sometimes they must take on responsibilities that are not proportioned to their age*” (262). **Despite all the difficulties, “it is worth your every effort to invest in the family; there you will find the best incentives to mature and the greatest joys to experience and share. Don’t let yourselves be robbed of a great love”** (263).

“*To think that nothing can be definitive is a deceptive lie... I ask you, instead, to be revolutionaries, I ask you to swim against the tide*” (264).

As for work, the Pope writes: “**I ask young people not to expect to live without working, depending on others for help.** *This is not good, because work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfilment. In this sense, helping the poor financially must always be a provisional solution in the face of pressing needs*” (269).

After noting how young people in the world of work experience forms of exclusion and marginalization (270), the Pope affirms with regard to youth unemployment: “*This is a highly complex and sensitive issue that politics must make a priority, especially at present, when the speed of technological advances and the concern to reduce labour costs can lead quickly to the replacement of many jobs by machines*” (271). To young people he says: “*It is true that you cannot live without working, and that sometimes you have to accept whatever is available, but I ask you never to give up on your dreams, never completely bury a calling, and never accept defeat*” (272).

Pope Francis concludes this chapter by talking about “**the vocation to special consecration**”. “**In discerning your vocation, do not dismiss the possibility of devoting yourself to God... Why not? You can be sure that, if you do recognize and follow a call from God, there you will find complete fulfilment**” (276).

Chapter nine: “Discernment”

The Pope recalls that: “**Without the wisdom of discernment, we can easily become prey to every passing trend**” (279). “A particular form of discernment involves the effort to discover our own vocation. Since this is a very personal decision that others cannot make for us, it requires a certain degree of solitude and silence” (283).

“*A vocation, while a gift, will undoubtedly also be demanding. God’s gifts are interactive; to enjoy them we have to be ready to take risks*” (289).

Three sensitivities are required of those who help young people in their discernment. “*The first kind of sensitivity is directed to the individual. It is a matter of listening to someone who is sharing his very self in what he says*” (292). “*The second kind of sensitivity is marked by discernment. It tries to grasp exactly where grace or temptation is present*” (293). “*The third kind of sensitivity is the ability to perceive what is driving the other person*”, discerning “*the direction in which that person truly wants to move*” (294). “**When we listen to others in this way, at a certain moment we ourselves have to disappear in order to let the other person follow the path he or she has discovered. We have to vanish as the Lord did from the sight of his disciples in Emmaus**” (296). We need “*to encourage and accompany processes, without imposing our own roadmaps. For those processes have to do with persons who remain always unique and free. There are no easy recipes*” (297).

The exhortation concludes with “**a wish**” from Pope Francis: “*Dear young people, my joyful hope is to see you keep running the race before you, outstripping all those who are slow or fearful. Keep running, “attracted by the face of Christ, whom we love so much, whom we adore in the Holy Eucharist and acknowledge in the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters. **The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith... And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us**”.*