

YOUNG PEOPLE, THE “PRESENT” OF GOD *Called To Participate in His Creative Work*

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It is wonderful to be here to listen together to the “appeals of the Spirit” in the situations of the world, the Church and your Congregation. The synodal journey of the universal Church on the theme *Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment* is certainly a “word” that the Spirit is addressing to all of us as consecrated persons.

“I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!” (Lk. 12:49) These are the words of the Lord Jesus, who is speaking about his imminent Passion, and they refer to the “burning bush” within him—the ardent flame of love he received from his Father and that he wants to bring to the world of human beings.

It obviously concerns the fire of love by which he himself feels continually regenerated, that lies in the depths of his soul through the presence of the Spirit who dwells within him and who “reminds” him of the loving experience he lived in the bosom of the Father.

The mission of Jesus in this world is to bring people within the beneficent influence of this love, from which we have decidedly withdrawn. Therefore, if we ask ourselves in what the revelation of God consists, we have to say that it is a living and sanctifying fire, a bush that burns without being consumed, that ignites without destroying, that illuminates without dazzling. And all those who truly approach Jesus, even if only by touching the hem of his robe (cf. Lk. 8:44), are inflamed and ignited, becoming one with him.

So, dear Chapter delegates: evangelization, a duty to which every baptized person is called, can only be an irradiation of this fire that Jesus himself came to bring to earth. He “ignites” us with his presence and power, and only in this way do we become a fire that warms and illuminates all those we meet. Everything else is harmful proselytism, sterile pastoral marketing, theoretical conviction that does not transform one’s existence, a lack of testimony to a meeting that never happened.

It is clear that the Lord, who put his life at stake, is asking us to put our own lives at stake. The baptism we received is precisely this: “I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire” (Mt. 3:11). We are baptized in the Holy Spirit and fire. Let us never forget this! Put in the words of *Christus Vivit*:² “Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive! (ChV 1). He burns with love for everyone, without exception, and wants you to be “infected” by this living fire so as to infect others!

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² Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* [ChV], Vatican City 2019.

1. THE *JOURNEY*: FROM DREAMS TO DECISIONS

It is very beautiful that in the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* there are many questions: it is an open document that involves the reader because every question creates co-responsibility in the listeners, seeks dialogue and communion, asks us to get involved and take a stand by means of our life.

I believe that the throbbing heart and center of *Christus Vivit* is Chapter V, which opens with a formidable and truly challenging question: “What does it mean to live the years of our youth in the transforming light of the Gospel?” (ChV 134) We can use this question as a starting point for reading the whole Apostolic Exhortation, from the previous chapters to the succeeding ones. Going back, we move toward the great message for all young people (Chapter IV) and going forward, we move toward intergenerational relations (Chapter VI).

And after asking this question, Pope Francis takes the risk of proposing to all young people exciting, courageous and prophetic journeys of youthful spirituality in the contemporary world. It is enough to scroll through the escalating subtitles in the different parts of Chapter V to realize that youth is a time of dreams and decisions, a thirst for life and experience of friendship with Christ; a time of growth in maturity [that it is made up of] the fraternal journeys of committed young people who are courageous missionaries.

I take Chapter V as my starting point because it speaks about dreams and decisions (cf. ChV 136-143), in the knowledge that today it is difficult to find an environment in which to realize them. It is easy to be overcome by despair and at the same time it is hard to make decisions in the presence of a wealth of very different possibilities. But it is in our own interest to keep dreams and decisions connected to each other. For Romano Guardini, who knew well the hearts of young people, the specific task of youth is to combine ideals with concrete situations, imagination with reality. We cannot lose the bold thrust toward seemingly impossible ideals, but at the same time we must guarantee that these ideals find space in daily life through a real and true work of incarnating our most beautiful dreams:

Youth, as a phase in the development of the personality, is marked by dreams which gather momentum, by relationships which acquire more and more consistency and balance, by trials and experiments, and by choices which gradually build a life project. At this stage in life, the young are called to move forward without cutting themselves off from their roots, to build autonomy but not in solitude (ChV 137).

In a General Chapter, dreams must take on substance, that is to say, they need to materialize. If youth is a dream that does not become a reality, then it ends in idealism, in abstraction, in the idolatry of principles. This is why dreams must become decisions that must be realized on the journey through life. Thus it is very important to get involved in real life. As we know, this is a very vigorous invitation on the part of Pope Francis:

Dear young people, make the most of these years of your youth. Don't observe life from a balcony. Don't confuse happiness with an armchair, or live your life behind a screen. Whatever you do, do not become the sorry sight of an abandoned vehicle! Don't be parked cars, but dream freely and make good decisions. Take risks, even if it means making mistakes. Don't go through life anaesthetized or approach the world like tourists. Make a ruckus! Cast out the fears that paralyze you, so that you don't become young mummies. Live! Give yourselves over to the best of life! Open the door of the cage, go out and fly! Please, don't take early retirement! (ChV 143)

These words apply to us too if we want our charism to remain young! We must go forth, we must take risks, we must enter into the logic of the ecstasy of life! There is only one certainty here: the best defense is attack! We must come out of ourselves so as not to die of narcissism. In this regard, I believe the concept of ecstasy is one of the most powerful in *Christus Vivit*: “How wonderful it would be to experience this ‘ecstasy’ of coming out of ourselves and seeking the good of others, even to the sacrifice of our lives” (ChV 163).

The Pope then goes on to develop this powerful thought:

When an encounter with God is called an “ecstasy,” it is because it takes us out of ourselves, lifts us up and overwhelms us with God’s love and beauty. Yet we can also experience ecstasy when we recognize in others their hidden beauty, their dignity and their grandeur as images of God and children of the Father. The Holy Spirit wants to make us come out of ourselves, to embrace others with love and to seek their good. That is why it is always better to live the faith together and to show our love by living in community and sharing with other young people our affection, our time, our faith and our troubles. The Church offers many different possibilities for living our faith in community, for everything is easier when we do it together (ChV 164).

2. *VOCATION: A QUESTION OF “ECSTASY”*

Thus we come to Chapter VIII of *Christus Vivit*, which is dedicated to the theme of vocation.

The starting point is friendship, which is our specific way of relating to Jesus, and our point of arrival is the different forms of “call”: love in the family and work. The chapter concludes by keeping the door open to “the vocation to special consecration” because God calls whom he wants, when he wants, where he wants and how he wants. Consequently, no one is excluded from God’s extreme liberality and creativity.

But here too I would like to say something about what is common to every vocational call. This is marvelously stated in the section entitled *Being There for Others* (ChV 253-258), which in my opinion is the generative heart of this chapter.

A vocation is always for the good of others. God calls us not so as to create a group of specially-favored people who exclude and isolate themselves from everyone else (perhaps because they think they are better than they are), but so as to create inclusion through our “missionary service toward others” (ChV 253). It is necessary to clarify that every vocation is a mission; every call is an immediate mandate to go out to others. It might seem strange, but that’s really how it is: God calls out of love for the uncalled! If I think of Don Bosco, the founder of the Congregation to which I have the gift of belonging, I immediately ask myself: Why did God call Don Bosco? And the only reply to that question is: for the sake of the poorest and most abandoned young people.

See: God calls one person for many others, not for him/herself. He calls a person to be at the service of the full life of those who have not (yet) been called. Pope Francis develops this thought very clearly in various passages, underscoring the fact that our call is always a “missionary vocation” (just as our identity is always that of “missionary disciples”):

This missionary vocation thus has to do with service. For our life on earth reaches full stature when it becomes an offering. Here I would repeat that “the mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an “extra” or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world.” It follows that every form of pastoral activity, formation and spirituality should be seen in the light of our Christian vocation (ChV 254).

I invite you to take careful note of the “ecstatic” perspective, because mission, that is, my “coming out of myself,” “going forth with my entire being,” is not a superstructure of existence but the heart of my identity. Precisely because of this, I do not “have” a mission but I *am* a mission. Here too there is an exciting paradox: I am myself when I go out of myself, when I interpret my identity not as a refuge but as a space for meeting, dialogue and service. My existence is missionary: I do not exist for myself but for others. The talents given to me are not for self-consumption but for service. “I am a mission” and because of this “Your own personal vocation does not consist only in the work you do, though that is an expression of it. Your vocation is something more: it is a path guiding your many efforts and actions toward service to others” (ChV 255). Your identity as a Pauline Congregation is intimately and radically missionary!

Since the vocational dynamic is from the outset more intimate to me than I am to myself, it is not an opportunistic or pragmatic choice but the fruit of a friendly and loving dialogue with the Lord, who offers full and definitive meaning to the many actions we perform. Without him, they run the risk of being a soil of dispersion, fragmentation and confusion because “it is not simply a matter of doing things, but of doing them with meaning and direction” (ChV 257).

In this sense, vocation is a principle of unification of our life because it gives us the “grace of unity” that is so necessary but impossible to attain through our own efforts:

In the end, it is a recognition of why I was made, why I am here on earth, and what the Lord’s plan is for my life. He will not show me every place, time and detail, since I will have to make my own prudent decisions about these. But he will show me a direction in life, for he is my Creator and I need to listen to his voice, so that, like clay in the hands of a potter, I can let myself be shaped and guided by him. Then I will become what I was meant to be, faithful to my own reality (ChV 256).

Pope Francis further says: “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” (ChV 257). I am firmly convinced about the idea of vocation as the full flowering of our being. At times we have the idea that a vocation is a bit like a straightjacket that humiliates our authenticity. We think it is something that God imposes on us from the outside and that mortifies our uniqueness. Nothing could be more false! In reality, it is the exact opposite. God, our Creator and Father, has at heart the full flowering of his children. We are his glory insofar as we are men and women who live our existence to the full. God is happy when we are fully in bloom!

So here is the center of vocation: your “being for others,” because “your vocation inspires you to bring out the best in yourself for the glory of God and the good of others” (ChV 257). From here we can move *toward God*: toward love for him, friendship with him, the cultivation of our spiritual life, living participation in the liturgy of the Church as a privileged place for meeting him. In this sense I want to point out that the theme of friendship with God is one of the most beautiful themes running through *Christus Vivit*, which develops it in three points (150-157; 250-252; 287-290). And one can move *toward one’s neighbor*: the family, work, special consecration—all subjects that are developed in a systematic way in Chapter VIII, but which we don’t have time to examine in depth here (cf. ChV 259-277).

What matters is to avoid *philautia*, that is, a pathological concentration on oneself, which is a defect typical of our time at all levels, civil and ecclesial. It is also a risk for the life of our Congregations and Institutes, which at times work for their self-survival and nothing more! This applies to the Church as a whole, which when it focuses on itself is not faithful to its vocation. It applies to our Christian communities when they work for their own survival. And it applies to every young person when he/she sees only self on the horizon and works only for narcissistic self-realization. This is a young person who has lost his/her youth!

3. *DISCERNMENT: THE ANSWER TO THE “BIG QUESTION”*

Let us now move on to discernment: a key word in the whole synodal journey, which kept us busy from start to finish and which continues to be a challenge for each one of us and for the Church in this very difficult but promising time of renewal at all levels.

I said that there are a lot of questions in *Christus Vivit* and this is something very positive. Discernment, after all, is a process of answering many questions because “when it concerns discerning one’s own vocation, it is necessary to ask oneself a number of questions.” And what are these questions? Pope Francis, who as a Jesuit comes from a very lofty tradition on the subject of discernment, is very clear in this regard:

We should not start with wondering where we could make more money, or achieve greater recognition and social status. Nor even by asking what kind of work would be most pleasing to us. If we are not to go astray, we need a different starting point. We need to ask: Do I know myself, quite apart from my illusions

and emotions? Do I know what brings joy or sorrow to my heart? What are my strengths and weaknesses? These questions immediately give rise to others: How can I serve people better and prove most helpful to our world and to the Church? What is my real place in this world? What can I offer to society? Even more realistic questions then follow: Do I have the abilities needed to offer this kind of service? Could I develop those abilities?" (ChV 285).

And here we come to the point. All these questions send us back to a single "big question" that summarizes them all and that offers fundamental direction to our existence, which, I want to say again, should be thought of and implemented in terms of going forth, mission and service:

These questions should be centered less on ourselves and our own inclinations, but on others, so that our discernment leads us to see our life in relation to their lives. That is why I would remind you of the most important question of all. So often in life, we waste time asking ourselves: "Who am I?" You can keep asking, "Who am I?" for the rest of your lives. But the real question is: "*For whom* am I?" Of course, you are for God. But he has decided that you should also be for others, and he has given you many qualities, inclinations, gifts and charisms that are not for you, but to share with those around you (ChV 286).

This is a formidable passage and it accompanied us from the outset of our synodal journey! It was a question which Pope Francis offered us as a gift of 8 April 2017 on the occasion of the Prayer Vigil held in preparation for World Youth Day. The Final Document of the Synod made good use of it in article n. 69, entitled *Life Under the Sign of Mission*:

Pope Francis invites young people to view their lives within the horizon of mission: "So often in life, we waste time asking ourselves: 'Who am I?' You can keep asking, 'Who am I?' for the rest of your lives. But the real question is: '*For whom* am I?'" (*Address during the Prayer Vigil in preparation for World Youth Day*, Basilica of Saint Mary Major, 8 April 2017). This statement sheds a profound light on life choices, because it invites us to make them within the liberating horizon of self-giving. This is the only way to arrive at an authentic and lasting happiness! Indeed, "My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an 'extra' or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 273).

The transition from "Who am I?" to "*For whom* am I?" is absolutely strategic. Without it, we remain bottled up in a traffic jam of systemic narcissism, which in our time is bringing sadness and boredom to many young people, along with a few flashes of transient and insignificant enjoyment.

It is a question that springs from a heart that has moved to the side of Jesus, who lived his life as *pro-life*, as an existence at the service of others. This "big question" invites us to remove our gaze from ourselves and commit ourselves to the good of others. It is the "high road" taught us by the Lord—the path of the Beatitudes; the path of full joy. Let us stop asking ourselves: "What must I do to be happy?" and instead begin to ask ourselves: "Who can I make happy so as to be truly happy?"

We are called to recognize that nothing is given to us for ourselves. Instead, everything is given to us to use as a gift. That's how the Gospel works. This is its fundamental law: "Give and gifts will be given to you: good measure, packed together, shaken down and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you" (Lk. 6:38). It is the law of generosity across the board, taught us by a God incapable of making petty calculations and seeking his own advantage, but who always "makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust" (Mt. 5:45). He will never be stingy with anyone but always generous with everyone.

In all this, as you have already guessed, the link between generous service to others and vocational discernment is decisive. It is clear that making a vocational discernment requires times of silence and solitude (cf. ChV 283), as well as attentive listening (cf. ChV 284). But we must not forget the theme of *diakonia*, that is, service to others, as a space of authentic discernment, where I am called to resolutely adopt the "position of service" that characterizes every genuine vocational dynamic:

As in the miracle of Jesus, the bread and the fish provided by young people can multiply (cf. Jn. 6:4-13). As in the parable, the small seeds sown by young people can yield a rich harvest (cf. Mt. 13:23, 31-32). All of this has its living source in the Eucharist, in which our bread and our wine are transformed to grant

us eternal life. Young people face immense and difficult challenges. With faith in the risen Lord, they can confront them with creativity and hope, ever ready to be of service, like the servants at the wedding feast, who unknowingly cooperated in Jesus' first miracle. They did nothing more than follow the order of his Mother: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn. 2:5). Mercy, creativity and hope make life grow (ChV 173).

Not only the young people of the Third Millennium, but also all of us along with them, are called to take on the challenge of service: "Fight for the common good, serve the poor, be protagonists of the revolution of charity and service, capable of resisting the pathologies of consumerism and superficial individualism (ChV 174).

4. ACCOMPANIMENT/MENTORING: AN EPOCHAL NEED

We have spoken about dreams and decisions, vocation and discernment—all things of great importance, which cannot be done alone. Every dream can become a reality if it is shared; every vocation is always also a convocation, and discernment is not only personal but communitarian.

Jesus does not want individuals following him; he wants a Church that lives communion as its first and most important form of mission. I was deeply struck by the fact that during the synodal journey, the young people asked us to make the "prophecy of fraternity" shine in the Church. If you have read the Synod's *Final Document* carefully, I am sure you too were struck by the emergence of the theme of "missionary synodality," that is to say, the need to walk together, the capacity to work as a team—to *be* a team so as to educate and evangelize. Communion is a condition for mission!

Vocational discernment also requires teamwork: we must give and receive, climbing into the "canoe" of the Church, as one young participant in the Synod put it so graphically:

During the Synod, one of the young auditors from the Samoan Islands spoke of the Church as a canoe, in which the elderly help to keep on course by judging the position of the stars, while the young keep rowing, imagining what waits for them ahead. Let us steer clear of young people who think that adults represent a meaningless past, and those adults who always think they know how young people should act. Instead, let us all climb aboard the same canoe and together seek a better world, with the constantly renewed momentum of the Holy Spirit (ChV 201).

Pope Francis dedicates an entire chapter (VIII) to the theme of intergenerational dialogue, that is, to the mutual help that young people and adults/seniors can give each other. There is always a giving and receiving in the Church, an exchange of gifts that should vibrate between the different generations.

This is true above all in the field of vocational discernment, due in part to the many elements that cause confusion today. Just think of the media bombardment that creates fragmentation and disintegration in us. This is why solitude and silence are very important (cf. ChV 283). We also know that the Malignant One is always at work, prompting us to replace good with evil, what is just with what is unjust, holiness with wickedness. This is why contemplation, prayer and a readiness to listen are so important (cf. ChV 284).

I think a young person would be both naïve and arrogant to consider making a discernment alone. In actual fact, that person would be defenseless and easily prey to subjective whims and objective errors. The tradition of the Church has always known that it would be suicidal to think about making a discernment alone. Instead, one must seek out persons rich in human experience and experience of God so as to move in the right direction. A General Chapter, on the other hand, is an important moment of community discernment.

Accompaniment/mentoring and discernment go together: one must be accompanied in order to discern on the community, group and personal levels (cf. *Final Document*, nn. 95-100). We need family environments in which each of us can experience a confidential, friendly and loving atmosphere. We need to belong to groups that are able to share apostolic initiatives and develop contemplative sensibilities. Finally, we need adults, not pseudo-adults, and also "unadulterated

adults,” by which I mean persons “whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14).

Christus Vivit offers us a resumé of some elements proper to this precise directive, summarizing many indications that emerged from the synodal journey. I think at this point it is important to give the floor to young people because they, better than anyone else, offered us an adequate profile of the adult who carries out the service of accompaniment/mentoring:

The young people described to us the qualities they hope to find in a mentor, and they expressed this with great clarity. “The qualities of a mentor include: being a faithful Christian who engages with the Church and the world; someone who constantly seeks holiness; someone who is a confidant without judging. 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. Sometimes mentors are put on a pedestal, and when they fall, it may have a devastating impact on young people’s ability to continue to engage with the Church. Mentors should not lead young people as passive followers, but walk alongside them, allowing them to be active participants in the journey. They should respect the freedom that comes with a young person’s process of discernment and equip them with tools to do so well. A mentor should believe wholeheartedly in a young person’s ability to participate in the life of the Church. A mentor should therefore nurture the seeds of faith in young people, without expecting to immediately see the fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit. This role is not and cannot be limited to priests and consecrated life, but the laity should also be empowered to take on such a role. All such mentors should benefit from being well-formed, and engage in ongoing formation” (ChV 246).

What can we add after such clear and courageous words? I permit myself to simply recall the three sensitivities or attentions mentioned by Pope Francis regarding the persons called to listen to and accompany young people in their vocational discernment (cf. ChV 291-298).

The first kind of sensitivity is directed to the *individual*: devoting time to listening to a singular story, a unique existence, without giving in to the temptation of homologation. Every existence is a unique and unrepeatably love story that requires attentive and selfless listening.

The second kind of sensitivity is marked by *discernment*: it is the delicate and precious work of one who knows how to distinguish grace from temptation, the inspirations of God from those of the Malignant One. Great attention is truly needed because evil always presents itself in the form of good, like wolves that dress like lambs to deceive the sheep.

The third kind of sensitivity is the ability to perceive *what is driving the other person*: the inclinations of that person’s heart, the person’s ultimate intention, the plea of God that passes through the conscience of the person who is being accompanied/mentored. Here, the person should be helped to recognize the question that God is asking in the depths of his/her heart so as to respond to the profound meaning of his/her existence.

You understand that this is not easy. At the minimum, it requires a saint! And we know that only holy mentors have succeeded in guiding those they accompanied on the path to holiness.

I want to end by saying that “in the last analysis, good discernment is a path of freedom” (ChV 295), and a sign of this is that the mentor “has to disappear in order to let the other person follow the path he or she has discovered” (ChV 296). This is the great sign of the sanctity of the mentor. It is his/her signature! Such a person knows how to leave the scene with elegance and without regrets: like Eli with Samuel, who told the youth how to answer God and then went back to sleep, leaving the field to him (cf. 1 Sm. 3:1-21); or like John the Baptist, who was not afraid to step aside, pointing to Christ as the lamb of God to be followed (cf. Jn. 1:29-37); or like Philip, who after having accompanied and baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, had the courage to let the traveler resume his journey full of joy (cf. Acts 8:26-40).

Certainly all these people had as their point reference the first and greatest evangelizer: Jesus, who was able to listen to, enlighten and warm the hearts of the disciples on the way to Emmaus. And then, mysteriously, he graciously stepped aside, leaving them the task of choosing according to their dreams:

As they approached the village to which they were going, [Jesus] gave the impression that he was going on farther. But [the disciples] urged him, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost

over.” So he went in to stay with them. And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?” So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!” Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread (Lk. 24:28-35).