

Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation

CHRISTUS VIVIT

of the Holy Father

FRANCIS

to Young People and to the entire People of God

'Christ is alive', Pope Francis' latest Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, is without doubt a shot in the arm for the contemporary Christian ministry with young people. In many ways the document can be likened to a Pope Francis, Greatest Hits album, drawing, as it does, from all his major writings thus far. The expected themes from the recent Final Document of last year's Synod of Bishops are well covered, this time with the warm personal style we have come to appreciate in Francis' writings. Wanting to speak both 'to' and 'about' the young, the document juggles two voices in a way that is not immediately apparent from chapter headings and subtitles.

In the first two chapters, the Scriptures are briefly surveyed along with the youth and young adulthood of Jesus himself. The example of the young Mary is examined, and a short litany of young saints is created amid the echoes of a Vatican II call for openness to renewal and attention to the signs of the times. Chapter Three then summarises much of the contextual material from the 2018 Synod on Young People describing the challenges faced by the Church and its young today.

With the self-explanatory title, 'A great message for all young people', Chapter Four switches to a personal address aimed directly at the young. Francis desperately wants all young people to know that God loves them, Christ saves them and the Spirit of Jesus is alive today! "If in your heart you can learn to appreciate the beauty of this message, if you are willing to encounter the Lord, if you are willing to let him love you and save you, if you can make friends with him and start to talk to him, the living Christ, about the realities of your life, then you will have a profound experience capable of sustaining your entire Christian life." (129)

Switching back and forth between 'to' and 'about' modes, Chapter Five urges young people to make the most of these youthful years. With some great lines like: "Don't observe life from a balcony"; "Don't confuse happiness with an armchair"; "Don't be parked cars"; and "Make a ruckus!" it is obvious that this is a Pope who wants the young to be thoroughly involved. Faith as 'friendship with Christ' along with 'rootedness' are key themes setting the groundwork for Francis' encouragement to the young to dream, envision and take risks.

The seventh Chapter entitled 'Youth Ministry', offers substantive food for thought for those who would work in the faith formation or religious education of young people. Two main courses of action are identified – outreach and growth. Francis strongly warns against burying the kerygma in preachy 'formation' talks that bore the young. Instead the educational project for young people must keep two goals in mind – to develop the kerygma and to foster growth in fraternal love, community life and service. "Youth ministry should always include occasions for renewing and deepening our personal experience of the love of God and the living Christ. It can do this in a variety of ways: testimonies, songs, moments of adoration, times of spiritual reflection on the sacred Scriptures, and even an intelligent use of social networks. Yet this joyful experience of encounter with the Lord should never be replaced by a kind of 'indoctrination'." (214)

Youth ministry in educational institutions is tackled in three paragraphs which highlight what educationalists here tend to know but still find very hard to concretely address. Evangelisation of the young is essential and the promotion of a culture of encounter is vital as Francis has addressed elsewhere in his 2017 Apostolic Constitution, *Veritatis Gaudium*. Above all, there is no place for bunker approaches; entrenched and defensive they reflect, "...in a chilling way, what many young people experience when they graduate from certain educational institutions: an insurmountable disconnect between what they were taught and the world in which they live." (221)

Francis also calls for a 'popular' youth ministry by which he seems to mean a young-led, fluid, broad and flexible way of working with the young. He sees it as essential if the Church is to reach the youthful peripheries, that there be 'Popular' leaders, "able to make everyone, including the poor, the vulnerable, the frail and the wounded, part of the forward march of youth. They do not shun or fear those young people who have experienced hurt or borne the weight of the cross." (231)

Christus Vivit (CV) walks somewhat disconcertingly at times between the world of the young and that of those who would work with them. Themes of discernment, vocation, listening and accompaniment feature strongly, and parishes are strongly encouraged to take these into consideration in the development of any pastoral plan or asset assessment as is currently taking place in the Archdiocese. Spaces that are truly welcoming of young people and future focussed rather than hinting of underlying 'bunker approaches' are well-advised. But most of all, the strategic development of mentoring and accompanying relationships between adults and young people are to be fostered – think volunteer teams rather than individual youth ministers. Whether you read CV as a young person or as someone who once was, there is enormous insight and wisdom summarised here. If we are to pay more than lip service to the inclusion of the young in today's Church – this document must be applied with urgency in the life of every Catholic community.

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