

Follow-up to the Synod on young people

A Church with Doors Wide-open

Interview with Alessandra Smerilli, F.M.A.

Salesian sister Alessandra Smerilli of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians offers a few insights regarding the Final Synod document on young people and the apostolic exhortation, *Christus vivit*. What are the central points and specifics of these two texts? Sr. Smerilli is a lecturer in Political Economy at the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences Auxilium in Rome. She was an auditor at the Synod on young people and was recently appointed a Councilor of Vatican City State and Consultant to the General Secretariat of the Synod.

▲ *You are a part of the Salesian community, which has a particular charism for young people. As an auditor, you lived the experience of the Synod on young people from the inside. Sister Alessandra, what was your impression regarding this important moment of ecclesial discernment?*

In the preparatory phase and during the October 2018 assembly, the Synod on Young People heard the dreams, fears, hopes, and difficulties of young people, of *all* young people. The youth themselves attentively followed the proceedings with marked interest. They listened and underlined -- in their own fashion -- what had been most striking for them. But they also offered very timely and sometimes provocative interventions. Lewis, from the USA, for example, asked: 'You talk about young people. But how many do you know in person? Can you say their names?' Or Safa, from Iraq, asked that young Christians not be left alone in their lands. He is a dentist and had made the choice to stay (in Iraq). He feels called to concretely bring God's love there, where so many feel abandoned.

During the assembly, one clearly saw a willingness to "journey", and at the same time a visible presence of the Holy Spirit at work much like a cool breeze amid many moments of discussion. The bishops were there with an attitude of listening. This allowed participants to develop and arrive to shared ideas and perspectives, often different from those with which each had originally started.

What important aspects of the final document need highlighting?

The final document is the most visible result of the Synod. But, as Pope Francis said, it's of little use if it is not put into practice. It is up to everyone to ensure this happens. It was a joy, too, to see the iconic, scriptural passage of the journey to Emmaus chosen as the document's referential framework:

"We took the account of the disciples on the way to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-35) as paradigmatic for our understanding of the Church's mission to youth. This passage expresses well our experience at the Synod and what we would like every one of our Churches to experience regarding the young. Jesus walks with two disciples who have not grasped the meaning of all that happened to him and are leaving

Jerusalem and the community behind. Wanting to accompany them, he joins them on the way. He asks them questions and listens patiently to their version of events, and in this way helps them recognize what they are experiencing. Then, with affection and power, he proclaims the word to them, leading them to interpret the events they have experienced in the light of the Scriptures. He accepts the invitation to stay with them as evening falls; he enters into their night. As they listen to him speak, their hearts burn within them and their minds open; they then recognize him in the breaking of bread. They themselves then choose to resume their journey at once in the opposite direction, to return to the community and to share the experience of their encounter with the Risen Lord" (DF 4).

The document is divided into three parts: the first part outlines the situation of today's young people. The second part seeks to interpret this reality in the light of the Gospel and faith. A third part highlights paths to be undertaken as a youthful and youth-friendly Church. It is a very rich document that offers a synthesis of the whole Synod journey, beginning from the enunciation of its core theme up to its conclusion on October 27, 2018.

Personally, I believe the first chapter of the third part - the missionary synodality of the Church - serves as a foundation for other key themes and concepts. During the Synod, young people helped everyone experience the beauty of sharing and walking together. They brought the whole assembly to live a tangible experience of co-responsibility. They helped everyone step out of their usual ways of thinking. I would even go so far as to say their presence at the Synod emboldened some bishops to speak out and express themselves even more forcefully in statements, questions and requests.

The young people re-awakened everyone to the reality of synodality (of walking together) as a constitutive dimension of the Church. This included topics like co-responsibility, openness to laity and therefore women, and protection from abuse of authority and other forms of abuse which are a consequence of clericalism or the clericalization of lay people. Through reciprocity all find their rightful place because we are all called to serve. Thus, youth are also a part of the process, and not simply recipients.

On this foundation, we can then speak of vocation, accompaniment, discernment, and therefore of a vibrant, joyful faith. The document states: "Vocation is neither a pre-composed script that the human being has simply to recite nor is it an unwritten theatrical improvisation" (DF 78). This is because we are called to be friends and not servants. We must therefore 'cleanse' our religious symbolisms and language when speaking of vocations. Perhaps it's also necessary to return to Scriptures and rediscover a God who walks with us, who trembles with us. Regarding accompaniment, the Document mentions the importance of involving consecrated women and later paragraphs underline the importance of a solid formation for consecrated men and women, given the complexities of today's world.

In considering key elements of the exhortation, 'Christus vivit', what is the emerging vision of the Church?

Pope Francis hopes for a youthful Church for young people. The Risen Jesus, who wants us

to participate in his resurrection, is the key to being young according to the Spirit. Thus, it is in Christ that "an institution as ancient as the Church can experience renewal and a return to youth at different points in her age-old history." (CV 34). A young Church cannot be focused on itself, immobile, held back by those who want to return it to the past. But, to do this, she needs to be humble, and open to accepting criticism from young people. A young Church always has the "doors open" (CV 234) to everyone because "all young people, without exception, are in God's heart and thus in the Church's heart" (CV 235).

The final Document contains many pastoral recommendations. 'Christus Vivit' instead has less to say in this regard and is aimed primarily at young people. Thus, they are two complementary texts. However, one cannot say that 'Christus Vivit' is completely lacking in this pastoral vision . . .

The model of youth ministry can only be a vocational one (cf. CV 254). Pope Francis makes this clear when he reminds us of the iconic passage of the disciples of Emmaus chosen for the Synod. We read in 'Christus Vivit' that Youth ministry is synodal, that it "should involve a 'journeying together'" (CV 206), where no one is excluded. Synodality set the tone and accompanied the Synod journey as a renewed understanding of the Church itself.

For all participants, it was precisely the youth who re-awakened synodality as a constitutive dimension of the Church. This missionary synodality enhances the charisms given by the Spirit, and calls out for co-responsibility: "We recognize in this experience a fruit of the Spirit which continually renews the Church and calls her to practice synodality as a way of being and acting, promoting the participation of all the baptized and of people of good will, each according to his age, state of life and vocation" (DF 119) . Youth ministry can assume this form only if it is an expression of a synodal Church.

The Synod's main themes were vocation and discernment. 'Christus Vivit' speaks in broad terms without limiting itself to the call to ordained ministry or consecrated life. . .

There were lively and wide-ranging discussions around the themes of vocation and accompaniment! There were those who described vocation as God's personal plan thought out for each one from all eternity, and others who said it is something to which everyone is called to follow. There were those who claimed there is only one universal call to holiness. The assembly rejected the idea of vocation as a pre-written script or pre-packaged task. But they also rejected the notion of it as a kind of theatrical improvisation having no real long-term impact, because "God calls us to be friends and not servants (cf. Jn 15:13), our choices make a real contribution to the historical unfolding of his loving plan" (DF 78).

In the exhortation, Pope Francis dedicates an entire chapter to the theme of vocation. Before that, he also dwells in several places on the unique and unrepeatable contribution each can offer through his or her earthly life: "Your life ought to be a prophetic stimulus to others and leave a mark on this world, the unique mark that only you can leave. Whereas if you simply copy someone else, you will deprive this earth, and heaven too, of something that no one else can offer." (CV 162). Life is seen as a fundamental and unrepeatable participation in God's creative work. Our relationship with God -- who weaves his love story with our own (cf. CV 252) -- serves to reveal each one's uniqueness.

We also find beautiful passages on the meaning of work (CV 268-273) as a continuation of God's own creative works and a participation in the immense project of transforming the

world.

As the Synod assembly concluded, the pope remarked that, in a certain sense, everything begins now. Thus, the post-synodal phase is a decisive moment in this process. What are its key elements?

The final document and the apostolic exhortation could remain just words, if they are not lived out in decision making and in our ways of drawing nearer to young people. The more time spent meeting teens and young adults, the more one realizes that they constantly challenge adults who are their points of reference in order to interact with them in a frank and open manner. In a society where hierarchies have weakened and roles become increasingly interchangeable, the values behind our words and actions are what count.

By way of an example, two teens showed great interest during a session on finance. They worked with Radio Immaginaria, a network for those within their own age group. In speaking after the session, they asked really important questions: "What can we say to our parents to convince them to be more aware of how they spend money? How do we make them understand they can't complain about a broken world, if they are contributing to these same problems through their own spending choices? They say that we young people are not interested in these major world issues like economics and finance. But it depends a lot on what is transmitted to us." So, their questions were directed to adults, and regarded adults. Thus, intergenerational meetings remain essential, provided it becomes a real exchange.

The first generation of the new millennium does not want to go ahead on their own or get rid of adults. It's just the opposite. But the truth is that we frequently fail to interact because our mutual expectations do not coincide. We want them to be ready to listen to what we have to say. They, instead, expect to dialogue with persons who understand them, trust them, and encourage them to fulfill their potential. They expect support from us in overcoming difficulties and hardships. "We are called to invest in their audacity and educate them to take on their responsibilities" (DF 70). The Synod called us to this.

We are living in a fascinating time and we need to recognize that young people are getting used to the possibility of a more genuine Christianity with less superstructures. There are many ways to successfully relate with young people: by showing up, by answering questions with sincerity and warmth, by sharing about ourselves, by speaking of our past mistakes instead of trying to hide the fact that we are normal like everyone else. They want to be with persons who know how to have fun, like being with others, and enjoy the good things that life offers. All this contributes to erasing the idea of a sad Christian preoccupied with morals, obligations, judgements and prejudices. In fact, this is a very common perception despite it being a distortion of the very Christian event by which God who made himself flesh does not ask for sacrifices but sacrifices himself for us.

Here's another example. A group of university students in the United States were involved in a fast paced, intense three-week project at a study center. Mass was celebrated in one of the shared residences and it really seemed like the early days of Christianity in which Eucharistic celebrations took place in the homes of the people. The young people spoke about the mass, and soon word spread around the university. Quite unexpectedly, others asked to attend the mass, youth who do not normally attend mass. This showed that youth want to be involved if they encounter this atmosphere of a home. In its simplicity it can

satisfy both their desire for interiority and their longing for new relationships.

This is the missionary Church. This missionary Church was needed at the beginning and it is needed just as much today: a community that can spring up through word of mouth through the invitation from others. Come and see (Jn 1:39): Pope Francis underlined that “frequently young people fail to find in our usual programmes a response to their concerns, their needs, their problems and issues. [...] Rather, it is a question of helping young people to use their insight, ingenuity and knowledge to address the issues and concerns of other young people in their own language” (CV 202-203).