

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,  
 APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA  
 “LIVING THE GRACE OF THE SYNOD:  
 ACCOMPANIMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH MINISTER”  
 NATIONAL FEDERATION FOR CATHOLIC YOUTH MINISTRY  
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 HOTEL ELEGANTÉ, COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO  
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*Introduction*

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, I greet you in the name of Pope Francis and express to you the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of the Holy Father. He obviously loves young people, having presided over the recent Synod and the celebration of World Youth Day. His concern is not only for our youth but also for you, who accompany young people on their journey of faith as they discern the Lord’s call and discover their vocation in the Church. Grateful for your generosity and apostolic availability to our young people, I assure you of the Holy Father’s prayerful support as you gather during these days. I especially want to thank Christina Lamas, Executive Director of the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry, for her work and for her invitation to address the subject of the Synod on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment.

It has been nearly three years since I was appointed as nuncio to the United States. One of my first engagements was in Rockville Centre, where I delivered an address entitled, “Evangelization in a Time of Change.” There, I sought to address the mission of evangelization during a change of epoch; that is, Pope Francis says that we are not so much living in an epoch of change as in a change of epoch. Society is changing rapidly through advancements in science and technology and through great movement of peoples around the globe. The culture is becoming more and more secularized, and families and parishes are struggling to hand on the faith to young people. Young people have hopes and dreams for their future, and yet, many do not have a sense of belonging to the Church. The practice of the faith seems to be waning and even when it is practiced, it is often practiced in a purely formal way. The increasing presence of the “nones”, those who practice no religion whatsoever, adds to the worrying situation.

Even before he became Pope, then-Cardinal Bergoglio noted:

“I would say that the gravely serious thing that all this is expressing is a lack of a personal encounter with God, of an authentic religious experience. This is what I believe creates in the end the “religion *a la carte*.” I believe that one has to recover the religious act as a movement towards an encounter with Jesus Christ.” (S. RUBIN-F. AMBROGETTI, *EL JESUITA*, BS. AS., 2010, 80-81)

Today in addressing the problem of young people and faith, superficial solutions are proposed which initially seem attractive to meet the demands of a consumer culture. This is part of our advertising world – to try new “marketing strategies” to see if something works to attract the young. However, many parish activities – presentations, programs, meetings, social gatherings – are cosmetic and do not produce lasting change. If something doesn’t work, people simply move on. Western civilization seems to be taken with the present-moment, while losing its

sense of permanence. It is symptomatic of what Pope Francis has called the ‘throwaway culture’ – disposing of anything or anybody that doesn’t work out.

Today, young people are asking profound questions about meaning in their lives. Some eventually conclude that the superficial ideas do not satisfy the longings of the human heart. Perhaps, this restless generation might learn from St. Augustine, whose restless heart finally discovered that “*Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in You.*”

What is that our young people are looking for? I believe it is an authentic encounter with the Lord. At the beginning of his first encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. (BENEDICT XVI, ENCYCLICAL LETTER *DEUS CARITAS EST*, 25 DECEMBER 2005, 1).

*The Synod on Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment*

In November 2016, November 2017, and June 2018, I raised the subject of the Youth Synod with the Bishops of the United States. The synod represented and continues to represent a tremendous opportunity for the Church to facilitate this encounter with the Lord. The Holy Father has said that he wants a synodal Church – a Church that walks together. Certainly, the recent Synod on Young People allowed for the bishops, clergy and religious, and young people to walk together and to listen to one another. Gathering for a synod helps us better understand how we might live and work together as a Church – by listening to each other respectfully; by taking each other seriously; by rediscovering the fascination of being called by the Lord to follow Him; and by being transformed by our Faith, which can be shared with others.

At the conclusion of the Synod, after much listening, prayer, and discernment, a final document was produced. The document looks at the context in which young people live, noting their strengths and challenges. It also repeats several times that young people want to be “heard, recognized, and accompanied.” For this reason, the final document chose the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus as being paradigmatic for the entire synodal process, because that story involves recognizing, interpreting, and choosing – three elements identified by Pope Francis as critical to authentic discernment. The Church must recognize the context in which young people live, interpret these experiences in the light of faith, and accompany the young as they make fundamental life choices which influence the spiritual, pastoral, and missionary dimensions of their vocations in the Church.

The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus captures the drama and humanity of two companions trying to deal with a great disappointment. They had hopes that Jesus would deliver them. He was the One who spoke with authority and performed mighty deeds. He appeared as one who understood them and who offered them hope which corresponded to their hearts’ deepest desires. Then, suddenly and violently, He was put to death. In their humanity, they found themselves completely desolate and crushed. This was their situation, which demanded *recognition*.

It was then that Jesus, recognizing their condition, drew near. He walked with them. Engaging them in dialogue, He began explaining the scriptures to them. He began to *interpret* their experiences and the signs they had seen. Their hearts burned within them at the sound of

His voice and the power of His Word. Finally, they came to *recognize* His Presence in the breaking of the Bread. They had an encounter with an Event, with the Person of the Risen Lord, during their journey.

It was precisely this encounter that gave their lives a decisive direction, transforming their sadness to joy. He attracted them with His words and Presence, filling them with wonder. They made a choice to return to Jerusalem and announced what had happened along the way. They shared the Good News that the Lord had Risen! They *chose* to follow Him and to be missionaries. *Recognize. Interpret. Choose.* These three words, which emerged prominently at the recent Synod, can become paradigmatic for us as we accompany young people, and are reflected in the synod's final document.

### *The Final Document and the Profile of those who Accompany Young People*

It is not my intention to summarize final document; rather, I want to offer you, as Youth Ministers, some insights into how I believe, in light of the Synod, you can assist our young people. The Spirit of God, which renews, or rather, rejuvenates the Church in every age, is at work in the lives of young people, who are looking to contribute something to the Church and the world. Young people are filled with hopes, dreams, and aspirations which frequently are manifested in a "healthy restlessness." Sometimes, like John the Beloved Disciple, they run ahead of their elders, like the older, more mature Simon Peter.

The period of youth is a time of journeying to maturation. The young, while looking for a sense of purpose and mission, can be led, not only to ask, "Who am I?", but also, "For whom am I?" (FINAL DOCUMENT OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOP ON YOUNG PEOPLE, THE FAITH AND VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT, N. 69) At the same time, to answer these questions in a life-giving way, young people need authoritative adults to help them undertake the journey to maturation. Christ is ready to "activate" the freedom of young people through the use of authority, through authoritative witnesses, who help young people understand the gift of freedom as a "freedom for" something rather than a "freedom from something." Young people need authoritative guides to help them properly understand the relationship between faith and freedom. After all, faith is not something added to freedom; rather, it fulfills the desire for truth, beauty, and goodness that young people pursue through their free choices.

The need for authentic witnesses is where you come in. In the second part of the final document of the Synod, the part dealing with interpretation, the third chapter takes up the necessary qualities of those who accompany our youth. Young people want adults to accompany them on their journey of faith and to be present to them (cf. nn. 91-92) as they discern their vocations and assume responsibility in society and in the Church. This accompaniment is both personal and communal. While it is true that parents, priests and religious engage in specific tasks of catechesis and formation, so too do youth ministers play a significant role.

The final document speaks of the qualities of those who accompany the young. What type of person should accompany our youth during this change of epoch? The document suggests that the person should have an apostolic availability, an ability to place oneself at the service of the Spirit and the one being accompanied, and the courage to step aside with humility when necessary. (101)

Furthermore, it offers a "profile" for a person who accompanies young people. Necessary characteristics include having a balanced personality; being a good listener; having a high level

of self-awareness, including of one's weaknesses; accepting young people without moralizing, without being too lenient, and without permitting a "false indulgence"; having the ability to offer "fraternal" correction; possessing a true spirit of service; and, perhaps, most importantly, being a person of faith with deep spiritual roots. (102)

Additionally, such persons, including youth ministers, need to cultivate their own spiritual lives; need to receive support from their parishes and dioceses, including a specific formation to carry out their ministry; and need to be ready to work collaboratively, which necessarily involves listening, giving others space, having the capacity to forgive, and, finally, a willingness to take risks. (103)

### *Accompaniment and the Discovery of One's Humanity*

But if one examines this "profile", one notices that these characteristics remain at a "moral" level. I believe a fundamental problem with respect to the transmission of faith is not the content of the Faith or Christ's Presence in the Sacraments. He is present; He accompanies young people and us. I think the difficulty lies at the level of our own humanity. That is, the Lord wants to have an encounter with us and with young people, but He meets us in our humanity and in our circumstances of life. It is there that He offers His grace, which builds upon our nature and perfects it. The accompaniment of young people ought to include helping them to discover their own humanity, if we are serious about transmitting the faith.

Today, faith is often reduced. Sometimes it is reduced to the religious sense; that is, it is lived as a possible hypothesis by which we face daily situations and problems, as if Christ's breaking into history isn't certain for us. The starting point in the search for solutions to the problem is the unknown, rather than from a Presence of something real.

Just as common is the reduction of faith to ethics, morality or culture. Faith is reduced to defending certain values from a previously Christian culture that has disappeared or is rapidly disappearing. We defend values, but often without reference to Him, His Presence, or His profound love. In this post-Christian culture, it is not only faith that is reduced; even our humanity is reduced to our biological, psychological and sociological antecedents or impulses.

Occasionally, faith is reduced to sentiment. Instead of recognizing the Presence whom we have encountered, faith is conceived as sentiment or feeling, an almost irrational act of the will. It is not something that can be verified. Young people fall into the trap of thinking that reason isn't involved in the journey of faith.

Sometimes people no longer believe or believe without really believing, that is, they practice in a purely formalistic or ritualistic way or in an overly moralistic way. The faith seems more dead than alive, because they aren't living their own humanity or sufficiently committed to their own humanity and to an awareness of their own humanity. It is precisely this that is the condition for being ready when Christ offers Himself to us through an Encounter.

By "commitment to one's own humanity" or "having an affection for oneself", I don't mean in an egotistical or self-referential way. Rather affection for self means being surprised at not being made by yourself and being in awe and wonder of how one is made and pondering by Whom one is made. There is surprise and wonder at not being made by ourselves. Affection for self leads to the seriousness of gazing at one's own needs and lamenting when they are not met. Affection for self requires having a true sense of poverty of spirit, or to quote the Beatitudes,

having a “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Even Zacchaeus, a wealthy man, experienced Jesus’ gaze upon him, which made him recognize his needs and his value. His deeply human needs (and his awareness of them) led him to hurry down from the sycamore tree to welcome Jesus.

Whether it is the need for love, personal fulfillment, friendship and companionship – those needs which young people say they have – unless young people are guided to take these needs seriously, they won’t come to an authentic faith. In contrast, those who have these needs and acknowledge them have an expectant waiting for something – something that is outside of themselves; they are open to the Infinite. Their awareness of and affection for their own humanity is awakened by a gaze of love upon them – a gaze cast not only by the Lord but also by those who accompany them on their journey.

It is the witness of a humanity changed by the Lord that has the capacity to offer a coherent testimony to young people, which helps them understand that they have value. The gaze provokes a wonder in them that leads them to ask questions about what will satisfy their aspirations, the desires of their hearts, including the desire for truth, beauty, and goodness. The personal witness and the gaze of love, especially from those who have had their own humanity changed by an encounter with Christ, will allow young people to also gaze at themselves with tenderness rather than self-hatred and loathing. It is we, who accompany young people, who can cast this gaze and awaken them to the possibilities that faith offers – a faith which comes to them in their own humanity.

There is a temptation to provide young people with all the answers to life’s problems, based on our life or faith experiences or based on the *Catechism*, and yet, the question is an anthropological one. Chesterton wrote: “They say that the wise don’t see the answer to the riddle of reason. The problem is not that the wise don’t see the answer. It’s that the wise don’t see the riddle.” (G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Barnes and Noble, reprint 2004), 24).

*Christ is the Answer. What is the Question?*

Christ is the answer, but if we don’t perceive the question (of our humanity), how can we understand the answer? This is the challenge – modern people have lost a sense of their own humanity and with it a sense of the Infinite, a sense of Mystery. The youth minister, by his or her witness and by his or her efforts to accompany a young person, assists them in discovering their own humanity by provoking questions: What is the meaning of existence? Why is there pain and death? Why is life worth living? What is True? Good? Beautiful? What does reality consist of and for what is it made?

Young people must be guided to engage reality – to engage life and to ask these questions. It is not for us to pre-determine the questions or their answers. They must engage reality. Unless they ask these sorts of questions, they will never encounter the answer: Christ.

The starting point for accompaniment, therefore, is not an argument about what young people should or should not believe but a gaze that communicates to the young person that they are valued and the awareness that the young person must follow a path just as we had to. It is true that not everything young people want corresponds to their needs. In the process of accompaniment, we listen and offer our experience and wisdom, attracting them by our fidelity and the witness of our lives.

Naturally, young people will be critical and ask questions, not only the existential questions but also about particular dimensions of the faith. For our part, we accompany them by adhering more faithfully to the Tradition, against which they can, through experience and their encounter with us, test the coherence of the Catholic Faith and verify its truths through reason, faith, and their personal encounter with Christ. Thus, they will learn to accept responsibility, use their freedom, and become protagonists in their future.

I want to say a brief word about coherence. Young people do not expect the parents, clergy, teachers, or youth ministers to be perfect people. God alone is perfect. Nevertheless, they do expect that there would be a correspondence between the faith we profess with our lips and our lives and actions. That is perhaps why the final document emphasizes the need for ministers to be spiritually-rooted, for if we are not rooted ourselves in the faith and offer poor witness, then the coherence of the Faith as a whole will appear to fall apart in the eyes of young people.

As leaders, we must use our authority wisely to mediate the Presence of the One from whom we have our authority. Young people want adults to accompany them and to be present to them. God and the Church call us to help them discern their true good as we accompany them, listening to and taking them seriously. This process demands time, effort and patience, but the investment is worth it.

In addition to coherent, authoritative witnesses, the proposal of the Catholic Faith needs to be attractive. This is God's method: He chooses a person or persons to attract others. We invite the young to follow, even if they are drawn to God along a path that is different from our own, promising them that they too will experience the positive change in their lives that we have had in knowing Christ intimately. We invite them to actually get on the road and to commit themselves to walking the journey (with us). That is, we offer them signs and reminders of His Presence that provoke the person to continue the journey and to ask still more questions.

In the course of the journey, the young person will have to verify whether the Faith corresponds to his or her heart's desire. They will have to ask questions and to reflect. This involves, on our part, taking a risk – the risk of freedom. The young person must be guided to use his or her freedom along the journey. This takes time and patience. The disciples on the Road to Emmaus only gradually realized who Christ was. We must also acknowledge the risk that they might choose not to follow, just as the rich young man did.

Faith and discipleship are an adventure, which involves risk-taking. Discipleship is a path for them to discover that God's promises are true and that this way of life is fulfilling. The proposal of faith, by facilitating the encounter with Christ, can lead young people to the beautiful, the true, and the good – to the transcendent dimensions of life and eternity. Otherwise, what we offer will leave them – as the proposals of the world marked by selfishness and relativism leave them – disillusioned.

The Youth Synod and this period following it, including the most recent World Youth Day in Panamá, afford an opportunity to examine whether and how we have actually facilitated the essential encounter with Christ. What is the quality and the capacity of our communities, parishes, movements, and schools to attract young people to Christ? As youth ministers, the Youth Synod provides an occasion to be innovative in creating ways for young people to contribute something to the Church instead of having them leave because there is no room for them. If the young want the Church to be present outside of the church buildings, then we must reflect on how to do that. The Synod acknowledged the phenomenon of the digital world. How will we help them to

encounter the Presence of Christ in these “new peripheries”? The response certainly involves the laity, including peers of young people, being a leaven in the world, in schools, and in the workplace, in those places where the young live, making Christ known there.

*Taking the Next Steps: Listening, Being a Neighbor, Bearing Witness*

I want to conclude by placing before you the words of the Holy Father at the Mass concluding the Synod. That Sunday, the Gospel passage was taken from Mark’s account of Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, when he encounters Bartimaeus. As expected, Jesus is the model for us as we carry out our ministry to young people.

The Holy Father pointed out that like many young people, Bartimaeus found himself alone on the roadside, abandoned, unloved, without anyone to listen. The few people that are there tell him not to speak. It’s not dissimilar to how many young people feel in the Church or even in their families.

He cried out for help, and Jesus heard his plea. Pope Francis said:

“Jesus takes his time. He takes time to listen. This is the first step in helping the journey of faith: *listening*. It is the apostolate of the ear: listening before speaking.”  
(POPE FRANCIS, HOMILY FOR THE CLOSING MASS OF THE XV ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS, 28 OCTOBER 2018)

We cannot be like the disciples who sought to shut Bartimaeus up, seeing him more as a problem and a nuisance rather than a person who needed to experience the loving, merciful gaze of Jesus. The disciples of Jesus had their own plan and ideas about who their journey was supposed to go, and it didn’t involve Bartimaeus. Of course, Jesus has a different plan. He came to save all those entrusted to Him by His Father. In His eyes, Bartimaeus, who represents the young, needed to discover his value – that he is precious in God’s sight. In fact, the first step to his recognition of this is that Jesus listens to him.

Pope Francis points out that after listening, the next step on the journey of faith is *to be a neighbor*. Jesus does not delegate His responsibility to others. He gets personally involved and engaged, asking, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” The Holy Father points out that faith engages reality; it flowers and grows in life:

“Faith passes through life. When faith is concerned with purely doctrinal formulae, it risks speaking only to the head without touching the heart. And when it is concerned with activity alone, it risks turning into mere moralizing and social work. Faith, instead, is *life*: it is living in the love of God who has changed our lives. We cannot choose between *doctrine and activism*. We are called to carry out God’s work in God’s own way: in *closeness* ... Closeness: that is the secret to communicating the heart of faith, and not a secondary aspect.” (IBID.)

It is for this reason that I mentioned the importance of the encounter. In the reality of life, we help young people experience the closeness of God who brings a newness to their lives and opens new horizons and possibilities before them.

The third step in accompanying young people on the journey of faith is *to bear witness*. While the initial impulse was to make Bartimaeus be quiet, eventually, at Jesus’ command, the

disciples encourage him. The Holy Father pointed out that the disciples say only three words to him, and all three are the words of Jesus: “*Take heart; get up. He is calling you.*”

Pope Francis continued:

“Jesus alone *calls*, transforming the lives of those who follow him, helping raise up the fallen, bringing God’s light to the darkness of life. So many children, so many young people, like Bartimaeus, are looking for light in their lives. They are looking for true love ... It is not Christian to expect that our brothers and sisters who are seekers should have to knock on our doors; we ought to go out to them, bringing not ourselves but Jesus.” (IBID.)

The mission of evangelization continues in the Church today, and the recent Synod can help renew our efforts at evangelizing our young people during a change of epoch in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to transmit the faith. In a synodal church, a Church that walks together, you have been charged with the accompanying our young people and assisting them *to recognize* their situation and experiences, *to interpret* them in the light of faith, and *to choose* to engage in a relationship not only with reality but with the Lord Jesus.

It is the life-changing encounter, in which the person meets Jesus and feels valued, often through your presence, that can give a young person a new and certain direction in his or her life. As men and women, deeply-rooted in the Lord and commissioned by the Church to guide them, you are uniquely positioned to help our young people discover their own humanity, leading them to identify their true needs and to ask the right questions, which in turn facilitates the encounter with Christ, the answer to the desire of the human heart. The Synod has concluded, but the Holy Father has charged you and the whole Church to continue to walk with young people by listening, by being a neighbor, and by bearing witness to Christ, whose loving gaze never ceases to attract.