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The liturgy can be a moment of accompaniment for young people. The apostolic exhortation calls for liturgical ministers to evaluate whether the liturgies are fresh, authentic, and joyful.

# Lifting Every Voice: *Christus vivit* and the Liturgy

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Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Christus vivit* has become synonymous with ministry to young people in the Church. The Holy Father's message, addressed "to young people and to the entire people of God," is written with the love of a spiritual father to young people—as though Pope Francis is sitting around a kitchen table drinking coffee and speaking with the young people he loves about those issues that affect their current stage of life.

That this apostolic exhortation is written "to the entire people of God" invites all of us, no matter the age or stage, into a deeper conversation about the joyful reality that Christ lives. The document is not limited solely to those whose ministry is to "youth and young adults," but it speaks to all of us: Are we truly aware that Christ lives? How do our lives respond to that truth? How do we walk with young people in that reality?

For those of us in liturgical ministries, we might find ourselves drawing the circle much wider than simply serving young people: we facilitate the experience for each person who comes to be nourished in prayer and worship, regardless of how we might define their constituency. However, we should not allow the broadness of what we do to inhibit our ability to see that the liturgy can be a moment of accompaniment for young people. Let us be unafraid to ask: How can *Christus vivit* be used as a

road map to draw young people more deeply into the liturgical life of the Church?

## THE WORSHIP EXPERIENCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

While *Christus vivit* was not written to respond specifically to matters of liturgy and worship, the grace of the document is that a reader can easily take the broad notes on the experience of young people and apply them to their specific contexts, ministries, and constituencies. First and foremost, *Christus vivit* provides an orientation on the message of God's love, the gift of salvation, and the person of the living Christ—all of which informs our worship experience. (All that we do must begin there, by virtue of the integral nature of those truths.)

Second, the Holy Father uses this exhortation to expand upon the experiences that all of us have had at some point in our lives: the stage of growth that is youth/young adulthood.<sup>1</sup> Some markers of this stage include: seeking meaning in life; trying to figure out (discern) purpose (vocation); navigating a period of dreams and decision-making; the struggles of work, family, and identity that inform these; and many more topics. The broader impression that we can draw is that the document details what youth/young adulthood entails and calls all of us to accompany young people through the ups and downs therein. Because the youth and young adulthood stage is one of intense and extraor-

dinary growth—spiritually, professionally, physically, and mentally—the need is greater than ever for a worship experience that invites young people into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ as well as the support of a community, both of which are integral for the navigation of those waters. As liturgical ministers, we can look at the experiences of this chapter of life and not only identify what we experienced, but how quality worship can benefit these experiences.

The document does not leave us off the hook, so to speak, when it comes to the worship experience of young people. Pope Francis brings it down to brass tacks with the subhead “Areas needing to be developed” (because there is always room for improvement). While this section addresses a wider range of areas in the life of young people, some areas described apply in a special way to the experience of liturgy. Pope Francis is clear on the need for “a fresh, authentic, and joyful” liturgical experience:

Many young people have come to appreciate silence and closeness to God. Groups that gather to adore the Blessed Sacrament or to pray with the word of God have also increased. We should never underestimate the ability of young people to be open to contemplative prayer. We need only find the right ways and means to help them embark on this precious experience. When it comes to worship and prayer, “in many settings, young Catholics are asking for prayer opportunities and sacramental celebrations capable of speaking to their daily lives through a fresh, authentic and joyful liturgy.” It is important to make the most of the great moments of the liturgical year, particularly Holy Week, Pentecost and Christmas. But other festive occasions can provide a welcome break in their routine and help them experience the joy of faith. (224)

This paragraph affects liturgical ministers; finding the “ways and means” to help young people on the experience of prayer and worship is no small task. This also challenges us to hold a mirror to what we do and ask if it is fresh, authentic, and joyful as the paragraph calls for—and if not, we have a responsibility not only to young people, but to all of the People of God, to ensure that worship does, in fact, meet those requirements.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

Advocating on behalf of young people globally, the Holy Father has identified the need for reverential, engaging liturgy that will lift the minds and hearts of those in attendance. Within *Christus vivit*, some suggestions are made, especially under the subhead “Areas needing to be developed,” beginning at paragraph 224; while the suggestions made therein might not be new or surprising, they are worth considering anew in light of this document.

### Beautiful Music

Pope Francis encourages realizing the importance of the arts as an avenue of personal and spiritual connection for young people. Citing the final document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, he reminds us that “music is particularly important, representing as it does a real environment in which the young are constantly immersed,



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The homilist should be encouraged to reflect on whether the preaching considers the worries and needs, and the hopes and dreams of young people.

as well as a culture and a language capable of arousing emotion and shaping identity. The language of music also represents a pastoral resource with a particular bearing on the liturgy and its renewal” (226).

While the musical tastes of the congregation can vary, the importance of engaging beauty and the ability to participate are two striking components of utilizing music for the purpose of drawing young people into liturgical participation. Many saints, bishops, and pastoral ministers have written and spoken on beauty, truth, and goodness being those critical means of engaging young people; music is one distinct opportunity for beauty to shine in the liturgy.

### Quality Preaching

Any conversation about the liturgical needs of young people would be remiss without addressing the need for an experience of relevant, pastoral homilies that speak to the lived experiences of young people. In *Christus vivit*, Pope Francis is unafraid to address this topic. He cites the final document of the synod itself in saying that:

A substantial number of young people, for all sorts of reasons, do not ask the Church for anything because they do not see her as significant for their lives. Some even ask expressly to be left alone, as they find the presence of the Church a nuisance, even an irritant. This request does not always stem from uncritical or impulsive contempt. It can also have serious and understandable reasons: sexual and financial scandals; a clergy ill-prepared to engage effectively with the sensitivities of the young; lack of care in homily preparation and the presentation of the word of God; 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)



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Our models of hospitality should help people of every age feel at home and welcome to participate.

In the litany of reasons for the disaffiliation of young people, “lack of care in homily preparation and the presentation of the word of God” stands out strongly as something that seems, to me, most easy for us as a Church to address. Homiletics and Scripture study are focused on during the seminary (as well as that of many advanced degrees in pastoral care and ministry) and are a crucial part of the Roman Catholic worship experience.

Highlighting this issue may well elicit a sigh from readers who, since they are not ordained, feel no responsibility for the homily. Although in the formal sense, preaching may not be an aspect of the lay liturgical minister’s vocation, their pastoral sensitivity can be an impetus to improvements in the homily. If possible, the preaching priest or deacon should be encouraged with all courtesy and charity to consider the worries and needs, the hopes and dreams of young people and how the Scriptures proclaimed can illuminate a path of discipleship for them. If a homilist is not inclined to this conversation, then even more critical is the need for other aspects of a vibrant worship experience.

*Christus vivit* is rife with descriptions of the experiences of young people, so as to inform the homiletical experience with that generation in mind. One section provides perspective on how young people view the Church, and how that informs their relationship with the institution (and thus their faith):

Although many young people are happy to see a Church that is humble yet confident in her gifts and capable of offering fair and fraternal criticism, others 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. A Church always on the defensive, which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no

room for questions, loses her youth and turns into a museum. How, then, will she be able to respond to the dreams of young people? Even if she possesses the truth of the Gospel, this does not mean that she has completely understood it; rather, she is called to keep growing in her grasp of that inexhaustible treasure. (41)

### Increased Hospitality

The value of hospitality cannot be underestimated. However, given what Scripture says about the grace of hospitality (from Abraham’s heavenly visitors to the imagery used in Christ’s parables and ministry), it is truly impossible to overdo—and the reality we must face is that many of our parishes have become complacent in this department.

Instead, we might each consider one way our communities can increase hospitality so that a young person who joins us for worship feels less like “the odd man/woman out” and more like a family member who has returned home. The beauty of the universal Church is that no matter where the Mass takes place in the world, anyone should be able to walk in and participate in the consistency of our liturgy; the same expectation should be set in our parishes. Regardless of one’s age or stage of life, our models of hospitality should help people feel at home and welcome to participate.

A friend who is a parochial vicar at a large suburban parish focused his homily on the Second Sunday of Advent on how the congregation could be hospitable to those who join them for worship on Christmas who might not regularly attend Mass. By suggesting six practical methods of hospitality (ranging from giving up your usual seat/pew to parking further away in the lot, allowing for later arrivals to park closer), he equipped his community with a few simple acts to welcome visitors at Christmas. Such acts do not need to wait until Christmas. Generous efforts that help people feel at home should be applied by our communities all year.

I will not add to the list of examples of hospitality around liturgical celebrations, for they are myriad and community-based. Some communities ask for visitors to stand, or ask the congregation to greet each other before Mass begins; for other communities, those methods might be uncomfortable, but the parish demonstrates hospitality in other ways. Finding the community’s particular charisms for demonstrating hospitality might require a step out of our comfort zones, but every Christian community comes innately with these gifts by virtue of the members’ Baptism. Reaching out to others in new ways can be done and can be fulfilling to the community as a whole and to individual ministers.

### Visible Presence of Young People in Liturgical Celebrations

In the earlier-quoted section of *Christus vivit* in which Pope Francis shares a host of reasons why young people feel that the Church is irrelevant to their lives, he cites “the passive role assigned to the young within the Christian community”<sup>2</sup> as a major impetus. This is a challenge that many Christian communities face. It is easy to fall into the rhythm of expecting people to pay their dues, to be involved only once they have reached

a certain age or status, or perhaps a stage of life in which greater commitment to the parish is easier (for example, retirement). Doing so not only casts out young people from the life of the parish, but more importantly is a disservice to the community by not maximizing the gifts of the young people coming to worship.

At your parish’s next liturgical celebration, observe those who have a role in the liturgy with a critical eye. Who serves as a greeter—what face does a visitor see upon entering our church? Who are the readers, altar servers, gift bearers, and extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist? Who are the ushers and facilitators of the collection moving among the congregation? Who cantors in the choir? Who reads the announcements or a prefacing word of welcome? We can ask: “Do the people of my parish see themselves reflected in the liturgical celebration?” People find it difficult to be what they do not see. Are there people represented of all ages and stages, of different socioeconomic status or ethnic backgrounds, or is it the same few volunteers? Critical for this conversation is the question of whether young people are involved.

A follow-up question would be “What roadblocks have we unintentionally put in place to inhibit ‘fully conscious, and active participation’<sup>3</sup> of all the faithful in the liturgical life of this community?” One example is the offering of training for readers, ministers of the Eucharist, etc. during the standard working hours of 9 AM to 5 PM, Monday through Friday. Such a schedule limits the members of the community who can participate and doubly so if the members are young professionals at the beginning of their careers, or perhaps young families.

Once young people are involved in the liturgical life of the parish, the parish can begin to link liturgical ministers who are new to ministry with people who are more seasoned. The concept of mentorship has become prevalent in pastoral ministry to young people. It is helpful to recall times when a more experienced minister believed in us, took time for us, and shared wisdom. Each generation needs to pass down its experience and wisdom. A young person who is consistently involved in worship might benefit from mentorship to learn more about liturgical ministry and receive some further training in order to lead a ministry or serve as sacristan, just to name some ideas. Only through engaging young people in this way can a new generation of liturgical ministers be formed to offer their gifts in service to the worship life of their communities.

### “AND TO CONCLUDE . . . A WISH”<sup>4</sup>

Pope Francis concludes *Christus vivit* with an exquisite word of encouragement to young people, inviting them to “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.’”<sup>5</sup> All of us, at every age and stage, can take these words to heart for ourselves: let us be unafraid to accompany young people into the



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Parishes should examine whether members of every age group see people like themselves fulfilling liturgical roles.

beauty, truth, and goodness of our Roman Catholic faith and liturgy. By offering the best that our tradition of worship has to offer, we can engage the hearts of young people in divine relationship, as well as the gifts of young people in service to our faith communities. We can be the accompaniers, the mentors, the ones who facilitate the spiritual experiences that will fuel young people. Let us offer our momentum, intuitions, and faith in prayer, that, through the experiences of worship that we facilitate, young people might find the faith and support they need to run the race. ♦

#### Notes

1. *Christus vivit*, 158–167.
2. *Christus vivit*, 40.
3. *Sacrosanctum concilium*, 14.
4. *Christus vivit*, 299 (header).
5. *Christus vivit*, 299.

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