

Young People Seek Room to Grow, Engage with Faith

Kathy Kuczka

Pope Francis believes today's young people have a lot to teach us. Calling them "the now of God," the pope understands the impact young people can have on the future of the Catholic Church.

He is so concerned about their involvement in the Church that the 2018 Synod of Bishops on "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment" was preceded by a process that sought to provide a response to young people, their connection to their faith, and their vocational calling.

While the terms *youth* and *young adults* are used interchangeably, the age range the synod designated included those born between 1980–1995, as well as adolescents 16 and older.

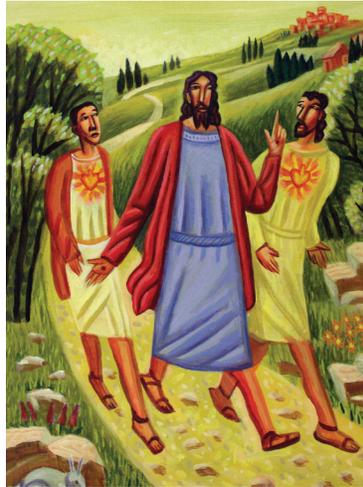
Pope Francis followed the synod with the apostolic exhortation *Christus vivit*, Latin for *Christ is Alive*.

In his exhortation, the pope said that engaging young people means meeting them with open arms wherever they are.

Room should be made for "all those who have other visions of life, who belong to other religions or who distance themselves from religion altogether. All the young, without exception, are in God's heart and thus in the Church's heart." (235)

Synod members recognized that the Church doesn't always listen to young people and instead offers them ready-made answers without allowing their questions to be heard, something the pope cautioned against. "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" (41).

Cindy Caughman, high school youth minister at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in Alpharetta, Georgia, said that young people, especially teens, want to make a difference. "They hate hearing 'We've always done it this way.' They want their voices to be heard, and that's why we have to keep trying new things."



Just as Jesus accepted the disciples where they were, Pope Francis is calling on the Church to accompany and listen to young people.

Pope Francis is calling the Church to be creative. "Rather than being too concerned with communicating a great deal of doctrine, let us first try to awaken and consolidate the great experiences that sustain the Christian life" (212).

The pope states that creating new opportunities for young people to experience the person of Jesus will go further than only teaching about Jesus in a classroom. He notes, "Young people frequently fail to find in our usual programs a response to their concerns, their needs, their problems and issues" (202).

Paul Jarzembowski, who serves at the Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), said it's important to know the distinctions between millennials and teens.

"Across the generational and age spectrum, teenagers today are generally more pragmatic, while young adults are often seen as more idealistic—which means they require different approaches. Teenagers like to work more individually while young adults are more team-focused, which means they prefer different pastoral settings to process faith and life."

This is one reason the pope encourages the entire community to be involved in evangelizing youth. The pope asserts, "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" (246).

Jarzembowski said the pope's exhortation underscores the importance of mentors who can accompany the youth. "The best way to know what youth and young adults are looking for is to engage with each person individually. To walk with them one by one is how we will learn what they seek."

For more information on ways to implement *Christus vivit* in your parish community, visit the Youth and Young Adult Ministries division within the USCCB Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth at <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/who-we-teach/youth-and-young-adult-ministry.cfm>.

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