

USCCB General Assembly November 14, 2016, Baltimore, MD - Address of His Excellency Most Reverend Archbishop Christophe Pierre

For a Church Evangelizing Youth in a Changing Society

Your Eminences, Your Excellency, Archbishop Kurtz, my Brother Archbishops and Bishops, Monsignor Bransfield and staff of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:

Allow me to begin by expressing to you a word of sincere gratitude for the warm welcome I have been receiving during my short time here in the United States. I am thankful to all those bishops whose dioceses I have been pleased to visit for various occasions since our June meeting. The kind invitation and gracious hospitality that I have enjoyed in your local churches for so many particular gatherings has shown forth a great spirit among the many faithful. As the Holy Father's personal representative in this country, I assure you of his continual communion with all of you through his prayers and support for all of your efforts as you carry out the invaluable mission entrusted to you. The visit of His Holiness to this country a little over a year ago has left a great impression upon the Church in America, and the experience of this Jubilee Year of Mercy has provided numerous opportunities for a renewal and rejuvenation of faith.

From the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Francis noted that:

"...mercy changes the world. A little mercy makes the world less cold and more just. We need to understand properly this mercy of God, this merciful father who is so patient.... This mercy is beautiful." (Angelus Address, 17 March 2013)

Mercy is the "key" to understanding the Holy Father and his path for the Church. Mercy is not an abstract idea but an experience of being looked upon and forgiven -of knowing the "caress" of God. Everyone here has experienced this special closeness of God in some way, at some particular time. It is this that the Holy Father wishes us to share, by word and deed, with the Church and the whole world.

May I add that throughout the Year of Mercy, following the very long process which has led to the recent national election, I honestly think that mercy is what this country needs to heal the wounds of division after a polarizing campaign. Many Americans have personally reached out to me to voice their frustration with what has been happening. As Catholics and shepherds, we need to give witness to hope, to carry on through the coming days, so that we can truly be "one nation, under God."

At the conclusion of the Year of Mercy, we listen again to the reason for this Jubilee Year:

"How much I desire that the year to come will be steeped in mercy, so that we can go out to every man and woman, bringing the goodness and tenderness of God! May the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst!" (Misericordiae vultus, 5)

I wish to highlight the words "go out" and "tenderness of God." Pope Francis knows that we must preach the Gospel joyfully to everyone, even to those at the peripheries. In doing so, people will experience the tenderness and closeness of God through the Church. The Church goes out. She does not wait for the wounded to knock on her door; rather, she looks for, gathers, cares for, and makes them feel loved, showing forth "the tenderness of God."

The Holy Father desires that each person experience mercy. With a pastor's heart, he realized that families, struggling to live and hand on the faith, first need to experience this mercy daily. The family is the first place where we should receive mercy and learn to show mercy; where we say, "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you."

That is why recently two Synods were called to assure families that God is close to them in moments of joy and sorrow and that the Church is near, accompanying them on this pilgrimage of faith, where each domestic church can show solidarity with and charity toward other families, especially struggling ones. *Amoris Laetitia* is an exhortation to the Church to show forth the

Merciful Face of the Father to men and women, husbands and wives, to the elderly and to our children.

The Holy Father now directs our attention to young people. The theme for the next Synod was just announced: Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment. They too must know God's mercy. Two key words emanating from the exhortation are 'accompaniment' and 'discernment'. Young people need to be accompanied in discerning their path in life, but this accompaniment presupposes welcoming them to better integrate them into the life of the Church. It is this that I wish to explore more deeply with you.

At the outset, we must ask ourselves: What is it that young people have to offer to the Church? Young people are young people. They bring with them energy, creativity, sensitivity, and generosity of spirit. Many are eager to serve. Still others are willing to take risks for a better future. There is a temptation to think that we only need to teach them.

The upcoming Synod and the preparation for it provide a window for us to learn from young people, to listen to them, to be with them, and to help them discover God's plan for them. Our presence will remind them that they matter; that they are part of the family; that they belong. Rejecting the throwaway culture, we will give them reason to hope by assuring them that we are on the journey with them.

The accompaniment begins with us. Pope Francis reminds us that "the Church does not exist to condemn people but to bring about an encounter with the visceral love of God's mercy." (The Name of God is Mercy, an interview with Andrea Torielli, p. s2) The Holy Father uses the image of the Church as a field hospital to describe the Church. She is a mobile unit, offering first aid and urgent care to those in need, going out to the young to bring about this encounter with God's mercy.

Many adults lament that young people are not in the pews. If they are not in our churches, why are they not there? The then-Cardinal Bergoglio diagnosed the problem stating:

"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. ... 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.)

But we, the Church, have to seek them out to provide the occasion, the environment, and the moment that allows for this encounter. Do young people have a sense of being sought out, welcomed and appreciated enough that they can have this encounter with Jesus Christ through the Church? We know that youth are critical to the life of the Church, and that it is becoming increasingly difficult to transmit the faith to young people in a changing environment and in a Church in which very often they do not have a profound sense of belonging, even if they have the desire to belong. Our youth find themselves at the "peripheries" of both the Church and society. We must go out to them.

But who are these young people? Only those who are part of our organizations, parish youth groups, and Catholic schools? Or all youth? It's a good question! It's also very hard to answer as young people are diverse and constantly changing. Not only are they changing, but so is our culture. We are living in a period of profound transition, of a silent cultural revolution, which affects us all. It is an invisible process or movement, happening almost by inertia. It is not so much a movement in space as of the mind, an existential exodus, a cultural change, and cognitive migration. In a changing environment, it is we who must be "On the move", open to real conversion, a true metanoia of mind and heart, so that we may be authentic witnesses to Jesus, becoming real instruments of encounter for our youth.

A new language, new methods, and a new missionary ardor is necessary so that each young person may experience tangibly the mercy of God. Our methods of evangelization require a profound reconsideration to see whether they are effectively communicating the authentic Christian experience - with closeness, simplicity, warmth and transparency.

What are some characteristics of young people at this moment in history in which we wish to share the joy of the Gospel? I realize, of course, that it is not my intention at this point to make a sociological or psychological study of youth, but just to offer to you for your consideration some subjective impressions of them. Perhaps there are young people might disagree somewhat with these ideas and think otherwise.

To begin, young people generally tend to place everything in the present moment. Many young people are affected by a sense of being in constant flux and are unable to make a permanent choice. In a period of change, for some, there is only one certainty- the present moment.

Furthermore, young people want to affirm their own person, while resisting uniformity of education and social pressures. They want to have confidence in themselves, to rid themselves of self-doubts and fears of emotional commitment; nevertheless, they also feel a need to be supported, to accept life, and to pursue their future.

Young people want to separate themselves from the control of parents as they look to the future. At the same time, they want community or to be part of a group, shown through their obsession with "brand name" products, or even tattoos and piercings. These things give them a mark of identity. This is their way of expressing their desire to belong, because they want to belong.

Another characteristic of young people today is prolonged adolescence. Certainly, young people have a steady intake of modern media which unfortunately is causing them to lose contact with reality and which fosters dependency upon virtual realities. This phenomenon is growing through the universe of video games and the internet, which predispose young people to live in the "imaginary" world without contact with reality.

As a result, young people have modified their language and ways of communicating. They write only: with difficulty. They have changed their way of showing their feelings and interiority, using instant messaging to express themselves with abbreviated words, signs, and likes. Virtual closeness with people is easier, but it is often superficial and can impede people from looking at each other with their own eyes, making personal encounters more difficult. For a young person who has been conditioned by this culture, it is not easy to suddenly undertake the difficult task of building one's future or considering one's call in life.

To commit oneself to serious vocational discernment, one has to have a proper understanding of the human person. What role can the Church play in guiding young people in this process of discernment? In general, young people are open, available and generous. They want authentic relationships and seek the truth, but very often when asked to look into their interior lives, they focus only on feelings and emotions. While many are disposed to commit themselves to great causes and to show generosity and solidarity, these same young people often lack a true spiritual foundation. Our parents truly want their children to be happy, but occasionally without teaching them the richness of the Catholic Faith. Many young people are not allergic to the truths of the faith or to the Church, but they simply don't know anything or know very little about the faith.

Still, when we think of massive spiritual events on a grand scale, like World Youth Day, the majority of young people who participate - even if their practice of the faith varies - generally show a joy for living. Their concerns center on peace, gentleness, cooperation, and openness. Their attitudes invite us to have faith and confidence not only in them but also in their peers. It will be they who carry out a true, silent spiritual revolution.

We have been describing young people and their relationship to the Church. If we are to help young people discern God's plan for their lives, we might ask: what are they looking for?

They are looking to be heard. Earlier I mentioned the idea of accompaniment, which implies going to them and being with them. To this, we add listening to them. Listening is an important element of discernment. Pope Francis said:

"I think that in the pastoral ministry of the Church many beautiful things are being done, many beautiful things... But there is one thing that we must do more, even the priests, even the lay people, but above all the priests must do more: the apostolate of listening: to listen!" (Incontro del Santo Padre con i partecipanti a/ convegno per persone disabili, 11 giugno 2016)

That fact that we go to them to listen is an acknowledgment of their existence as true members of the Church. It is an important dimension of affirming their dignity. Young people have a strong need to be heard, to be recognized as persons, and to receive a personal response. In this dialogue, young people learn to journey in faith with others.

Young people seek bonds. They want to be part of a relevant group to overcome loneliness and isolation. In an individualistic society, the young have a desire for community. Some want to belong but ask, "Do I fit in here? What is my place or role in this Church?" That to which we belong defines our cultural expression. If we do not experience this sense of belonging to the Church, our cultural expression will be determined by something else.

Also, young people seek a response to the question of identity. Today they no longer have an awareness of their identity, of belonging to a particular history, tradition, or community. In general, the young aspire to make their entrance on to the stage of life, but they need the help of a cultural, religious, and moral tradition so that they can discover the path that leads to authentic fulfillment in Christ.

What then must the Church do? In effect, the whole Church and each of its members must decide to go to and walk with our young people: to each and everyone, from an awareness of carrying out a prophetic task. The most important thing that a young person needs to feel saved by Christ is to experience His love and mercy directly. This is different from simply saying, "You are saved."

Being Christian is a result of an encounter with the person of Christ who gives direction to life and who gives life a new horizon. This new horizon is what we call hope. This hope evokes a sense of wonder, which implies a constant discovery of themselves in Christ and Christ in them. It is for this reason, Pope Francis encourages us to propose Jesus Christ. He says:

"It is Jesus Christ who continually renews in me this hope, it is He who continually renews my outlook. It is He who awakens in me, in each one of us, the wonder of enjoying, the charm of dreaming, the delight of working together. It is he who continually invites me to conversion of heart. Yes, my friends, I say this because in Jesus I have found the one who is able to bring out the best in me ..." (Address of His Holiness in the Meeting with Young People, Morelia, Mexico, 16 February 2016.)

Living in this hope in Jesus Christ, young people discover their dreams, but we must remind them that God too has a plan and dreams for them. Pope Francis asked, "Have you ever thought: The Lord dreams of me? He thinks of me? I am in his mind, in the heart of the Lord? The Lord is able to change my life?" (Homily at Domus Sanctae Martae, 16 March 2015.)

When a young person experiences the joy of the encounter with Jesus and has the grace to be taken with, or even fascinated by, these questions, in his heart he can no longer close himself to the horizon of a vocation - whether as a priest, religious, married or single person.

No doubt that the upcoming Synod, with the cooperation of bishops from all over the world, will provide further and deeper insights. However, from this very moment we are encouraged, as the Pope constantly reminds us, to be a truly outgoing, missionary Church, shining brightly like a star leading young people on their journey to encounter the True light. The Church must be a strong voice in this world, especially for the young, and echo the words of the Merciful Father to the elder son, "You are with me always and everything I have is yours." (Luke 15:31)