

# Church, world need the gifts, enthusiasm of young people, pope says

VATICAN CITY — The life of a young person and the vocation to which God calls each one is “holy ground” that pastors and parents must respect, nurture and encourage, Pope Francis wrote in a new apostolic exhortation.

“Christus Vivit” (“Christ Lives”), the pope’s reflections on the 2018 Synod of Bishops on young people, the faith and vocational discernment, is a combination letter to young people about their place in the church and a plea to older members of the church not to stifle the enthusiasm of the young, but to offer gentle guidance when needed.

In the document, released April 2, Pope Francis talked about how the sex abuse crisis, a history of sexism and an overly narrow focus on just a handful of moral issues can keep young people away from the church.

But he also said many young people want to know and understand the teachings of the church and, despite what many people think, they long for and need times of silent reflection and opportunities to serve their communities.

“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,” Pope Francis wrote. “How, then, will she be able to respond to the dreams of young people?”

Young people have a natural desire to improve the life of the church and the world around them, the pope said. If older people in the church will let the young people try, it will keep the church youthful, too.

“Let us ask the Lord to free the church from those who would make her grow old, encase her in the past, hold her back or keep her at a standstill,” Pope Francis wrote. “But let us also ask him to free her from another temptation: that of thinking

she is young because she accepts everything the world offers her, thinking that she is renewed because she sets her message aside and acts like everybody else.”

The core of the pope’s message to young people was that they remember they are loved by God and saved by Jesus, who continues to live and act in the world and in their lives.

“His love is so real, so true, so concrete, that it invites us to a relationship of openness and fruitful dialogue,” even when one is angry with God, the pope said. “He does not get upset if you share your questions with him. He is concerned when you don’t talk to him, when you are not open to dialogue with him.”

Drawing on the final documents from the synod and from a presynod gathering of young people in Rome, Pope Francis urged parishes and dioceses to rethink their young and young adult programs and to make changes based on what young people themselves say they want and need.

“Young people need to be approached with the grammar of love, not by being preached at,” he said. “The language that young people understand is spoken by those who radiate life, by those who are there for them and with them. And those who, for all their limitations and weaknesses, try to live their faith with integrity.”

Directly addressing young people, he said, “Take risks, even if it means making mistakes. Don’t go through life anaesthetized or approach the world like tourists. Make a ruckus!”

And, he told them, reach out to other young people, do not be afraid to mention Jesus and to invite friends to church or a church-sponsored activity.

“With the same love that Christ pours out on us,” the pope said, “we can love him in turn and share his love with others in the hope that they too will take their place in the community of friendship he established.”

Youth ministry cannot be elitist or focused only on the teens and young adults already active in the church’s life, he said. It must be “a process that is gradual, respectful, patient, hopeful, tireless and compassionate,” as Jesus was when he walked with the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Parents, pastors and spiritual guides must have “the ability to discern pathways where others only see walls, to recognize potential where others see only peril. That is how God the Father see things; he knows how to cherish and nurture the seeds of goodness sown in the hearts of the young.”

“Each young person’s heart should thus be considered ‘holy ground,’ a bearer of seeds of divine life, before which we must ‘take off our shoes’ in order to draw near and enter more deeply into the mystery.”

A long section of the document is focused on discerning one’s vocation, which, he said, always is a call to serve God and serve others, but always in a unique way.

Discovering one’s vocation, he said, “has to do with finding our true selves in the light of God and letting our lives flourish and bear fruit.”

For most young people, that will mean marrying, forming a family and working, the pope said.

“Within the vocation to marriage we should acknowledge and appreciate that ‘sexuality, sex, is a gift from God. It is not taboo. It is a gift from God, a gift the Lord gives us,’” he wrote. Sexuality “has two purposes: to love and to generate life. It is passion, passionate love. True love is passionate. Love between a man and a woman, when it is passionate, always leads to giving life. Always. To give life with body and soul.”

Pope Francis also encouraged young people not to dismiss out of hand the fact that God may be calling them to priesthood or religious life.

God’s call to each person is individual, made-to-measure just for him or her, the pope said, so discovering that call can be done only with calm, silence, prayer and the wise help of someone who truly knows how to listen and ask the right questions.

A vocation, he said, is a gift that “will help you live to the full and become someone who benefits others, someone who leaves a mark in life; it will surely be a gift that will bring you more joy and excitement than anything else in this world. Not because that gift will be rare or extraordinary, but because it will perfectly fit you. It will be a perfect fit for your entire life.”

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