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ENGLISH

**IN THE HEART OF THE SYNOD
GENERATIVE THEMES,
PROVOCATIVE CHALLENGES,
INVITATIONS TO CONVERSION**



DOSSIERS

HAPPY SYNOD TO ONE AND ALL!

A TIME OF SPIRITUAL, PASTORAL AND MISSIONARY CONVERSION

Rossano Sala

After two years of intense preparation and great expectation, we have finally arrived at the Synod! It is certainly an extraordinary moment for youth ministry, for all those who are involved in various ways in the world of young people and for the Church itself. Also and above all for young people.

Walking with young people

This editorial is first and foremost a serious invitation to prepare for the Synod in the same way that the synod fathers have been doing in recent months: by carefully studying the *Instrumentum Laboris (Working Document)*. This document is, in a sense, the “agenda for the synod's work”, because it summarises what has emerged from the various contributions received by the Synod Secretariat. It is a reflective document, because it orders the various themes in such a way that they take on a unified and logical form; it is also lively, because it often gives the floor to the Episcopal Conferences consulted and especially to young people.

It can be noted that in each of the three parts there is a retelling of the Gospel story of Emmaus from different points of view. From the beginning of the first part, it is said that, “just as our Lord Jesus Christ walked alongside the disciples of Emmaus (cf. *Lk 24:13-35*), the Church is also urged to accompany all young people, without exception, towards the joy of love” (no. 1). Then again, at the beginning of the second part, it is stated that “therefore, Jesus is “a young man among young people”, and He wants to meet them and walk beside them, as He did with the disciples of Emmaus (cf. *Lk 24:13-35*)” (no. 75). Finally, in the third part, when addressing the theme of the Christian community, the various topics are introduced with the following statement: ‘the community of believers is also called to go out and meet young people where they are, rekindling their hearts and walking by their side (cf. *Lk 24:13-35*)’ (n. 175).

I would say with confidence that there is a clear intentionality here, an authoritative tone, a decisive will and a specific style that are attested to: it is not simply a matter of making young people walk, but of walking with them, because Jesus is already mysteriously and effectively walking with every young person!

A Church in vocational discernment

According to the “method of discernment”, the three-part division of the Working Document helps us to enter into the right spiritual climate: the reference verbs proposed for each of the three parts – recognising, interpreting and choosing – are the three verbs of vocational discernment. Accompanying young people in their vocational discernment presupposes that the Church herself is willing to undertake a journey of vocational discernment concerning her own form, identity, position and task in the “epochal change” we are experiencing today. The Church as a whole is therefore called to a genuine review of her life and a change of mentality: it is not for nothing that we speak of spiritual, pastoral and missionary conversion. In this regard, the reflection offered in no. 139 of the Document in question is central:

"In this framework, “choosing” does not mean giving answers to problems once and for all, but rather identifying actual steps to increase the capacity to engage in discernment processes for our mission, as an ecclesial community. Moreover, we cannot expect our offer of accompaniment towards vocational discernment to be credible to the young people we address, unless we show that we are able to practice discernment in the ordinary life of the Church, making it the *modus operandi* of our community before applying it to their situation”.

The right dispositions of the heart

In order to live the Synod well, it is therefore necessary to enter into it with the right attitude. Attitude, as we know, is the intimate way of facing things, the style with which we present ourselves to the world, the relational posture that characterises our way of living with others. From my specific vantage point as ‘Special Secretary,’ I have noticed that there have been essentially two different attitudes towards the journey underway, from which some concrete behaviours have also sprung.

The first I would call “reactive”, and essentially consists of trying to push through one's own positions in every way possible, influencing the journey that is being made with one's own points of view, practices and convictions. This is done in the certainty that what one is doing in one's own reality, in one's own diocese or nation, or in one's

own congregation or movement, is the right thing that everyone should be doing. Essentially, this is asking the Church to change, but with a view to embracing our points of view, both theoretical and practical, without questioning them in the slightest. It is the position of those who ask others to change, while remaining unwilling to do so themselves. It is generally an attitude marked by presumption and arrogance, of those who are convinced that they have the right point of view and must impose it on others in one way or another. Sometimes in an arrogant and disrespectful manner, if necessary. After all, those who cultivate such an attitude have more or less this intimate thought, more or less thematised: "The Church is wrong; I have the right answer; the Church must do as I say".

The second attitude, on the other hand, which I would define as 'proactive', consists first of all in getting involved with humility and openness, knowing that the synodal journey is a path of spiritual, pastoral and missionary conversion, whose primary purpose is to change the hearts, minds and lives of those who are travelling it. In the certainty that it is a matter of verifying with truth, renewing with creativity and relaunching with enthusiasm our way of thinking and acting. It is a simple, gentle and dialogical attitude of those who do not presume to have the solution in their pocket, but are convinced that only together – that is, in the form of synodal symphony – is it possible to achieve something good and valid for everyone. I must attest that most of the people I have met over the last two years are approaching things in this proactive and receptive way: many are truly convinced that no one at this time has the perfect or ready-made solution to the issues concerning youth, and that we must therefore seek together, with patience and prudence, the right paths to take. Here too, we could summarise it as follows: "The Church is on a journey of conversion; I am part of the Church; I am personally called to conversion together with others."

I think it is important to read the Working Document in the second way, allowing the proposed summary to speak to our hearts and minds and dispose them to be receptive to the action of the Spirit, who alone can make all things new. Anything less than this will make it difficult to help the Church to follow paths of convincing and fruitful renewal.

Three suggestions to begin with

The Working Document offers many indications for undertaking paths of spiritual, pastoral and missionary conversion. I will limit myself here to three indications, which I consider particularly significant and decisive.

Human life in the vocational horizon

The first concerns the vocational horizon of human existence and of all the pastoral action of the Church, including that of young people. Some passages are decisive, both in the second and third parts of the document in question: in the second part, numbers 87 to 90 are invaluable because they accurately convey that 'only a vocational anthropology seems adequate to understand humans in all their truth and fullness' (no. 88) and that this perspective should guide the existence of all men and women:

"Talking about life as a vocation allows us to highlight some elements that are very important for the growth of a young person: it means ruling out the possibility that life is determined by fate or randomness, and also that it is a private good that can be managed on our own. [...] The notion of life as a vocation invites human beings to give up the lie of self-creation and the illusion of narcissistic self-realization, to let themselves be involved through history in the plan with which God destines us to one another's good. Hence, we must promote a renewed vocational culture, that is still linked to the joy of the communion of love that generates life and hope (nos. 89.90). In the third part, when discussing the need to consolidate and increase the idea and practice of "integrated pastoral care" (nos. 209-210), it is confirmed that "to many, the linchpin to achieve this integrated unity is the vocational horizon of existence" (no. 210).

The centrality of the Christian community

The second point that I think is worthy of attention is the centrality of the Christian community as the horizon of our pastoral action. In a world that pushes towards isolation, the prophecy of fraternity remains a necessary goal for inserting youth ministry into its natural community setting. The entire third chapter of the third part is devoted to exposing the resources and weaknesses of the community of believers because, as it says at the beginning of the chapter, 'communal experiences are still essential for young people: if, on the one hand, they are "allergic to institutions", it is equally true that they are also looking for meaningful relationships within "true communities" and personal contact with "shining and consistent witnesses"' (n. 175). This also applies to structures, and here it is worth quoting a passage in its entirety: "In order to accompany young people in their vocational discernment, not only are competent persons needed, but also adequate animation structures that are not just effective and

efficient, but are also attractive and radiant due to the relational style and fraternal dynamics they generate. Some BC feel the need for an “institutional conversion”. While respecting and integrating our legitimate differences, we recognize communion as the preferred way for the mission, without which it would be impossible to both educate and evangelize. Therefore, verifying not only “what” we are doing for young people, but also “how” we are doing it, is becoming increasingly important (n. 198)."

The primacy of daily life

The third and final indication concerns the undisputed and indisputable primacy of daily life that emerges in many passages of the Working Document. There are many traces that lead in this direction, but above all, in addition to the many analyses conducted in the first part, the second chapter of the third part appears with a very evocative title: Deep into the Fabric of our Daily Lives (nos. 144-174). It is no coincidence that this is the longest chapter in the entire document, calling on the Church to be where young people are and, above all, to avoid “the temptation to blame young people for their distance from the Church or complain about it when, instead, we should speak - as some Bishops’ Conferences do - of a “Church that is distant from young people” and is called to embark on paths of conversion, without blaming others for her lack of educational impetus and apostolic timidity’ (no. 174). Youth ministry has an extreme need to inhabit the places where young people live, otherwise it will be like a commercial, perhaps even evocative and charming, but extemporaneous with respect to the everyday existence of young people. In a paradigmatic way, the fourth chapter of the third part refers to the relationship between extraordinary events and daily life, and at one point it says that

"Some Bishops’ Conferences warn about the illusion whereby extraordinary events might provide a solution for young people’s journey of faith and Christian life: in this respect, attention to virtuous processes, to educational pathways and faith itineraries appear to be quite necessary. Because, as one Bishops’ Conference puts it, «the best way to proclaim the Gospel in our time and age is to experience it every day in a simple and wise manner», thus showing that it is the salt, light and leaven of each day” (n. 208).

These three suggestions alone are enough to understand the richness, depth and stakes of the journey we are undertaking, which, let us not forget, we must face with the right disposition of heart.

May it therefore be a joyful Synod for each and every one of us—a truly favorable time for spiritual, pastoral and missionary conversion!

In other words, a favourable time for spiritual, pastoral and missionary conversion!

**“ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL FOR ME,” BUT NOT ALL THINGS ARE BENEFICIAL (1 COR 6:12)
CHRISTIAN HUMANISM FROM A VOCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

*Interview with Giuseppe Mari
Edited by Rossano Sala*

From the standpoint of Christian pedagogy, we asked Professor Giuseppe Mari, Full Professor of General Pedagogy at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, to help us reflect on the major themes of the Synod. The condition of young people in our late-modern era, the state of faith in today’s world, and the journey of vocational discernment are the main topics addressed here, approached from an anthropological and educational perspective, without neglecting a theological horizon.

Let us begin with a general overview. Today, at least in Europe, we are witnessing a visible crisis of faith. Paradoxically, uncertainty and the lack of firm reference points seem to be the only remaining certainties. Where does this new wave of secularization come from, and where might it lead us?

I am not surprised that, after nearly three centuries during which so-called “scientific” culture has repeatedly claimed that faith—if not harmful—is at best insignificant, believing has become difficult today. The myth of modernization, which spread especially in the postwar period, pushed this attack even further by portraying Christian faith as an obstacle to human fulfillment. What truly amazes me is that the twentieth century seems to have passed in vain: it was the most atheistic and agnostic century in history, yet also the bloodiest. Moreover, after the suffocating grip of positivism—convinced that truth lies solely in numbers and measurements—was rejected from various perspectives, we now find ourselves once again emphasizing statistics and testing. As the great historian Henri-Irénée Marrou reminded us, history is the greatest experiment ever undertaken; before chasing current events, we should carefully examine at least the recent past.

What can we learn from this?

That many promises have not been kept—so much so that attempts are made to make us forget them by promoting the standardization of behavior according to the lowest common standards.

For example?

To remain with the recent past, we might take stock of the so-called “sexual revolution” of the late 1960s. “Edenic sex” was promised, yet we now find ourselves faced with what might be called “cave sex,” as the explosion of sexual violence clearly shows. And this is not the only case. There was also the promise of widespread consumption, accessible to everyone. If people now find themselves shopping in discount stores, it means that other forms of distribution are no longer within reach. Here too, something has not worked. Certainly, one can react—as is happening—by letting everything collapse into consumption “at any cost,” but this does not seem to me a genuine achievement; rather, it is a diversionary strategy.

The Church, too, is suffering greatly in this situation. We have paths of “Christian initiation” that do not lead to Christian life but, in practice, to its abandonment (if we consider the very small percentage of those who attend Sunday Mass after having received the sacraments). We have a Church that struggles to find its place in this new context, where faith seems to have become one option among many...

...if consumption is generally relied upon to compensate for the lack of what is essential, this happens in every sphere, including faith. What we are facing is a generalized drive to produce in order to consume and to consume in order to produce, as though this were sufficient to sustain society. The Church is subject to this pressure, yet she seeks to exercise a prophetic call back to what is essential, beyond mere utility. We must not give up.

In what sense?

The production–consumption mechanism, and vice versa, is the simplest one; it perfectly sustains animal life and, more broadly, the cycle of nature. But the human being is not an animal, because he or she is free—that is, endowed with an intrinsic and original dignity. On the basis of this dignity, what is useful must be ordered and subordinated to what is essential, not the other way around. We are not the first to face this challenge. The

distinction I am referring to is the one Saint Augustine draws between “use” (*uti*) and “enjoyment” (*frui*). This shows that the problem already existed a millennium and a half ago—and probably has always existed.

You are a pedagogist. From many quarters there is a call for a renewed anthropological approach to educational issues and even to matters of faith. Indeed, it seems that the “anthropological question” has returned to the forefront, precisely because today the human being and his or her dignity appear to be seriously threatened. Why, in this historical moment, should an anthropological approach be preferred over others?

Perhaps because today, more than ever before, human power over other human beings has grown enormously, especially through technology. It is no coincidence that throughout the twentieth century authors of very different backgrounds—for example, the Catholic Romano Guardini, the Marxist Max Horkheimer, and the secular Martin Heidegger—each identified the question of technology as fundamental. Since technology is a human product, the issue immediately leads us back to the question of who the human being is. From here, we can begin to take stock of our situation.

Is there a need for a renewed humanism?

Certainly, this is a fruitful direction for thought and action, provided we are careful to avoid dissolving faith into a generic philanthropy. The Ecclesial Convention of Florence reminded us of this clearly: “*In Christ, the new humanism*”—not “*a new humanism*.” Christian humanism is theocentric, not anthropocentric—or rather, it is authentically anthropocentric precisely because it is theocentric. In the encyclical *Laudato si*, Pope Francis offers a pointed critique of self-referential anthropocentrism—agnostic, if not atheistic—which prevailed during modernity and which, by reaction, now inspires post- and transhumanist tendencies.

Never before have we had so many possibilities and so many tools at our disposal, and never before have we been so uncertain about ends, orientations, and the ultimate destination of our existence and commitment. How can this loss of knowledge about ends be explained?

If we take modernity as our background, we must recall that the “scientific revolution” was characterized precisely by the abandonment of what the ancients called the “final cause.” In other words, scientific knowledge was restricted to functional description. But this cannot suffice for the human being who—because he or she is free—asks not only *how* things happen, but also *why*, in the sense of *for what purpose*. From this perspective, it is essential to take up Pope Benedict XVI’s invitation to “broaden the concept of rationality.”

What are the consequences for younger generations?

Among all stages of life, youth is the one most oriented toward the future, because it approaches existence with the full psycho-physical and moral vitality of which young people are capable. When recognition of ends is lacking, one rushes into the present and assertiveness is replaced by compensation. In short, this gives rise to forms of discomfort and deviance that need no description, because they are evident to all.

How do you assess the choice of the upcoming Synod, which seeks to bring vocation back to the foreground? Does it strike you as a forward-looking move or an archaeological return? Do you see it as a prophecy or as a short circuit? Why?

We should be grateful to Pope Francis for convening the Synod and making “vocational discernment” its essential point of reference. We are inundated with descriptive analyses of young people (as of everything else), but we must be clear that a hundred kilograms of analysis do not yield a single gram of synthesis, because they are two different cognitive processes. It is therefore important not to be swept along by a flood of words that risks rendering our encounter with the Word—and with the living Tradition that transmits it to us—ever more elusive.

“Vocation” refers to “decision,” a term that presupposes an adult capable of making it. Yet today we often hear that even “adulthood” is in crisis...

Literally, to “decide” means “to cut,” that is, to make a choice which, at the very moment it is made, cuts off other possibilities. Let me give an example. If I bring a child into the world, by that very fact I become a father. I may then be a good father or a bad father, but I have certainly “cut” myself off from the previous condition in which I was not a father—and I cannot go back.

So what is at stake?

Freedom. If, in order to define freedom, we start from the mere capacity to choose between alternatives, then there is virtually no stable criterion—and this is precisely what is happening today. How is it possible to decide in this way? Only in temporary terms. It is striking that today both the vocation to marriage and the vocation to

consecrated celibacy are in crisis. They are certainly different, but they converge on one fundamental point: the decision understood as irrevocable.

How, then, should freedom be presented?

Saint Augustine calls free choice (the kind I described earlier) “lesser freedom.” Alongside it, he speaks of “greater freedom,” which is true freedom: the capacity to choose the good without coercion. We must educate toward this kind of freedom, but to do so at least two things are required:

1. identifying personal dignity as the immediate criterion for choosing only what truly deserves us—that is, what is morally commensurate with our stature;
2. adopting a discipline of behavior that enables us to reject what does not deserve us, even when it attracts us.

The first condition is met through the recognition of values (to which we are generally attentive), but the second requires the practice of virtues—and here we find ourselves seriously lacking.

In what sense?

In the sense that current educational practice is excessively biased toward cognition; it treats the human being as if he or she were only a “mind,” whereas the person is also “heart” and “hands.” Every operational decision passes through the body and therefore involves impulses, emotions, and feelings, as well as ideas. Above all, it passes through concrete behaviors, which gradually become the person’s habits.

*We have thus arrived at the body, which in recent decades has inspired much reflection. **Why is the theme of the body strategic, and what gains might we expect from reflecting on it?***

The cultural shift of the late 1960s placed the body at the center, claiming to liberate it from hypocrisy and moralism. Yet fifty years later it is evident that something has gone wrong. What do substance abuse, alcohol abuse, and so-called adrenaline-fueled practices have in common? Altered sensory perception—and thus the body itself. The supposed liberation of the body has resulted instead in its objectification: the body is used and therefore abused. But our body is still ourselves, and to use it is to use ourselves. This is deeply degrading.

But this is presented as fulfilling...

Certainly—within the logic of use and consumption, which places enjoyment at the center of everything. Yet it is also profoundly frustrating, because it treats the human body as if it were merely animal, whereas it is spiritual, that is, imbued with freedom. Eating disorders tragically remind us of this, revealing that our relationship with food is not governed solely by nutritional function but by a symbolic relationship with the world. It is no coincidence that only the human body is described in terms of “corporeality,” understood as physicality expressing personal uniqueness. Saint John Paul II’s catecheses on the body and sexuality remain essential for illuminating these dynamics and guiding educational practice.

How can corporeality be educated?

It involves guiding people toward freedom understood as the capacity for self-governance—that is, the ability to choose only what truly deserves our choice, because it corresponds to us insofar as it is commensurate with our dignity. *1 Corinthians 6:12* seems written for us today: “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not let myself be dominated by anything (1 Cor 6:12). We must present self-mastery not merely as renunciation of something, but as the opportunity to acquire self-esteem through mastery of our own body. If we do not gain possession of ourselves, what could we ever truly attain? Moreover, we should bear in mind that one can give only what one possesses; but if one does not possess one’s own body, how can one give it in marriage or in consecration through celibacy? Perhaps here lies one of the roots of the great fragility we see today in keeping spousal promises, both according to the flesh and according to the spirit. Education in virtue responds to this logic, because it expresses “strength” as “discipline.” It must do so in an assertive way, as the Pauline epistles teach when they compare the life of faith to athletic and military practice.

The body bears the marks of sexuality and thus of the difference between man and woman. There is a wide-ranging debate today on the complex issue of gender. In what sense can a non-naïve reflection on the body help us to clarify and deepen some of the questions related to this topic?

The body is structurally sexed in reference to male and female identities, and this, in my view, is the starting point. It is true that human beings, by virtue of their freedom, are capable of symbolically reinterpreting physical sexual dimorphism. Yet this does not mean erasing it, because without it even symbolic interpretation would be impossible. I personally accept the distinction between sex and gender, where the former refers to the male–female

difference on a descriptive level and the latter on an anthropological level. However, I firmly reject the idea that gender is purely socio-conventional. There are certainly conventions—and they must be corrected when they imply discrimination between men and women—but there is also a rootedness in the body that is not conventional but rather “natural,” in the sense of “original.” From this we can conclude that men and women possess equal dignity but different identities. This is the foundation of sex education. Gender studies themselves are, in my opinion, useful insofar as they offer material for understanding male and female identity; but when they go so far as to interpret the male–female difference purely in socio-conventional terms, they become ideological, that is, unfounded.

Christianity is the religion of the Incarnation. It is therefore evident that the body takes on great importance for believers in a God who became flesh. Our time has seen the rise of various forms of gnosis and neo-paganism that would like to eliminate the body.

The crisis of faith we are currently experiencing seems to be turning people not into atheists, but into pagans. Even in its highest spiritual expressions—classical Greece, for instance—the pagan world tended to devalue the body, often openly despising it because it is subject to corruption.

What characterizes paganism?

The absolutization of finitude, in which—returning to the theme of the body—physicality is destined for dissolution. One of the clearest signs of today’s re-paganization is the normalization, within the widespread cultural imagination, of a pagan practice—suicide—which expresses to the highest degree the absolutization of what is finite, in this case earthly life, because it is assumed to depend entirely on human decision.

Where does paganism reach its limit?

On the historical level, my impression is that paganism collapses when it is confronted with the human heart’s demand for love—a demand that is never satisfied by the finitude of human gestures that attempt to respond to it. Quite rightly, the initial question mentioned “gnosis,” a term that means “knowledge.” In gnostic thought, salvation is professed as achievable through knowledge, whereas Christianity associates salvation with love. Yet this is not a “consumerist” love; it is the love that God freely offers to the creature—this is what *agápē* means. It is interesting to note that the Fathers of the Church who engaged with gnosticism did not deny that Christian faith was also a form of knowledge; rather, they described it as a “good gnosis,” precisely because they placed it in dependence on God’s love. Perhaps the pagan of today—like the pagan of yesterday—is ultimately searching for the proclamation of a love that saves. After all, Pope John Paul II traced the “new evangelization” back to this very point in the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*: “God loves you!” And Pope Francis continually reminds us that the Christian proclamation is the announcement of God’s most tender mercy—that is, of God’s love for his creature.

Let us return to the idea of vocation. Among the concepts that appear, at first glance, to be closely related to vocation is the notion of “choice.” Within today’s neoliberal market—one in which we are immersed and at times imprisoned—choice seems highly appealing, because it links freedom to an ever-expanding range of options. But is freedom understood primarily as choice truly liberating?

The question of freedom is strategic today, perhaps even more than in the past. It is important to remember that freedom is not an end in itself, but a means. We are free in order to become better, that is, to cultivate our dignity, which precedes our actions because it is what makes them possible. Liberalism must be educated so as not to reduce the human person to a producer–consumer. It is striking that the same reduction characterized communism. In both cases, if everything hinges solely on the ownership of the means of production—assigned by some to the individual and by others to the community—without recognizing the dignity of the human person, freedom is diminished on all sides. As Pope Francis once reminded students of Jesuit schools, we are free in order to become magnanimous, not to shrink—like rodents—to what merely satisfies our cravings.

Another word that revolves around the horizon of vocation is “project.” Of course, it can refer to the capacity to organize one’s life in a disciplined and goal-oriented way. Yet it can also become a deeply self-referential and ultimately narcissistic notion, centered on one’s own desires and needs, without regard for one’s relationship with others and with the Other. What do you think?

I agree. If “project” simply means that one is not improvising, that is positive. But if it implies reducing action and education to planning, we go astray. Christians believe that all of history is the place where the freedom of God and the freedom of the human person meet—and at times collide—even though they are not on the same level, despite God treating us as if they were. The term Christians use to speak of the future is not “project,” but “vocation,” because it expresses the primacy of God and of our relationship with Him. If this primacy is not clearly acknowledged, we risk becoming, as Pope Francis once warned, an NGO rather than the Church of Christ.

From an anthropological point of view, two concepts seem particularly important for approaching the essence of vocation: the filial identity and the spousal dimension. The first suggests that existence is not primarily a project or a choice, but a gift, evoking the grace of life, the time of gestation, and even the traumatic moment of birth. The second indicates that I become myself only within a logic of communion with the other, made possible by a freedom that gives itself without reserve. Do you consider these categories suitable for a serious reflection on vocation? Or would you propose others?

These terms constitute an “elementary” vocabulary, in the sense of being fundamental. All the insights we may draw from the human sciences must be ordered in reference to them; otherwise they become self-referential and therefore misleading. The filial identity reminds us, in a broad sense, that we did not make ourselves—a fact that undermines the widespread tendency today to equate freedom with self-determination. In the specifically Christian sense, it recalls our original dignity as children in the Son. This is essential, because it allows us to grasp the liberating power of faith in Jesus Christ, disqualifying the opposite propaganda which, for at least three centuries, has claimed that faith—when it is not harmful—is at best insignificant. The spousal dimension is equally essential, because it reminds us that we do not exist in order to live for ourselves alone. The contemporary crisis of both marriage and consecrated celibacy shows that the problem is the same in each case, and so is the solution: recognizing that we are structurally relational and educating ourselves to decide for the other, not only for ourselves.

The filial identity and the spousal dimension both imply a promise that asks to be honored. The theme of promise—by which life and relationship are entrusted to the freedom of another—is anthropologically significant. Promise evokes bonds, fidelity to one’s word, and a choice that commits freedom and thereby fills it with meaning. Do you think this category can assist the synodal journey, and in what way?

It is a meaningful path, because it poses a dual challenge: first, recognizing spousal love—according to the flesh and according to the spirit—as the fundamental vocation of the human person; and second, educating people to respond to it. In this sense, the vocation to become husbands and fathers as men, and wives and mothers as women, could form the backbone around which educational practice as a whole might be organized.

Here we arrive at the key word of the Synod: vocation. It is immediately a relational word, because it presupposes a caller and one who is called, who enter into communication. A calling that immediately refers to the word “love.” Taking vocation seriously once again may be the keystone for the renewal of Christian identity and of all the baptized—young people, married laypersons, consecrated persons, and ministers alike. In what sense is vocational awareness decisive for civil and ecclesial renewal?

Without vocation, there is self-referentiality—this is why the category has civil as well as ecclesial significance. We need to regain confidence in the heritage of wisdom that is characteristic of Christian education. Perhaps this is also why the Italian bishops offered us the document “Educating to the Good Life of the Gospel”. In my view, it is a matter of paying more attention to history than to current events: what happens here and now is certainly relevant, but if we are unable to situate it within a broader horizon, it can be deceptive or misleading. As Vatican II teaches us, being up to date does not mean chasing the “news”, but exploring the “News”.

Help us to approach this issue from an educational and pastoral point of view. What processes and operational methodologies seem most appropriate to help young people enter into the rhythm of vocational discernment? What should we prioritize in our educational practice in order to create a “vocational culture,” in which every young person—and every adult—can become aware of having a mission in this world?

The question is not an easy one, because the crisis of faith is also affecting Christian education. Nevertheless, I would like to propose a hypothesis, while being aware of its schematic and approximate character. My impression is that our current educational practice in ecclesial contexts revolves around two focal points: formation and aggregation. It also seems to me that the social or aggregative dimension clearly prevails over the formative one, which itself struggles to identify the essential content to be transmitted. This is evident in the widespread religious ignorance of many who have completed the entire process of ecclesial formation. A different perspective might be this: to replace aggregation with the practice of charity in solidarity, and to identify a set of indispensable formative contents. This does not mean eliminating the social dimension, but rather making it complementary to the two primary focal points—formation and charity. The latter, in particular, allows for both the concrete embodiment of what formation presents in theory and the discovery of the beauty of service, which is essential both for the vocational choice of marriage and for that of special consecration.

Finally, a word on the vocation of the Church at this moment in history. Some authors suggest that the category best suited to interpreting our time is that of “metamorphosis,” given the profound changes underway whose outcome we cannot yet foresee. At least in Europe,

we are increasingly a minority from a quantitative point of view. We are no longer everything, nor do we dominate everything, as in other periods of European history. What, then, are we called to offer Europe today—something that is specifically ours, yet fruitful for all?

What I offer is more a suggestion than a fully developed proposal, given the breadth of the question. A few years ago, among my students at the Institute for Religious Studies in Milan, I was struck by a forty-year-old African man who followed every lecture with great attentiveness. I felt the desire to speak with him, so we went for a coffee together, and he shared his story as a believer who, after many trials, had rediscovered the faith in which he had been raised as a child. Today he is a highly respected teacher of Catholic religion. I asked him how, in light of his life experience, he viewed our European Catholicism, and he used an image that has remained deeply impressed on my memory. He said: “In Africa, Christianity has not yet managed to lead us out of Egypt, because human life continues to be exposed to violence and injustice; but you in Europe have ended up in Babylon.” I found these words profoundly true. In Europe, we risk failing to recognize that Christian faith has liberated us by enabling us to recognize our dignity. If this is the case, then the category that seems most appropriate to me is that of challenge, because it expresses non-resignation and the conviction that we must—and can—act in favor of a renewal that does not consist in adapting to fashions, but in recognizing what is essential. While preparing the introduction to two short essays by Pope John Paul II that I later published, I learned that the Polish word for “challenge” is *wyzwanie*, which is related to the verb *wyzwalać*, meaning “to liberate.” Perhaps this is why John Paul II so frequently used this term when addressing young people. Vocation is a challenge, as are freedom and human life more generally, because they contain a call not to conform, not to remain anesthetized on the couch, as Pope Francis once urged young people during World Youth Day. Today, as yesterday, the Christian proclamation is a challenge not to resign oneself to what is supposedly “given,” but to recognize within it the “mandate” that freedom—like vocation—carries within itself. In this sense, challenge names faith for what it is at its core: prophecy.

'I MAKE ALL THINGS NEW' (REV 21:5).

THE YOUTHFULNESS OF THE CHURCH, VOCATIONAL CULTURE AND YOUTH MINISTRY

Interview with Andrea Bozzolo

Edited by Rossano Sala

After taking a Christian cultural and pedagogical perspective, we asked a theologian, Prof. Don Andrea Bozzolo, Full Professor of Systematic Theology at the Turin section of the Faculty of Theology of the Salesian Pontifical University, to help us enter into the upcoming Synod with a certain depth. It is not enough to be emotionally moved; it is necessary to get to the root of certain issues from a theological, ecclesiological, spiritual and pastoral point of view.

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Let us begin with an ecclesiological perspective. At the end of the Second Vatican Council, on 8 December 1965, the Church addressed a very beautiful message to young people around the world. It said that the Church had undergone a "revision of life" to "rejuvenate its face", because the Church itself is to be thought of as "the youth of the world". Remembering that message, do you think the Church has been faithful to those prophetic words over the last fifty years?

The Church experienced the Council and the post-Council period as a great season of renewal, the fruits and results of which we greatly appreciate: a richer relationship with the Word of God, a more accessible liturgy, a new awareness of the role of the laity in the community, the flourishing of ecclesial movements, the steps taken in ecumenism, a new sensitivity to dialogue with culture, overcoming all forms of entrenchment, etc. However, we cannot deny that in some cases the change has remained superficial. It has clearly affected external forms – think of the liturgy – but it has not always reached deep convictions and attitudes, so as to generate a joyful freshness of Christian life. This helps us to understand that the Church is not rejuvenated through "facelifts", but by the conversion of hearts and institutions to the One who says of himself in Revelation: "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev 21:5, NABRE).

And what does this mean?

It means that the 'new' that rejuvenates the world cannot simply be the work of our hands, the result of our projects. I am struck by the force with which Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* denounces 'meticulous and well-designed apostolic plans, typical of defeated generals' (EG 96). The claim to manage the future through planned objectives and predefined roadmaps is in reality a condemnation to remain prisoners of repetition. The "novum" that the Church brings is different, it has an eschatological character: it is the Paschal victory of Christ, the definitive event that Easter introduced as leaven into history. This novum does not come to us as a product, it is adventus, parousia, it comes from heaven as a gift of grace.

Let's go back to Revelation...

Of course! I am thinking precisely of the final scene of Revelation, in which the wedding of the Lamb takes place. The community of the faithful, the "new" Jerusalem, is presented as a young woman descending from heaven, from God, ready as a bride adorned for her spouse. This is the true "youthfulness" of the Church! Perhaps we should be a little more concerned that the eschatological message resonates too weakly in our communities... It does not concern a distant tomorrow, but is the decisive key to entering into today, to opening our eyes to what the Spirit is accomplishing in history, causing creation to "rise" from within. Without this perspective, the Christian community becomes self-referential, lost in its own discourse and plans. But this path will not lead very far.

The Pope insists strongly that the Church as a whole must adopt the style of "discernment" as its ordinary working method in all its components. But what do we really mean by this word, which sounds strange to many and even incomprehensible to some?

Discernment is the spiritual process that leads to deciding in accordance with God's will, learning to recognise his voice, to "distinguish" it from the voice of the old man within us and from the temptation of the evil one, with his deceitful logic. If every decision must open up to something new, discernment is the art of welcoming God's newness, of collaborating in its advent, of placing oneself at its service. God speaks "today" to his Church, to individuals and to communities, to guide them and direct their actions. Recognising his voice, which opens up the future, is a source of joy and fruitfulness and enables us to face the challenges of history with courage and boldness. Discernment concerns all areas of life: moral, spiritual and vocational. In the pastoral sphere, adopting the style

of discernment means planning activities and maturing decisions with a clearer reference to the inspiring action of the Spirit. Using a musical comparison, we can say that it means letting God give us the LA, setting aside the pretence of striking the right note ourselves.

Why is it so important today to adopt, as a Church, the habitus of discernment? And what does it mean in concrete terms for the Church to think and act according to this “way of proceeding”? What conversions are necessary?

It is important because we sometimes risk reducing pastoral planning to a mere organisation of the calendar of commitments, which mostly reproduces by inertia what was done the year before, or as a division of tasks that does not deeply involve people. It is difficult to find time to reflect on the experience we are living, to bring out the big questions that life poses. But when we go on like this, sooner or later fatigue prevails, we feel like cogs in a machine... anything but the youthfulness of the world.

What is at the root of this mentality?

There is a subtle temptation to believe that the Gospel can be reduced to mere “content”, which after a few years we think we know, and that pastoral care is all about “techniques” and “methods” of transmitting that content. But this is not the case. Christianity is an event: it has its own way of happening and being transmitted that never ceases to amaze and fascinate. It is a synthesis of forms and forces, words and gestures, structures and dynamics that are inseparable from one another and are always and again stirred up by grace. When we recognise this, we do not feel like masters of structures and activities, but humble witnesses of what God continues to do among us. We feel the need to return every day to learn what it means to live “in Christ” and we try to live everything “in Him”.

Concretely, what considerations are important for living pastoral discernment?

First of all, it is important to live discernment not as an additional duty, but as a grace, an opportunity, a gift that makes the community grow. It is beautiful, though challenging, to mature decisions in an atmosphere of prayer, communion, and mutual listening, seeking to learn humbly from previous experiences and to open ourselves boldly to the new. When someone comes to a pastoral council with the certainty of already having the right solution and wants to “push through” their own idea, there is no discernment. It is necessary to keep one's point of view open to integrating the elements that emerge in the discussion, so as to build the integrated and multifaceted vision that Pope Francis speaks of. Without perfectionism, without wanting everything immediately, accepting the time needed to activate challenging processes. The sign of well-done discernment is the peace that accompanies decisions, even when they are difficult. It transmits the serene energy of those who allow themselves to be led by God.

Let us now turn to the specific topic of the next Synod: “Young people, faith and vocational discernment”. The Synod on young people comes after two synodal moments in which the universal Church focused on the theme of the family. Do you consider this continuity important? Why?

Young people and the family are two important areas in which to measure the anthropological changes of our time. The choice of these themes clearly expresses Pope Francis' desire to effectively implement the commitment of a Church that is ‘going forth’. However, this request cannot be understood only in an operational and factual sense, but more profoundly concerns an attitude of the spirit. It is a matter of returning to inhabit worlds that have become distant, in order to understand them from within and enrich them with the light of faith. Let us consider, for example, a theme that lies at the intersection between young people and the family, namely the changing culture of affection in which young people grow up. The Church cannot ignore the fact that young people have new ways of building emotional relationships, use new languages to express them, and grow up within symbolic representations of the body that pose new challenges. Often, catastrophic judgements about this reality circulate in our communities, but there are few constructive proposals. The concern is justified, but it must be translated into commitment, not complaint. Harsh judgements, as well as condescending closeness, do not help young people. We need to go out and live in their world, as Jesus did, and make the witness of the Gospel accessible to them.

Young people are, first and foremost, the “most precious and delicate” part of society, as Don Bosco used to say. How do you see the situation of young people today, at the beginning of the third millennium, living in a globalised and late modern society, dominated by the power of the media, where there are unprecedented opportunities and new risks?

I think that before talking about the young people “of today”, it is important first of all to recall some traits that apply to young people “of all times”. There is an anthropological condition that is ultimately universal; it is the

great challenge of existence, which unites us all. It is important to recall this because it allows us to bring different cultures and even different eras into dialogue, identifying the great questions of life and drawing on the great wisdom of humanity. Youth is the age of life when people feel a deep call to decide for themselves, about their future, to give a fundamental direction to their existence, which will have a decisive impact on the future. For this reason, young people are looking for a reliable horizon, a convincing promise, a solid foundation on which to build the house of their lives, and they look to adults, expecting to find authentic witness to a fulfilled existence that can show them the way to freedom. Today, however, the adult world has largely given up on providing this testimony, abdicating its responsibilities: it limits itself to providing young people with (technological) tools and (consumer) goods, but when it comes to answering the big questions about the meaning of life, it shirks its responsibility.

With what consequences?

This defeatist attitude causes cognitive uncertainty and decision-making paralysis in the younger generations: they grow up uncertain and indecisive. What is more, they are disappointed, especially in institutions, which do not seem oriented towards protecting the common good and safeguarding the most vulnerable, but rather entrenched in the defence of privileges. It is against this backdrop of educational fragility and the breakdown of the social contract that the drive to emerge as individuals emerges with force. When the father is absent or distracted, the child can only rely on his own strength, trying in every way to get noticed, to promote his own image and make it attractive. Gustavo Pietropolli Charmet has spoken in this regard of an “unsustainable need for admiration” that characterises contemporary society. It is a frenzy of visibility, a need for notoriety that brings with it the fear of being relegated to a social shadow. In short, the authenticity of life is replaced by the appeal of image and the emphasis on the self.

You spoke of young people's cognitive uncertainty. Many talk about the post-truth era, where media bombardment does not help us to grasp what is true, good, beautiful, right and holy. Where fake news abounds and colonises the younger generations, preventing disciplined and profound thinking. How can we help young people find their way in such a fragmented and confusing world?

It seems to me that in order to face this challenge, it is important first of all to help young people reconnect with what they are experiencing, to believe in the effectiveness of experience. The world of everyday life is not only made up of sensations, but of events that change the person who experiences them. We are not a virtual sounding board; we do not live relationships just to “feel the effect”. The first step, therefore, is to rediscover that the events of life speak to us, challenge us and require decisions.

And then?

Then we need to reaffirm that truth is not an idea, an abstract theory or an evanescent formula. Truth reveals itself in its original intertwining with justice. We can only recognise as true that which is reliable for a life worthy of man, his hopes and his affections. A truth that does not inspire passion, that is not capable of regenerating the heart, that does not commit to transforming the world would be an empty idol. This is why it is important to rediscover truth as a source of justice and joy. The idea that without truth we are freer is an immense lie. Faced with Pilate's scepticism, we must remember that truth is what prevents us from confusing the victim with the executioner, what prevents us from washing our hands in the face of the world's injustice. Giving up the search for truth opens the door to the arrogance of the strongest: relativism is ultimately a dictatorship in which economic interests thrive.

Is this why it has become so difficult to make decisions, especially when it comes to life choices? You spoke of paralysis in decision-making, which is increasingly postponed and considered reversible...

An anthropology that reduces man to a consumer leaves him with only one certainty: every choice is “temporary” because every product, sooner or later, must be replaced. If we add to this cognitive uncertainty, all that remains is doubt about what the best choice is and the urge to try everything. But there is also another anthropology, which does not think of man as a subject of his needs, but understands him as inhabited by a call to live authentically. The seat of decisions is the conscience, and the conscience is not an empty room. It is inhabited by a voice that asks us to do good, even to “dedicate” ourselves to it and not to chase our whims in front of the world's shop window.

How can we help young people to recognise this voice and accompany them towards authentic adulthood, whose main characteristic is the ability to choose the good faithfully?

Here we return to the role of the father, the educator, the witness. Young people do not have enough life experience to recognise the call that dwells within them on their own. The father is the one who makes that voice recognisable and testifies to its reliability, because he shows by his life that he has listened to it and honours its call. The father becomes such not when he imposes himself and his authority, but when he points to and bears witness to the Origin of the covenant that holds human beings together: an Origin that transcends us, but is not foreign to us, since we all hear its voice.

Objectively, faith is at the centre of the synodal theme. It is a specific way of seeing young people and also a specific way of helping them. What are the characteristic features of the Christian faith that we are called to transmit to the younger generations?

The Christian faith recognises in Jesus the full and definitive revelation of the face of this Origin, which is God – the Father, and in the Holy Spirit the secret of freedom, the intimate voice that moves the conscience to become what it is called to be. The Christian faith is constitutively Trinitarian; it allows us to access the truth of our being in relational terms, since it makes us live in Christ as children of the Father in the Spirit. Faith must be understood by reference to the event through which God communicates himself to us, avoiding reducing its features to simplistic and misleading schemes, as unfortunately often happens.

For example?

For example, when we think of faith taking the modern concept of reason as our starting point, thus confining belief to a reason that is distinct from knowledge and perhaps even opposed to it. In this view, faith begins where reason ends, reducing itself to a subjective sensation, a private feeling devoid of cognitive value and public relevance. At other times, faith is reduced to mere adherence to doctrinal content, without implying a happy and persuasive relationship with the divine You; or it is understood as a voluntary gesture of ethical commitment to certain values, emptying it of its character of judgement about the ontological order of reality. All these interpretations distort Christian belief in an unacceptable way.

Christian faith is not a philosophical theory, but a way of inhabiting the world and living our relationships with one another, which have their original reference in the way Jesus lived among us. How can we present the person and message of Jesus to young people?

I think it is important to help young people understand that at the heart of Christianity is not something we must do, but something that Another does for us. This is the crucial point, what in the light of Paul's teaching is called the primacy of grace. Recognising God in the flesh of Jesus, accepting the free offer of his friendship and the gift of his mercy, allowing this to renew us are fundamental steps in the Christian experience. The insistence on commitment, consistency and belonging must not supplant the central proclamation of grace and mercy. As Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii gaudium*, the kerygma is not simply an initial moment that can then be left behind, but the horizon within which to understand all the themes of Christian life. And the acceptance of the kerygma is expressed as joy, consolation and hope. Helping young people to recognise true joy is to introduce them to the language with which God speaks to their hearts.

Let us also talk about the liturgy and the sacraments. In their responses to the questionnaires, young people ask that the liturgy be given greater consideration. There are various complaints about its simplification and trivialisation. There is also very harsh criticism regarding the quality of homilies. Why, in your opinion, are young people so sensitive to this issue?

The liturgy engages the symbolic dimension that is constitutive of the human person. It fascinates because it is not only thinking about God, but an encounter with Him: an encounter that, involving all dimensions of life, gathers it and unifies it around the essential. Let us think, for example, of the relationship with time. The consumer culture imposes on contemporary man the primacy of efficiency and performance, in which time is rigidly regulated by the deadlines of the agenda. In this way, however, time loses its breadth and depth, flattening itself to the urgencies of the moment. The liturgy overturns this vision and offers the authentic experience of a time inhabited by Mystery. In this way, it gives rhythm to the day and the week, nourishing the sense of expectation and the communal celebration of the feast. In the celebration of the sacraments, therefore, there is a true anthropology. Celebrating the liturgy well means accepting the logic of gift and gratuitousness, of listening and sharing; it means discovering that we are sustained and nourished by the action of Another.

The liturgical poverty of educational communities is therefore a sign that something is wrong. Apparently, young people see this. How can we start again?

We come from a season of “liturgical enlightenment” which held that sacramental practice only made sense if “preceded” by a theoretical understanding of what is being celebrated. Much catechesis still goes in this direction, but it risks, beyond its intentions, conveying a mistaken perspective, the perspective that the games are not played

in sacramental action, but in the instruction that precedes it. Perhaps it is time to question this approach and restore the vision that characterised the life of the Church for centuries at the beginning of Christianity: the sacrament is the place where faith becomes effective, the “hand-to-hand combat” with God... and not the translation into external gestures of beliefs matured elsewhere and otherwise. The Council taught us that the liturgy is the “culmen et fons” of Christian life, but in most common pastoral practices it fails to express the springing force of the source. For the most part, it is the culmination of catechism instruction, but in this way it arrives late and poorly.

So what?

I think we need a new season of initiation into Christian ritual, which introduces us to being in relationship with God without bypassing the body and its postures, sounds, images and gestures. Although there are significant experiences that go in this direction, in some communities there is a great deal of neglect. It is not uncommon to find churches where kitsch reigns supreme: this is not primarily an aesthetic problem, but a symptom of a faith reduced to a consumer good, which does not generate appropriate languages and forms. Sometimes, when I enter a place of prayer, I ask myself: how can a young person come in here and feel at home? How can they feel the call of the Absolute in this environment? The fact is that you cannot cheat or improvise on these things: the liturgy unmasks us. Only a living faith transmits – in the symbolic forms of the environments it inhabits and the gestures it makes – the sense of God's presence.

We come to the theme of vocational discernment. Here the Synod is very provocative: on the one hand, it says it wants to take care of all young people, without exception. But then it says with the same force that everyone must be offered “vocational discernment”: In the ecclesial imagination, the question of vocation is often thought of in elitist terms, in the sense that it is reserved for so-called ‘vocations of special consecration’ (consecrated life and priestly ministry). What is changing, starting from this synodal choice?

I would say that the choice of the synodal theme is profoundly provocative; it takes up one of the themes that in modern tradition has settled in the innermost “niche” of the Church and relaunches it as an essential node of anthropological experience. It is an operation that disrupts the inertia of customary language and provokes a real rethinking. In fact, it affirms that the responsive attitude is constitutive of freedom; one becomes free by responding to a call. Language has preserved a secret memory of this theme in the word “responsibility”, which connotes the typical quality of human action. Unfortunately, in common parlance, to say that one is “responsible” is understood as synonymous with “independent, autonomous, capable of managing one's own life”. Responsibility, on the other hand, is the figure of a responsive freedom, which gives an account of itself in the face of the call and injunction with which Truth calls it to decide.

We therefore need a broad and articulated “theology of vocation” that can support a strong change of perspective, capable of reforming the shared ecclesial imagination. Could you indicate the cornerstones of this theology?

The term “vocation” has a wide range of uses and meanings, which are already found with different emphases in New Testament literature. The verb *kaleō* (to call) and the corresponding lexical group (*klēsis* = call; *klētos* = called), in addition to designating the common action of calling or the act of naming, take on a strong meaning in many New Testament texts, mainly concerning two areas: the call of men to salvation and a particular divine designation in view of the mission. The first area of texts includes, for example, the parable of the wedding guests (Lk 14:15-24; Mt 22:1-14), which presents the coming of the Kingdom as an urgent invitation that God addresses to men. St Paul, reflecting on the mystery of grace, affirms that God's eternal plan of salvation is historically translated into a personal call, the acceptance of which leads to justification and glory (cf. Rom 8:28-30). The second area concerns the choice of certain people for a particular form of discipleship and for a special ministry. This is clearly evident in the vocation of the apostles (‘and immediately he called them’ Mk 1:20 par) and of Paul, ‘servant of Jesus Christ, apostle by calling, chosen to proclaim the gospel of God’ (Rom 1:1; cf. 1 Cor 1:1).

So there is already an internal tension and a complex network of references in the biblical text...

Certainly. The two groups of texts, in fact, outline a line of thought that should not be simplified. They show that particular ‘callings’ can only be understood within the ‘vocational’ horizon of the whole Church. In fact, the very name “ecclesia” indicates the vocational character of the Christian community, its identity as an assembly of those who are called together. Within it, vocations to a special task do not have the meaning of selecting an elite or conferring a privilege, but rather of making evident, through the assignment of a special mission, the grace with which God calls everyone to salvation. Let us consider the emblematic case of Levi's vocation. In the call of the tax collector who leaves the tax office to follow the Master, we see the specific features of a special vocation to

apostolic discipleship, but also the teaching that summarises, through Levi's story, the overall meaning of Jesus' mission: "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners" (Mk 2:17).

In our circles, we also speak of a 'vocational culture.' But, even here, we often do not know exactly what this expression means. Could you help us understand it more deeply, perhaps by suggesting some educational strategies that would help us put it into practice?

The expression "vocational culture" refers to the idea, already present in the teaching of Paul VI and taken up by subsequent teaching, that life itself is a vocation. God created with his Word, which "calls" into existence and "separates" in the chaos of the indistinct, imprinting on the cosmos the beauty of order and the harmony of diversity. This means that man discovers his own identity only by entering into dialogue with the Creator, in an attitude of listening and openness that is constitutive of his very being. The vision of life as a vocation is therefore opposed to conceptions that are widespread today, to perspectives that present life as the result of chance or fate. The educational outcomes of these anthropological models are devastating.

In what sense?

The deterministic view of life diminishes the importance of freedom and leads to resignation in the face of a blind fate that imposes itself. It has many versions, ranging from the superstitious fatalism of those who seek their fortune in horoscopes to the biological determinism of those who consider man to be a clump of cells or an ingenious animal. The view of life as chance, in turn, ultimately derives from the idea that in the beginning there is not Logos, but chaos. It generates the perverse illusion that nothing has definitive value, that all choices are interchangeable, that the only law is that which is imposed by force. From this mentality derives the culture of the provisional, which corresponds to the image of a man without a vocation.

What educational steps can therefore be taken in the direction of a vocational culture?

I would say that the first step is to invite people to come out of themselves. We need to help young people to allow themselves to be challenged by the reality that surrounds them, by the challenges and needs of our time. If they do not listen to the voice of the poor, if they do not personally come into contact with those who struggle and are in need, how will they hear the voice of God? The Pope recently stated that the question a young person should ask themselves is not "Who am I?", but rather "Who am I for?". The first question risks locking them into a self-centred narcissism, which exhausts itself in the fruitless search for self-realisation; The second question sets in motion energies and creativity that are ignited in us only when we take responsibility for others and strive to protect their dignity. It is precisely in this dedication that we realise in a very personal way the appropriation of the divine image and likeness that has been imprinted in us.

To help a young person in vocational discernment, it is necessary to accompany them. But for this, we have a great need to train those who accompany them. In this, it seems to me, we are somewhat lacking, because we really do not have many. In your opinion, what should be the main characteristics of a good spiritual and vocational accompanier of young people?

I will focus on just one: authenticity. We must have honestly honoured, despite the limitations that always mark our lives, the Lord's personal call and continue to feel it as the deep source of our energy.

Accompaniment, in the tradition of the Church, is not only personal but also communal. Sometimes we see, especially in Europe, Christian communities that are very self-referential and focused on their own survival. How can a Christian community, in its ordinary life, accompany young people? What could be the characteristics of a community that truly feels jointly responsible for the new generations? What tools could it prioritise?

I think that the first characteristic through which a community shows its interest in young people is closeness. It takes people who are among young people, who share their world, patiently building bonds of friendship and laying the foundations for trust. Don Bosco said that it is not enough to love young people; they need to realise that they are loved, and this happens when adults (educators, teachers, priests...) do not limit themselves to doing what their "role" implies, but live a real sharing, "wasting time" to share everyday life. Everything starts from there. Then, of course, young people must be given responsibility, offered opportunities to participate, encouraged in their creativity, and helped to build with realism and perseverance.

How can young people participate in the life of the community, giving what is proper to youth to the Church to which they belong? What are the spaces for participation in which young people could be protagonists today?

There is no shortage of opportunities for participation: from involvement in the parish youth club to charitable service to the poor, from leading the liturgy to involvement in movements and associations, not to mention the

possibility of putting their technological skills to good use for the benefit of the community or the opportunity to encourage their social commitment in the local area. The problem, perhaps, is not the opportunities, but the attitudes, because sometimes young people can be used rather than made protagonists. This happens, for example, when the services requested are not accompanied by adequate training opportunities, or when young people are jealously kept in their own environment, as if they were the “property” of the parish priest or an educator, and not introduced to broader ecclesial experiences. In these and other cases, the community does not place itself at the service of young people and their vocational journey, but risks squeezing their enthusiasm to respond to immediate urgencies. If this is the case, sooner or later young people will distance themselves from the community, taking some wounds with them.

To conclude, let us return to the Second Vatican Council, from which we started. This Synod on young people, which certainly does not deal only with young people, but also with the need to rejuvenate the face of the Church, what aspects of the Council could and should it bring to our attention?

I would undoubtedly take up the universal call to holiness, as mentioned in *Lumen Gentium*. Only a community that believes that every person can be touched by God's holiness has the joy and strength to educate and rejuvenate. The flourishing of numerous figures of youthful holiness in our time is certainly a sign of the Spirit. Christianity shows its appeal only in the horizon of holiness, which is the beauty and reality of God's life in us.

In what sense do you consider this theme to be strategic compared to others?

Benedict XVI, in his famous letter to the diocese and city of Rome on the urgent task of education, stated that “the soul of education, as of the whole of life, can only be a reliable hope”. Saints are witnesses to Christian hope and its reliability. This is why, in every age, it is the saints who rejuvenate the Church.

“ALL OF THESE I HAVE OBSERVED. WHAT DO I STILL LACK?” (MT 19:20).

THE SYNOD, A TIME TO ACQUIRE YOUTHFUL DYNAMISM

Salvatore Currò

The time of the Synod is both strategic and opportune for recovering some youthful dynamism both in the Church and in young people. But what are the characteristics of youth, which should logically also be those of the Church, which in the famous and unsurpassed ‘Message to Young People’ at the end of the Second Vatican Council (8 December 1965) defines itself as ‘the youth of the world’? We asked Prof. Salvatore Currò, professor of youth ministry at the Faculty of Theology of the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome, to pick up the threads of the two interviews with a view to relaunching the themes that emerged from an anthropological and biblical perspective, thus helping us to get to the heart of the synodal work.

* * *

A time of openness and hope

The Church desires to reach out and face the challenges of our time. This is particularly evident where it is most open to young people. The desire for openness is clearly present, yet significant difficulties remain: youth ministry is often too intra-ecclesial in its perspective; it fails to open up to all young people but only reaches those who are already open to the Christian message. Young people can help the Church to set out on a journey with everyone and to allow itself to be animated more by the Spirit. The Spirit leads the Church to new things, to inhabit this world prophetically, to be an interpreter of hope and a sign of God's presence. With young people, the Church can open itself to everyone, even those who are furthest away, express its vocation to universality and truly set out on a journey. In reality, the challenge to go out is for everyone. Young people themselves are called to keep going out, and for this reason, they themselves need support and encouragement. They are called to remain open to hope, responsible for others, confident in the possibility of building a future of good, not only for themselves, but also for society and the whole world. This openness is an integral part of being young, even if, at this time, it is sometimes difficult to manifest.

In reality, this struggle is shared by all. The temptation to close in on oneself, to withdraw into one's own little world, into one's own interests or those of one's own group, is strong in everyone: young people and adults, believers and non-believers. In such a complex world, full of resources and possibilities but also disorienting, it is easy to be overcome by fear or mistrust. The feeling that the dehumanising dynamics that mark culture, economics, politics and communication cannot change may prevail. We are called to support each other (young people and adults, believers and non-believers) in order to build a culture (and therefore a politics and an economy) of inclusion, of encounter, of the ability to see things from the point of view of the least and the peripheries, of the primacy of the common good, of the dignity of work, of care for the earth, of peaceful coexistence and mutual acceptance.

It is within this horizon that young people and adults must seek encounter, and also (and perhaps even more so) young people and the elderly (as the Pope reminds us). It is within this horizon—which, in biblical language, is the horizon of the Kingdom of God—that young people and the Church can meet fruitfully. And it is within this horizon that the Church's concern for the evangelisation of young people is situated. There is nothing proselytising about it. There is a desire to share the Gospel, the precious pearl of growth in true humanity, and the companionship of Jesus Christ, who opens us to the fullness of life and sustains trust, hope and openness.

The Church, which – as we read in the Council's Message to Young People of 8 December 1965 – knows that it is “the true youth of the world” (but it is not so without the help of young people!), which knows that it possesses ‘what makes young people strong and beautiful’ (but it possesses it only thanks to young people!), namely ‘the ability to rejoice in what is beginning, to give oneself without return, to renew oneself and to set out again for new conquests’, is a witness of true hope. It is a concrete hope, not forced or superficial, based on the traces of creation and redemption that run through life and culture, and which the Church knows how to read. It is the same hope that dwells ‘naturally’ in the heart of every young person, strongly present even if it may sometimes be dormant or frustrated, hidden within attitudes of closure. It can lie dormant in young people, it can lie dormant in the Church.

A biblical figure of the temptation to withdraw into oneself and, at the same time, of overcoming that temptation is Jonah. The Church can identify with him, and young people themselves can identify with him.

Jonah, faced with God's call to go to Nineveh, in the heart of the pagan world, allows himself to be overcome by fear and closes himself off in his own security. His fear is masked by reasoning: God cannot want such an open mission among the pagans; there is nothing good in Nineveh, only immorality; things cannot change; any presence and proclamation of a prophet would be useless. This closing in on oneself is also masked by religious motivations (of a closed theology rather than an outgoing one). Jonah's surrender to the call will show that, on the contrary, a desire for good and openness to the Word of God is hidden in the hearts of the Ninevites. The universality of Revelation will be manifested. Thanks to the pagans, that is, thanks to those for whom he was sent, Jonah will rediscover his capacity for wonder and the meaning of his being a prophet. The story shows us that fidelity to God implies the courage to step outside one's own patterns (including theological ones) and look, without prejudice, at those who seem distant from goodness and from God. It also shows us that change for the better is always possible, even when there seem to be no signs of hope.

Fidelity to God, living in the world without prejudice and prophetically, openness to all, trust that the world, beyond appearances, can change, because so many seeds of goodness and God's presence are hidden in everyone's heart, are deeply intertwined. Such intertwining could give impetus to the Church's current educational and pastoral commitment to young people. What is needed is: sincere openness to all young people, involvement with young people in changing social and cultural conditions, a social and cultural dimension to youth ministry, freeing it from the risks of a reassuring intra-ecclesiality and withdrawal into itself, the capacity for dialogue and proclamation starting from the places where young people themselves live and from the gifts and traces of God's presence that they carry within themselves.

Time of vocation and love

In the phase of youth, the life project takes shape. In this time, marked by complexity, fragmentation, and uncertainty about the future, planning one's life becomes difficult. The path of identity building is often marked by ups and downs, falls and failures, wandering and the absence of secure references, and the need to start over again and again. It is often difficult to become an adult, to achieve emotional, professional and value stability. This is compounded by a culture that risks losing sight of the meaning of the specific stages of life. The adult world, then, plays at youthfulness; it pretends to believe in young people; in reality, it renounces its proactive tasks and educational accompaniment. Yet there is an implicit but strong demand among young people for guidance, directed at adults and the Church itself.

In this situation of *crisis in life planning*, the Church's commitment to pastoral care and the education of young people is strongly (and, in some ways, rightly) oriented towards supporting planning. It is a question of helping young people to give unity to their lives, giving them direction and meaning; it is also a question of showing that Christ can become the meaning of life and the cornerstone of life plans. We can say that pastoral care and Christian education are often permeated by an anthropology of life plans. In the most fortunate cases and where young people are more receptive, pastoral care based on life plans helps young people to discover their vocation. Vocation is, after all, a word for the few. It refers to the culmination of the project. In the Church, we speak of vocation within a culture and anthropology of the project. But does this not reduce and compromise the meaning of vocation? Should we not instead think of the project within a culture and *vocational anthropology*?

The need to promote a vocational culture is often highlighted. What does vocational culture mean? Furthermore, does a vocational culture not need a vocational anthropology? Could the meaning of life as a vocation not give quality and momentum to the pastoral care and education of young people?

An in-depth reading of the reality of young people (an anthropological and, at the same time, kairological reading) perhaps shows that the greatest difficulty does not relate to the project but to the conditions and very foundation of the project. Benedict XVI intercepted this more radical level when, in his letter on the educational emergency, he highlighted an anthropological crisis that underlies the educational crisis and manifests itself as a 'crisis of trust in life' (Letter to the Diocese and City of Rome on the urgent task of education, 21 January 2008). Francis also picked up on this when, especially during the Jubilee of Mercy, he highlighted the need for mercy and reconciliation as the *kairos* of our time.

Self-confidence, self-acceptance (starting with one's own body), feeling loved and recognised for who one is (and not on condition that...), reconciliation with one's own fragility (within which riches and potential are hidden) are necessary conditions for bringing order to one's life, for building stable feelings, for integrating affectivity and reason, identity and social responsibility, attention to oneself and openness to others. Attention to this more radical, *pre-project* level opens up (and at the same time requires) fidelity to Revelation, which, in reality, is more a sign of vocation than of project; indeed, it is often a sign of the disruption of the project.

We can think of the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man (Mt 19:16-22; Mk 10:17-22; Lk 10:25-28), where Jesus does not support the young man's life project nor does he propose its fulfilment; he does not propose an additional commitment nor, in the end, does he want to fill a void in the young man, who had asked, "What else am I lacking?"; at least, he does not want to fill it by remaining and confirming the young man's project logic. It is not a question of filling a void, but of emptying oneself, of giving what one has.

It is a call to take risks, to let go of what has already been acquired, and to trust. It is a provocation to break with the project mentality which, if taken to extremes (i.e. if it has no vocational foundation or is not inspired by a vocational impulse), leads to narcissism, self-centredness (beyond appearances). Strictly speaking, Jesus does not propose a life plan, but invites us to enter into a logic (actually illogical) of gift, otherness, and discipleship. Jesus' provocation (call) is accompanied or preceded by an intense gaze of love. "Jesus looked at him and loved him and said, 'One thing you lack: go, sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me'" (Lk 10:21). The drama of the story lies not only in the young man's failure to respond, but also and above all in his failure to allow himself to be reached by this loving gaze. Many others in the Gospel, often marginalised, failed, dissatisfied with life, allowed themselves to be reached by Jesus' loving gaze, which always contains a call. The possibility of responding to a call is closely connected to the ability to allow oneself to be loved. Think of Peter. Even though he betrayed Jesus, he allowed himself to be touched by his loving and merciful gaze, and he made himself available to love; therefore, he was able to accept the call to feed the sheep (Jn 21:15-19). There is a mysterious and profound intertwining between vocation and love.

The pastoral care and education of young people must first of all intercept the loving gaze of Jesus. This harmony with Jesus' gaze allows us to intercept that plane of life where love is at stake: allowing ourselves to be loved and being willing to bet on love. This plane has to do with pre-projective dimensions: those of corporeality, affectivity, emotionality, and feelings. Here, in fact, there are already traces of God's grace, his love, and his call. We are called, first of all, because we are challenged to recognise the gift that we are to ourselves, to inhabit the "more" (which so often seems to us to be "less") than our planned consciousness, to surrender to the bonds with others that precede (and challenge) our self-affirmation. We are called and loved, called because we are loved, loved and therefore called. We are who-loved.

The Gospel is situated in this intertwining of love and vocation. The Gospel is the proclamation that we are loved as we are, that God has faith in us and calls us to collaborate for the Kingdom. Christ walks with us. He always places us and re-places us in this horizon of love and calling, of grace and responsibility. He is, first and foremost, the one who gives meaning to life, the one who walks with us, making us feel loved just as we are and capable of giving ourselves. In this sense, life is not so much the continuous construction of a project as it is a continuous rebirth, an ever-renewed beginning to love and respond, to allow ourselves to be loved and to decipher the call. Here too there is a possibility of alliance between the Church and young people. Young people can help the Church to rediscover the primacy of grace and not to fall into the danger of neo-Pelagianism (which is another name for the emphasis on the project) to which Francis often refers. We can try, as a Church, as Christian adults, to enter into the experience of Nicodemus (Jn 3:1 ff.). At his venerable age, he is called, in a certain way, to become young. There is nothing youthful about this. What is at stake is a rebirth from above, difficult to understand because it is outside the logic of planning and because it has to do with the ability to take risks, to allow oneself to be reached, to allow oneself to be loved.

A time of encounter and gratuitousness

The Church provides good education and youth ministry when it pays close attention to the quality of relationships, when it cares for the relational context of evangelisation, when it is capable of true encounter. Young people ask to be listened to, to have spaces where they can play a leading role, and to have reciprocal relationships. They ask, in fact, for true encounter, beyond contradictions and signs of closure, even though they often flee from encounter (think of the ambiguities of online relationships, which, at the same time, expand and become impoverished). The growth of young people, including their growth in faith, implies rich and true human relationships. Encounter, the thirst for encounter, is a characteristic feature of youth. The Church is challenged to become a sign and a place of true encounter. But is it not true that the Church itself must learn the true meaning of encounter? Is it not true that ecclesial relationships are sometimes marked by instrumentalism, unilateralism, and judgement of others? Is it not true that the witness of Christian truth and the proposal of faith struggle to find a place within relationships of true welcome? Young people sometimes perceive in churchmen a closed-mindedness, judgement, fear of diversity (doctrinal, ethical, of values), difficulty in welcoming the person as such with their history and fragility.

Encounter, in its deepest truth, is marked by gratuitousness. It always implies going out of oneself, openness, wonder, a sense of mystery. It implies giving but also receiving. The Church is making a great effort, especially with young people, to grow in welcome, in proposing by welcoming. But don't we also need to know how to receive and allow ourselves to be welcomed? Shouldn't the pastoral care of welcoming be counterbalanced by the pastoral care of yielding the initiative, of knowing how to insert oneself into situations and dynamics that are foreign to it, in other places, within initiatives managed by others (by young people themselves, even by non-believers who are nevertheless open to collaboration on paths of true humanity)? This implies an educational and pastoral action that recognises the event and the grace of the encounter. The proclamation of the Gospel and the educational and faith proposal must be situated within relationships that bring out the flavour of the event. The relationship is not, in essence, a means of getting a proposal accepted, but is a place where something great is happening and where God is at work, reaching us in ever new and unexpected ways. This is true for the evangelised but also, and above all, for the evangeliser.

Jesus' encounters in the Gospel must be continually meditated upon. Jesus is the master of true encounter and of the gratuitousness of encounter. He knows how to welcome each person by looking beyond appearances, without weighing up mistakes, discerning the desire for good that dwells in the heart of each person. He shows acceptance and trust even when he intervenes in a harsh and decisive manner. He gives, but he also knows how to receive and allow himself to be touched by what dwells in the soul of his interlocutor. His relationships open up spaces for God's gift to make its way.

He comes into contact with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:5ff.) by going beyond cultural and religious conventions. He reveals his thirst and his need for help to her. He knows how to lead her back to the truth about herself, without making her feel burdened by her mistakes. He announces the truth to her without violence or proselytism, but by intercepting her thirst for living water. He creates the conditions for God's gift to manifest itself. It is an encounter of reciprocity, of exchange of gifts; above all, it is an encounter in the sign of grace.

Jesus, who encounters everyone, starting with the poorest and most rejected, knows how to give everyone the trust that is always necessary to start afresh in life. The adulterous woman (Jn 8:1-11), judged and condemned by everyone, finds, thanks to Jesus' welcome, the possibility of starting afresh. Not words of condemnation but a presence of welcome and trust.

Francis rightly echoes Benedict's words, which focus on the centrality of encounter in Christian life and lead to the heart of the Gospel: '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' (*Evangelii gaudium*, 7). The encounter with Christ takes place within a web of encounters, pastoral encounters, which are not extrinsic (functional) to the encounter with Christ, but, in a certain way, already contain it. The sacramental experience itself, the privileged place of encounter with Christ, unleashes its meaning in the pastoral web of encounters, where the Church manifests her being as the sacrament of Christ. Faith is truly in the sign of encounter.