



Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment Preparatory Document - Summary

Introduction

“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11).

This verse is God’s plan for all people, including young people. The Church now wants to look more closely at how young people can be led to recognise and accept the call to the fullness of life and love. It also wants to ask young people to help in identifying the best ways to proclaim the Gospel in today’s world.

The vocation to love is lived out by the choices and decisions we make in life. The purpose of vocation discernment is to transform these choices into steps that lead towards the fullness of joy.

This preparatory document is a reflection on:

1. Some of the social dynamics of the world today, and how to read them in the light of faith.
2. The process of discernment so that the Church can offer young people help to discover their vocation.
3. Key points in a pastoral vocation plan for youth.

In the footsteps of the Beloved Disciple

The account of St John the Apostle in the Gospels is a biblical inspiration for this reflection on discernment and vocation. The key text is John 1:36-39 where John and Andrew approach Jesus who asks “what do you seek?”. They respond “where do you live” and Jesus then invites them to “come and see”.

This encounter leads to an abiding friendship with Christ. John’s example shows us how vocation can be a gradual process that requires discernment over time. Eventually John is led to discover the fullness of the joy of life and love. He makes a gift of his own life and participates in the proclamation of the Good News.

1. Young People in Today’s World.

(The document recognises that its reflections require adaptation to individual cultures. It broadly defines youth as being aged between 16 and 29 years old.)

1.1 A rapidly changing world.

We live in a world of rapid change. This has led to insecurity for many people. Unemployment and exploitation of minors are aspects of this situation, as is the great increase in refugees and migrants. Globalization offers great opportunities to some, but many others live in more difficult situations.

Today’s global culture is largely based on ‘science’ which is dominated by technological possibilities. This has often led to a throw-away culture which seeks short term profits, sometimes at the expense of excluding populations and harming the environment. Many societies are now multi-cultural and multi-religious. This offers both challenges and opportunities.

1.2 New Generations

Today's youth live in a very different world from their parents and educators. Technology has made some aspects of youth culture more homogenous, although there are still many cultural differences which affect young people in different places.

Young people today have a greater experience of living in a multi-cultural environment. Many grow up in a different society than their parents did, or they experience coming from a 'mixed' background (whether mixed in terms of ethnicity or religion, for example).

In some places, young people's freedom to make life choices is affected by poverty or violence. These problems are often worse for females.

Young people today often express a desire to have a greater role in society. Where the opportunities to do so are lacking, young people can slip into passivity. This impacts on their self-confidence.

Studies show that young people need personal and institutional points of reference which will support, encourage and challenge them. The role of parents and families is crucial but sometimes problematic. Older generations often underestimate the potential of young people. Parents can sometimes be absent or alternatively over-protective. In both cases, they make it more difficult for their children to develop in a mature way.

Young people also look for reference points among their peers. They are less sure about institutions (such as the Church) which they may distrust or feel anger towards. Many young people do not oppose the Church or the Gospel as such, but they often learn to live without them. In many places the Church is becoming more difficult to find, while the dominant culture is often at odd with Gospel values.

Modern communications technology and social media have changed the way that young people experience relationships. This is an issue that the Church needs to evaluate more carefully.

1.3 Young People and Choices

In a fast-moving world, people are regularly forced to change direction in life and take responsibility for the choices they have made. At the same time, the dominant western culture promotes an idea of freedom that prefers not to make lasting commitments. Young people are sometimes afraid to make decisions about their lives that involve risk or sacrifice.

The ability to make choices is also hampered by economic and social difficulties that affect young people and their families. These often have a greater impact on young women, and sometimes on ethnic and religious minorities.

The Church needs to find new ways to allow young people to act, and to support their projects.

2. Faith, Discernment, Vocation

The Church deeply wants to encounter, accompany and care for every young person, without exception. It now presents some ideas on how to accompany young people in their vocational discernment.

2.1 Faith and Vocation

Faith is "seeing things as Jesus does". It is the source of vocation discernment, and when we accept the gift of faith we need to make it fruitful through our concrete and consistent choices in life.

The Bible has many accounts of young people receiving a vocational call and then making a response. Through faith they



gradually become aware of God's loving plan for each person. John the Beloved Disciple is just one of those biblical figures we can draw inspiration from.

Our conscience is the place where this discernment takes place. Others may accompany and affirm a person, but the individual conscience is an inviolable place.

Life and history teach us that it is sometimes difficult to recognise the joy that God is calling us too. At other times disappointments or emotional attachments can make the path to fulfilment more difficult. The Gospel story of the Rich Young Man provides an example of this.

2.2 The Gift of Discernment

Discernment is a term which the Church uses to describe the making of decisions in situations of uncertainty. Discernment may take place on a moral or spiritual level. The focus of the Synod is on vocational discernment - the process by which a person make fundamental life choices, in dialogue with the Lord and listening to the Spirit. This is an issue which affects everyone, and it has an importance for believers.

The action and voice of the Spirit can be open to different interpretations. Discernment is required to reveal their meaning and decide. Three verbs can be used to guide this process - *to recognise, to interpret, to choose*.

• To recognise

Recognising concerns how the events of life affect us on an interior level, in terms of our desires, feelings and emotions. Recognising means that we identify these emotions, without making a judgment. We also capture the 'flavour' or feeling that remains - the consonance or dissonance between our emotions and what is in the depths of our hearts. Meditating on the Word of God is an important form of prayer at this time.

• To interpret

The next step is to interpret, which is to understand what the Spirit is calling us to do through what has been stirred up within us. It can be difficult to understand the origin and meaning of the emotions we feel, and then to check if they are leading us in a constructive direction.

This stage is sensitive and requires patience, vigilance and knowledge. Interpreting must be rooted in reality - considering the possibilities that are realistically available. It also requires us to look at the moral demands of the Christian life, so that we can apply them in the concrete situation.

Interpreting is always an internal dialogue between our hearts and the Lord, but the Church can offer valuable support by providing an experienced person to listen and offer guidance to the young person who is discerning.

• To choose

The next step in discerning and making a decision is to make a choice which reflects both our freedom and our personal responsibility. This choice must then be translated into action, even when there is an element of risk. Taking action will itself lead to further emotions which need to be recognised and interpreted. This will help us to evaluate the decision we have made and the action we have taken.

2.3 Paths Towards Vocation and Mission

Vocational Discernment is a long process which unfolds over time. The Bible accounts of Abraham and Sarah, and then in the Gospel, of Mary, describe vocations which become clear only over time. Every vocation is directed towards a mission. Accepting that mission means a willingness to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, even towards the cross. This mission requires a gift of self that can be especially difficult to make in deeply individualistic cultures. Contact with poverty, vulnerability and need are therefore of great importance to those in vocational discernment. This is particularly the case for those in seminary.

2.4 Accompaniment

Three basic beliefs underlie the process of discernment. The first is that the Spirit of God works in every person through feelings and desires. It is possible to interpret these signals through careful listening. The second belief is that the human heart is often conflicted and drawn in different directions due to human weakness and sin. The third belief is that every way of life requires a choice.



The Church's spiritual tradition offers a number of methods to help with discernment. Among these is the gift of personal accompaniment by someone who is not just aware of the theory of discernment, but who themselves has experience of recognising the action of the Spirit in their lives.

Spiritual guidance and accompaniment differs from psychological therapy because it involves helping the person to turn towards Christ and to prepare to meet him. In the Gospels we find certain traits highlighted which make up an ideal profile of a spiritual guide. These include being able to look on the young person with love, speaking with authority, identifying as the person's neighbour, being willing to walk alongside them, and acting as an authentic witness who challenges preconceived ideas.

This work of accompaniment requires the Church to share in the joy of young people rather than attempting to take control of their personal decisions.

3. Pastoral Activity

How does the Church help young people to accept their call to the joy of the Gospel? This work requires pastoral care and vocational discernment - two distinct areas which sometimes overlap.

3.1 Walking with Young People

Accompanying young people requires encountering them where they are, and taking them seriously. Many children are baptized and brought to Mass on Sundays, but this is not the same as making a mature choice for a life of faith. Arriving at that point can be a complicated journey for many people. Pope Francis said "Vocational pastoral ministry is learning the style of Jesus, who passes through the places of daily life, stops without being hurried and, by looking at our brothers with mercy, leads them to encounter God the Father."

This work of accompanying young people must be open to new approaches and not tied to a tried and tested format that worked in the past. Again, three verbs from the Gospels help us to see the approach Jesus took with others "*going out*", "*seeing*" and "*calling*".

"*Going out*" in pastoral vocational care means that the Church must be willing to leave its comfort zone and open itself up to the contributions of the young people it seeks to accompany.

"*Seeing*" reminds us of Jesus who looked with love at the men and women of his own time and appealed to their hearts. Likewise the Church must be able to see the reality of young people's lives if it is to offer them the Good News that speaks to their own circumstances. This seeing is never judgmental or intrusive, but respects the freedom and conscience of the young person.

"*Calling*" is the next step. Having looked on people with love Jesus then called them to new life. So too the Church must speak a word to young people which awakens their desire and shakes them out of complacency.

3.2 Agents

All Young People, Without Exception

In pastoral activity, young people are agents not objects. The Church must recognise and value their contribution and be willing to learn from them. Communities should be very attentive to the young people among them, especially those on the margins.

A Responsible Community

The entire Christian community should share in the responsibility of educating new generations. Those already doing this work deserve recognition. The Church should find ways to include young people in its structures on a diocesan and parish level, starting with pastoral councils. Where the Church runs initiatives for young people these should be well planned and resourced. Those who run them need specific formation as well.

People of Reference

Human development and vocational discernment cannot take place without the participation of adults who provide a credible witness of their faith. They should have a strong passion for education and a great capacity for discernment. Without these qualities adults severely disadvantage young people, and can even abuse them. Credible people of reference require a high level of training and support. This is particularly true of those who provide vocational discernment to those considering a vocation to priesthood or the religious life.

These people of reference include parents and families, shepherds of souls and teachers. Parents and families show God's care for every human being through a love which binds them to each other and to their children. Young people also need regular contact with clergy and consecrated men and women. Catholic teachers also provide tremendous witness as do other adults who provide mentoring roles in the workplace and those who coach or lead sports or artistic activities for young people. All these people demonstrate the meaning of Christian vocation in all its different aspects. Responding generously to one's own vocation is the primary way of performing pastoral vocational work.

3.3 Places

Becoming an adult means learning to manage different aspects of life such as the use of time and money, goods and services, balancing study, work and leisure, and developing skills in terms of relationships and sexuality. Different life experiences can guide us in accepting or pondering our vocations.

Specific Places in Pastoral Activities.

The Church offers a wide range of different places and opportunities where young people can meet, receive formation and have opportunities to serve. These include:

- World Youth Days.
- Diocesan and Parish youth events.
- Youth centres.
- Universities and Catholic schools.
- Social activities and volunteer work.
- Spiritual groups and ecclesial movements.
- Seminaries and houses of formation.

The Digital World

New technology and social media are themselves another 'place' where young people can be found. This area is a new opportunity for the Church and evangelization, but it also brings many risks and concerns such as pornography and cyber-bullying. Young people have much to teach the Church in terms of using this new area.

3.4 Resources

The Means of Expression in Pastoral Work

Although the Church has much to offer young people in terms of scripture, liturgy, art, catechesis, and media, it also must find a way to speak to young people in their own language. It should also

show appreciation for the creative contributions of young people. Sport, music and art are ways in which young people express themselves and which can be integrated into pastoral work.

Educative Care and the Path of Evangelization

Education and evangelization are intimately connected. The Church must approach these tasks with an awareness that ways of approaching the faith are less standardized nowadays and that it should be more attentive to the individuality of each person. Young people come to faith in many ways. The challenge for the Church is to receive everyone, following the example of Jesus who could speak with Jews, Samaritans, Greeks and Romans and answer the deep desires in each one of them.

Silence, Contemplation and Prayer

Finally, and most importantly, no discernment is possible unless we are truly familiar with the Lord. This requires a real dialogue with his Word, and the Church recommends *Lectio Divina* as a valuable method of prayer. In an increasingly noisy society, young people must be introduced to the value of silence and contemplation.



3.5 Mary of Nazareth

The Synodal process is entrusted to Mary. As the Church looks at how best to accompany young people in accepting God's call for their lives, we remember how Mary as a young woman accepted that Word and journeyed with it throughout her life.

Mary is an example to young people of how to listen, act with courage, experience human weakness and trust in the will of God. In her eyes, every young person can rediscover the beauty of discernment; in her heart, every young person can experience the tenderness of intimacy and the courage of witness and mission.