



Rediscovering dialogue between the generations: Synod 2018

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In October 2018, bishops of the Catholic Church will gather in the Vatican to discuss 'Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment'. Fr Giacomo Costa SJ, Special Secretary for the Synod of Bishops, describes the unique preparation for this meeting and says that the renewal of solidarity between the generations must be a priority for the Church and the whole of society.

The Church is preparing for another synod: the XVth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will be held from 3-28 October in the Vatican, on the theme 'Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment'.¹

There appears to be less public interest this time, both inside and outside the Church, and less media attention than were aroused by the two previous synods on the theme of the family (2014 and 2015). The title of the Synod has proved to be rather opaque, since it contains terms that can be difficult to understand, such as 'discernment', or interpreted in very different ways, such as 'vocation'; moreover, these are specifically ecclesial words. And yet the stated intention of the Synod is to address all young people, 'no one excluded', and therefore not only those who belong to Christian communities or regularly attend events.

In fact, the stakes of the next Synod are far from secondary, especially in a long-term perspective. Its aim is to address relations between the generations in today's context, that is, to think about the present in a way that leaves room for the future. Any organisation that fails to do this is condemned to lose relevance



and influence. The Church cannot afford to do this, not only for the sake of her own institutional future, but because this is a matter of the transmission of the Gospel message, which is her very *raison d'être*: in other words, her deepest vocation.

The relationship between the generations and the focus on assisting young people to find their own ways of participating and contributing are matters not only for the Church but for every institution and every society, too.

Method and objectives

A first element worth highlighting is the unprecedented level of inclusion and participation involved in preparing the Synod. The usual preparatory document, published in January 2017, was accompanied by a questionnaire that sought responses from all of the world's episcopal conferences. An international seminar held in September 2017 collected the opinions of experts from various theological and social science disciplines. At the same time, an online consultation offered young people from all over the world the opportunity to speak for themselves: more

than 100,000 filled it in. Finally – and this is totally novel – from 19-24 March 2018, 300 young people from all over the world (not all Catholics and not all believers) were invited to Rome to take part in the pre-synodal meeting. The final document they produced, which also integrated input from more than 15,000 young people who participated in the work via social networks, was handed to the pope and is one of the main sources of the *Instrumentum laboris* (IL), the document that will serve as a foundation for the Synod participants' discussions.

Thanks to these features, the preparation for the Synod has been a process of real encounter and listening between generations. As Pope Francis had expressly requested, new methods were tried so that young people could make their voices heard 'without filters' and be taken seriously. They did so with great enthusiasm and made a very stimulating contribution, precisely because it comes from a different point of view. Their involvement will be equally important when the local Churches receive the recommendations of the Synod, adapting and implementing them according to their different contexts.

As an event, the Synod is turning into a long process with many stages, responding to the stimulating leadership of Pope Francis who wants the style of the Church to be inspired by the culture of 'walking together'.

While the Synod officially remains 'of the Bishops', precisely because of their role as pastors, it cannot help but become an event that involves the whole Church. The evolution is not yet complete, and while the October assembly remains largely traditional in format, the direction taken is very clear. That direction can be summarised by the increasingly well-known expression from Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium*: 'generating processes of people-building' rather than 'possessing spaces' and 'obtaining immediate results'.²

However, there is still much to learn about how to engage the faithful, how to involve experts, how to highlight adequately the different social and cultural perspectives in all phases of the journey. It is an opportunity for the Church to learn to listen: especially when we are dealing with issues at a global level, we need to find concrete, appropriate and sustainable ways to do so that are anything but obvious. There is still a long way to go, but the steps taken so far have been and continue to be exciting!

In any case, among the first fruits of the Synod's journey of preparation we can cite: a better focus on the objectives. Here, I will discuss three of those objectives, which have clear links to others.

The first objective acknowledges the need of young people, forcefully expressed by them, to find people able to accompany them in identifying their personal path towards the fullness of life. The Synod will need to understand in which way and with which means the Church can respond to this need.

This first objective will certainly require ecclesial communities to question themselves, to embark upon a 'path of conversion' (cf. IL, Part Three). In their present condition, in many cases, they struggle to be recognised by young people as bearers of a message of joy and hope. We cannot generalise, but the Final Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting puts it clearly: 'One could attend, participate in, and leave Mass without experiencing a sense of community or family as the Body of Christ. Christians profess a living God, but some attend Masses or belong to communities which seem dead. Young people are attracted to the joy which should be a hallmark of our faith.'

The second objective of the Synod therefore concerns the renewal of the Church so that her profound identity also speaks to the world of young people, in terms they can understand.

Achieving these two objectives will require the universal Church and then the local Churches to make decisions and to identify objectives, ways and means. Therefore, the third objective of the Synod and of the process that October's Assembly will set in motion must be an increase in ecclesial communities' capacity for 'discernment'. Discernment, which *Amoris Laetitia* had already promoted to the Church as an appropriate way of proceeding to respond to complex situations that must be understood in their uniqueness, occupies centre stage in the Synod: in fact, it is simultaneously its theme, method and objective.

Communication and credibility

The Synod's process of preparation has provided proof of a problem of communication between the Church, in particular its official institutions, and the world of young people as a whole. Whether their home countries are traditionally Catholic or not, young people do not have a specific ecclesial reference point nor do they recognise themselves in the structures and organisations of Catholic inspiration. With different emphases and perspectives, both the young people and the Episcopal Conferences affirm this. Young people in particular point out the difficulty in feeling truly welcomed and listened to within the Church, in being trusted and finding spaces where they can take the initiative. They are kept away not only by a general lack of interest, but also by the 'poor preparation' of priests, compounded by financial and sexual scandals. Several episcopal conferences, on the other hand, declare that they do not know or understand some of the characteristic traits of the youth and are often frightened by them, in particular with regard both to the pervasiveness of digital media and to the global culture that they bear, with their consequences for the understanding of reality, the dynamics of learning and the structuring of interpersonal relations. The result of this strained communication is the estrangement of many young people from the Church, even though they have authentically spiritual questions and sensitivities. In a world where there is no shortage of alternatives, it is easier to look

elsewhere than continuing to try to converse, especially when the interlocutor – the Church and her representatives – cannot present itself in a stimulating and vital way. But the Church cannot let the treasure of faith become irrelevant to an entire generation.

The issue concerns above all the Church's capacity to present itself as a credible interlocutor for young people, who are very attentive to the themes of transparency and coherence and are accustomed to living in pluralistic milieus, where different views of the world are in immediate contact and competition – if not conflict – with each other. The weight of scandals and abuses of all kinds cannot be underestimated, but even more crucial is the interests at play in communications. Young people are particularly sensitive to attempts by adults to exploit them. They tend to shy away when they perceive that the interest in them is not genuine but motivated by institutional self-preservation.

In relating to the Church, young people want to be protagonists, starting with their own originality and the particular characteristics of the culture they bear. They want to receive support and sincere trust, without getting caught in the gears of a mechanism that overwhelms them.

Some typical elements of youth culture are a litmus test with which young people measure the credibility of their interlocutors. The first is rooted in inclusion of differences and concerns—above all the themes of gender, sexuality and affectivity. Positions perceived as abstract, unrelated to real experience, *a priori* or authoritarian, and not sufficiently attentive to the protection of differences, undermine the credibility of the messengers in the eyes of young people. The same applies even more to issues of inequality and social injustice, starting with the role of women in society and in the Church, and to environmental issues (including the issue of justice between the generations). Young people have their own way of thinking about and dealing with all this, with their own vocabulary; and their ways of getting involved are often far

removed from those of previous generations. But they will distance themselves from those who do not seem capable of paying adequate attention to them.

A Church that accompanies?

A second dilemma that comes out strongly is the culture of accompaniment. The Church traditionally adds the adjective 'vocational' here, but today, this is ambiguous and sometimes misleading, especially with an interpretation that narrows the term 'vocation' to priestly ministry or to religious life. This connection makes young people suspicious that the real objective is not to recognise the meaning of one's own life and to identify the concrete steps (in terms of family, relationships, work commitment, organisation of free time) that lead to the fullness of personal life (to the 'joy of love', in ecclesial terms), but rather to recruit more aspirants into the seminary.

This mistrust deprives young people of the vocabulary to convey a need that they also strongly express: a desire for support and understanding from role models along the process of growth towards maturity in a world that is becoming increasingly complex and marked by uncertainty and precariousness, making every choice extremely difficult. Young people want help to grow to maturity, but it must not be tinged with paternalism or attempts at manipulation and control.

Very often, young people meet adults who have lost the meaning of their parental role, both spiritual and in other senses, as well as their ability to exercise it, and who seem focused solely on their own self-realisation. These adults are therefore not able to pay enough attention to the specific needs of young people. Talking about the culture of accompaniment means discussing the relationship between generations, asking everyone to assume their own role and to respect their own limits, avoiding ambiguity and confusion. In an increasingly diverse world, renewing the culture of accompaniment also requires enhancing the potential of all the figures who, in different roles and for different reasons, are points of reference in the

lives of young people. The classic figure of the spiritual guide or director (who can be a priest, but also a religious or lay person) does not lose its importance, but it cannot claim a monopoly. Parents certainly play an accompanying role, but there are also many other figures who do: teachers, educators, coaches, psychologists, doctors, older colleagues, peers and, finally, the Christian community as a whole. Everyone obviously needs help and training to take on and perform this role better.

Finally, an important issue is that of closeness and support for all those young people who are socio-economically or culturally marginalised (starting with the lack of work, which is drastic in some countries), or who have suffered extremes of pain (such as illness), violence (victims of trafficking and abuse, child soldiers, etc.) or alienation (addictions, eating disorders, forms of detachment from the real world and refuge in the virtual one). It is necessary to offer opportunities for them to access the joys and fulfilment of life. Even more than in other 'non-marginalised' cases, it is essential to discover the best ways of offering these young people accompaniment. As the IL points out, 'this also requires the Church and her institutions to embrace the perspective of sustainability and promote consistent lifestyles, in addition to countering currently prevailing reductionisms (technocratic paradigm, idolatry of profit, etc.)' (§152).

A relational Church?

Lack of trust in institutions is undoubtedly one of the characteristics of contemporary culture, particularly for young people. Inconsistencies and failures undermine any institutional claim to be a point of reference, but it is not just a matter of scandals. This situation cannot fail to challenge the Church. For the Church counts on its own institutional structure as a support and carrier of its action or ministry. This reliance runs the risk of becoming a boomerang if not accompanied by the ability to develop authentic interpersonal relationships.

Being concrete or practical counts more towards credibility than any theoretical argument in the minds of young people. Here again, meaning and institutional belonging can no longer be taken for granted, defined in advance or received from above; they must be constructed and discovered by everyone through a path of experience and learning. While the institutional horizon is not excluded in principle, it is rather a point of arrival and not a starting point. This is true both for belonging to an association (ecclesial or not) and for achieving an emotional bond in a social institution like marriage. Here we also find elements of continuity with the work of the two synods on the family. Accordingly, elaborating the itinerary of one's own life in a journey of trial and error cannot be attributed to lack of backbone or reduced to superficiality; rather, in an age when one must go ahead without a map defined in every detail (that is, without the great idealistic and ideological systems according to which the whole range of life and its situations used to be laid out), it represents a strategy.

This kind of mentality displaces the model of the Church that has been built up over the long centuries of Christianity, within which many adults have grown up and to which they continue to refer more or less instinctively, leading them to misunderstand and even be shocked when that model has no hold over the younger generations. The challenge of the Synod is precisely to discover those riches within the spiritual and theological tradition of the Church that can allow it to tune into the mentality of this era, so that it can continue to show the relevance and vitality of the Gospel message for each generation. As we scroll through the IL, the tradition of discernment and of spiritual accompaniment appears to be extremely promising in this context.

Commitment and hope

The results of the Synod will determine if and to what extent this challenge is met, not so much in terms of documents – important as they are – but by processes of renewal and experimentation which will commence in local Churches and, ultimately, by the real conversion of ecclesial communities, which must be considered one of the objectives of the synodal process.

Taking young people seriously, with their culture, their needs, their resources and their weaknesses, places the need for change squarely before us. As our faith makes our Church aware, we need to be open to the new things that these generations bring with them: here the Spirit is at work and makes its appeal heard. The ongoing synodal process tells us that the Church has at least an awareness of the problem and a desire to deal with it seriously.

Several Bishops' Conferences say that there is not so much a generational conflict between young people and adults nowadays, but rather a 'mutual alienness': adults are not interested in conveying the founding values of our existence to younger generations, who view them more as competitors than potential allies³ – this statement challenges the whole of society.

In fact, it is not only the Church that has to grapple with the difficulties of communication between generations that result from the rapid socio-cultural changes of the past few years. This is shown most eloquently by the gap between digital experts and digital illiterates, with all that the use of new media means in terms of access to information, understanding of reality and images of the world. This divide not only affects families but also schools, work and Church groups, starting from parishes. Trying to address the issue from a diagnostic perspective and gradually identifying, through a committed effort of listening and shared interpretation, concrete paths of change in order to renew solidarity between the generations: this is what is at stake in the next Synod. The Synod is the means by which the Church carries out the service of revealing – for the whole of society – a priority that cannot be neglected.

Fr Giacomo Costa SJ is Special Secretary for the Synod of Bishops, appointed by the pope to coordinate the experts from the various disciplines involved in the synodal process in order to offer the Synod Fathers the tools to perform their role, particularly with regard to the framing of the theme, and to bring together their contributions and the results of their discussions.

Fr Costa is also Editor of Aggiornamenti Sociali, in which the original text of this article appears. It was published in the August-September 2018 issue (533-540), translated into English by John Coughlin and Robert Czerny, and adapted by Thinking Faith.

² *Evangelii Gaudium*, §223-224.

³ *Instrumentum Laboris* for XV Ordinary General Assembly for Synod of Bishops, §14:

<http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/instrumentum-laboris-for-the-synod-2018--young-people--the-faith.html>

¹ Please visit the Holy See's dedicated website:
www.synod2018.va