

## Summary of the Preparatory Document 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

### Introduction

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

Past Synod’s have dealt with the questions of how to proclaim the joy of the Gospel in today’s world and how to help families find this joy. This Synod on the topic, “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment,” seeks to examine how the Church can better lead and help young people to recognize and accept the call to the fullness of life and love by listening to young people in order to understand how the Lord is speaking in today’s world. Every person has a vocation to love, made known through a series of choices (professions, marriage, ordained ministry, consecrated life, etc.). The purpose of discernment is to see how one can transform themselves in order to achieve such joy. The Church has a basis of the “strength and beauty of young people” formed by the *Message of Vatican II to Young People* and provides resources in guiding the formation of consciousness and an authentic freedom.

This *Preparatory Document* will begin the Synod’s discussion and will be concluded with a series of questions that will involve young people answering questions on their lives in order to be used as a reference point during the discussion of the synod fathers.

### IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BELOVED DISCIPLE

John the Apostle serves as an inspiration for this process because he is both an example of a young person who chooses to follow Jesus and “the Disciple Jesus loved”, (Jn 13:23). It is in these verses that John calls Jesus the “lamb of God!” and begins to follow Jesus at the Messiah’s invitation to “Come and see”. After staying with Jesus, Andrew says to his brother Simon “We have found the Messiah.” Andrew brings his brother to Jesus where Jesus calls him Peter (Jn 1:36-39). Jesus is calling them to begin their inner journey and to prepare to move forward without really knowing where this will lead them (Jn 1:38-39).

John will be called to witness the Passion and Resurrection of his Master, he will recognize the Risen Lord during the miraculous draught of fish at the Sea of Galilee, at the foot of the Cross he will endure the profound grief of his Mother, entrusted to him. John’s example can be of assistance in understanding that the vocational experience is a gradual process of discernment and growth in faith, which leads to discovering the fullness of the joy of life and love.

### I. YOUNG PEOPLE IN TODAY’S WORLD

This chapter is the result of research in the social sphere of young persons, which is useful when addressing the issue of vocational discernment and provides a “concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual journey” (*Laudato sí*, 15). The subject will be addressed according to region and main dividing factors include countries where young people make up a significant and growing proportion of the population, countries marked by their Christian tradition and those where Christianity is the minority, and lastly gender differences. In this document, “youth” is referred to as persons who are roughly 16 to 29 years old; it is important to note that youth is also a stage of life that each generation understands in an unequal, original manner.

#### **1. A Rapidly-Changing World**

Contemporary society is characterized by a process of rapid change (*Laudato sí*, 18) and transformation that requires complete attention and planning while keeping in mind the consequences of today’s choices for the future. With the growth of uncertainty comes a state of vulnerability, which results from a combination of social unease, economic difficulties and

leads to people living in insecure situations that impact the courses taken in their lives. The contemporary world is characterized by its emphasis on technology and the possibilities offered by science “which sadness and loneliness appear to be on the rise” (*Misericordia et miseria*, 3); it is taught in *Laudato si* that the search for short-term profits is the basis for “throw-away” culture and threatens future generations. Many societies are increasingly multicultural and multireligious which poses both a challenge and an opportunity, in particular to provide possibilities for dialogue and enrichment from the point of faith.

## 2. New Generations

Today’s young people live in a world different than past generations in part due to economic and social changes that have led to new obligations and opportunities in turn creating a more homogenous generation. Multiculturalism is present in a different way in the world of young people; for example many young people are growing up in a society and culture different from their parents as a result of migration. Many young people are experiencing hardships which then lead to difficulties in making real choices in life because they do not have the possibility to exercise freedom; such as those young people experiencing poverty, those who are unemployed, victims of exploitation and slavery, etc. Studies conducted at the international level can help identify some characteristics of young people in our times.

### *Belonging and Participation*

Many young people desire to play an active role in the process of change that is currently occurring as confirmed by the experiences of involvement and innovation which see young people as major, leading characters acting with others. Just as there are young people who show a willingness to participate, there are young persons who show an intolerance in places where they lack opportunities to participate which lead to a resignation in their will to desire or dream.

### *Personal and Institutional Points of Reference*

Research studies show that young people have a need for persons of reference who are honest, consistent, credible and are able to offer support and encouragement without making them feel they are being judged. From this point, the role of parents and families is crucial yet problematic because older generations oftentimes do not have a clear idea of how to help young people focus on the future which results in them not saying anything or imposing their choices. Young people also seek reference points among peers in order to create opportunities for interaction and express their feelings in an informal manner. Young people often nourish indifference or anger towards institutions, including the Church, because they would like to see the Church become more attentive to individuals and social issues, but they recognize that this cannot happen immediately. It is in this context that young people learn to live without God and the Church and instead rely on minimally-institutionalized forms of religion and spirituality therefore making the presence of the Church less widespread and more difficult to encounter.

### *Towards a Hyper-Connected Generation*

Considering the younger generation is characterized by its relationship with modern technologies of communication, it is important to focus on how the experience of technologically mediated relations may structure the conception of the world, reality and interpersonal relationships.

## 3. Young People and Choices

The transition to adult life and the building of a personal identity requires a “reflective course of action,” but young people are increasingly refusing to continue on a personal journey of life if it means giving up the option to take different paths in the future. Opportunities and risks are intertwined in an entanglement which is not easy to navigate therefore requiring suitable cultural, social, and spiritual means so that the decision-making process continues to guide change rather than being changed itself. In the search to reawaken courage in young persons it must be taken into account that the person of Jesus and the Good News proclaimed by him continue to fascinate many young people. Young people’s ability to make decisions is affected by difficulties, such as the struggle to find work, obstacles in achieving economic independence and their inability to continue in one career. The economic and social hardships of families, the way young people adopt characteristics of contemporary culture, and the impact of new technologies require a response to the challenge in educating the young; this is highlighted by Pope Benedict XVI in his *Letter to the City and the Diocese of Rome on the Urgency of Educating Young People*. This situation makes urgent the promotion of personal skills by putting them at the service of a plan for common growth because young people appreciate working on projects which measure their ability to get results and exercise leadership directed toward helping the environment in which they live. It is important that young people propose and practise alternatives which show how the world or the Church could be, this is because social innovations express a positive involvement of new generations.

## **II. FAITH, DISCERNMENT, VOCATION**

At every phase of this Synod, the Church seeks to state her desire to care for every person without exception and that they cannot and will not abandon young persons to the isolation and exclusion that the world exposes them to. Being born and being cared for is the basic experience which places in the heart of each person the hope of being able to express one’s individuality in a journey towards the fullness of life. The wisdom of the Eastern Church is helpful in seeing how this confidence might be based in an analogy of “three births”: natural birth, birth in baptism, and the birth which is the passage “from bodily life in this world to the spiritual life of the next”, which opens a person to the full exercise of freedom (cf. *Discourse of Philoxenus of Mabbug*, 9). Offering others the gifts one has received means walking beside them on this journey as they deal with the difficulties in their own lives; the Church is called to rediscover her vocation of caring for others by having “strength of the spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love,” as spoken by Pope Francis (*Homily at the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome*). Some ideas will be presented regarding accompanying young people, beginning with the faith and listening to the tradition of the Church with the clear objective of supporting them in their vocational discernment and making fundamental life choices.

### **1. Faith and Vocation**

Faith is the source of vocational discernment because it provides vocational discernment with its fundamental contents; joyously and willingly accepting this gift of grace requires making it fruitful through concrete and consistent life choices. Faith is a gift and a response to feeling oneself chosen and loved because the joy of love is the fundamental call that God has placed in the heart of every young person so that one’s existence will bear fruit. Faith makes us aware of “the vocation of love and assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing for it is based on God’s faithfulness;” and it is this faith that “becomes a light capable of illumining all our relationships in society” (*Lumen fidei*, 53-54). The Bible has numerous accounts of young people receiving and responding to a vocational call in the light of faith as they become aware of God’s plan of profound love for each person. To believe is to listen to the Spirit and dialogue with the Word in order to learn how to trust in the Word, “embodying It” in the experience of everyday life, in moments when the cross is encountered and when one experiences the joy in seeing the signs of the resurrection. The

place for this dialogue is the conscience, which is a place where an invitation to discern the voice of the Spirit and decide how to respond is present. At times people struggle with the discouragement or the pressure of emotional attachments that stalls a person on the path to fulfillment, but human freedom never loses the fundamental capacity to recognize the good and carry it out.

## **2. The Gift of Discernment**

Making decisions and guiding one's actions in situations of uncertainty and in the face of conflicting inner forces is the place for exercising discernment, which can be exercised in interpreting the signs of the times, distinguishing good from bad, recognizing temptation, etc. The focus of this synod is on vocational discernment, beginning with the question of how a person does not waste the opportunities for self-realization leading to the questions of how does a person live the good news of the Gospel and respond to the Lord? The Spirit speaks and acts through the life of each person; it is the role of discernment to reveal their meaning and to make a decision.

### Recognizing

Recognizing relates to how life's happenings affect the interior life and requires making emotional richness emerge and ascertaining these feelings of sadness, fear, joy, fulfillment, etc. without making a judgement. In the recognizing stage the word of God is of great importance because it focuses on the ability to listen and also on one's feelings and emotions.

### Interpreting

Interpreting is being able to understand what the Spirit is calling a person to do and what the Spirit stirs up in someone; it is being able to understand the origin and meaning of one's desires and emotions. In order to interpret effectively, a person needs to consider the effects of social and psychological conditioning and must confront reality and realistic possibilities. Interpreting requires a confrontation with the moral demands of Christian life and a desire to apply them to the concrete situation which leads one to make the most of one's gifts resulting in an inspiring message for young people. Interpretation is done through internal dialogue with the Lord and can often be aided by a person who is experienced in listening to the Spirit.

### Choosing

Once desires and emotions are interpreted, choosing then allows one to exercise authentic human freedom in concrete situations. Promoting free and responsible choice is the goal of every pastoral vocational program and is exercised through discernment. A choice must not remain in the interior, rather it should take flesh and allow for the possibility to determine if the decision is good or if it must be reevaluated.

## **3. Paths Towards Vocation and Mission**

Vocational discernment is a process that takes place over a gradual period of time where one must monitor the signs used by the Lord to indicate a personal and unique vocation. Just as in the Bible, every vocation is directed towards a mission undertaken with reluctance or enthusiasm. Only by giving up one's own needs does a person become open to accommodate to God's plan in all aspects of life and make choices that result in the willingness to live life in compliance with the generosity of the gift of self.

## **4. Accompaniment**

These are three basic beliefs that underlie the process of discernment: that the Spirit of God works in the heart of every man through feelings and desires that are bound to ideas, images and plans; that the human heart is often divided because it is attracted to contrary feelings; and that every way of life imposes a choice. Personal accompaniment is an emphasized resource during the discernment process because it allows one to have personal experience of interpreting the movements of the heart in order to recognize the actions of the Spirit. Accompaniment fosters a person's relationship with the Lord and re-orientates a person towards the Lord in order to prepare for an encounter with Him. Jesus' encounters with those around him show an ideal profile of the what a person accompanying a young person in vocational discernment should look like, such as a being an authentic witness or making the choice to "walk beside" someone. The Church accepts her call to collaborate in the joy of young people and such service is founded in prayer and asking for the gift of the Spirit.

### **III. PASTORAL ACTIVITY**

How does the Church help young people accept their call to the joy of the Gospel, especially in these times of uncertainty, volatility and insecurity? The purpose of this chapter is to focus on how to respond to the challenge of pastoral care and vocational discernment.

#### **1. Walking with Young People**

Accompanying young people requires meeting them where they are, adapting to their times and should be done as young people seek to make sense of the reality in which they live. Making a mature choice for a life of faith requires a journey that includes several paths and is often far removed from ecclesial communities, this is why it is essential to walk with young people. Every community needs to give importance to creative ways of addressing young people in a personal way because no seed for vocations can be fruitful if approached with a closed and "complacent pastoral attitude that says: 'we have always done it this way'" (*Evangelii gaudium*, 33), but rather follow this pastoral style of Jesus: "going out", "seeing", and "calling."

##### Going Out

Pastoral vocational care means accepting Pope Francis's invitation to "go out," which is a sign of inner freedom from routine activities so that young people can be leading characters in their own lives.

##### Seeing

"Going out" into the world of young people means listening and being attentive to the joys, hopes, sadness and anxieties which then leads to inculturation of the Gospel.

##### Calling

Calling means awakening a desire and jarring people from what blocks them, it is in this way that people are impelled to embark on a journey and encounter the joy of the Gospel.

#### **2. Agents**

##### All Young People, Without Exception

In pastoral activity, young people are not objects but agents and have the right to be guided in life's journey. Each community is called to be attentive to young people, especially those experiencing poverty and marginalization and lead them to become involved in life; this is a gift of the Spirit which can truly manifest a proper manner of acting by a Church which is "going out."

### *A Responsible Community*

The entire Christian community should feel the responsibility of educating new generations and the Church needs to give major importance to young people's involvements in the structures of participation in diocesan and parish communities, starting with pastoral councils, inviting young people to make the creative contributions and accepting their ideas. It is essential to undertake the task of thinking, coordinating and implementing the pastoral programme for young people in a correct, consistent and effective manner which will require continual preparation of those responsible for formation.

### *People of Reference*

The role of credible adults is basic in the course of human development and vocational discernment, but sometimes unprepared and immature adults tend to act in a negative manner which can create negative dependencies and severe disadvantages which can intensify to the level of abuse. Having credible people of reference requires training and applies in a particular way to those who accompany persons in their vocational discernment to accept a call to the ordained ministry and consecrated life. Parents and family have an irreplaceable educational role and express God's care for every human being through a love which binds them to each other. Shepherds of souls have the ability of a genuine involvement with youth by going out and listening to young people in order to "help them understand the movements of their heart and guide their steps" (*Address to Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocations*). Teachers and other persons in education bear witness to the human and Christian vocation which is accepted and lived with faithfulness and dedication, and are truly performing pastoral vocational work by responding generously to one's vocation.

## **3. Places**

### *Daily Life and Social Commitment*

Becoming an adult means learning to independently manage all aspects of life; for young people this experience of learning is an opportunity to put order in their lives and exercise a course of discernment. The commitment to listen to the cries of the poor, and with them the earth, can be a real opportunity to encounter the Lord and the Church and to discover one's vocation.

### *Specific Places in Pastoral Activity*

The Church offers young people places for meetings, cultural formation, evangelization, celebration and service, all which seek to adopt a suitable operating style of "going out", "seeing" and "calling." World Youth Days stand out on the world level as a way of offering experiences for young people. Parishes host events for young people through the sacramental life which offers opportunities to grow by accepting the gift of God in their lives and are an indication of the Church's concern for young people. Universities and Catholic Schools are another indication of the Church's presence among youth. Social activities and volunteer work provide opportunities for unselfish service and in turn can be an opportunity for spiritual growth and vocational discernment. Associations and ecclesial movements offer young people programs for discernment, such as missionary experiences and pilgrimages. Seminaries and houses of formation have the task of providing young people who respond to God's call with experiences, including intense community life, which will allow them to be able to accompany others.

## **4. Resources**

### *The Means of Expression in Pastoral Work*

The Church sometimes has a difficult time finding the proper language and expression to talk to young people, but many dream of a Church capable to involving young people by showing appreciation and importance of young people's creativity and talents.

In a particular sense, sports, music, and other artistic expressions are an educational resource because they offer opportunities and ways young people can manifest their individuality.

*Silence, Contemplation, and Prayer*

No discernment is possible without cultivating a familiarity with the Lord and a dialogue with his Word. A main objective in the pastoral care of young people is to provide them with opportunities to enjoy the value of silence and contemplation and receive formation in understanding one's experiences.

**5. Mary of Nazareth**

The synodal process is entrusted to Mary, the young woman of Nazareth, who in every stage of existence accepted the Word and pondering it in her heart was the first to fulfill this journey. Each person can discover in Mary's life the way to listen, the courage that faith generates, the depths of discernment and dedication to service. Recalling the "great things" that the Lord accomplished in her, the Virgin felt fully loved and supported by the "fear not" of the angel; in her eyes every young person can experience the tenderness of intimacy and the courage of witness and mission.