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Christus Vivit

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Easter came early for Youth Ministers! Pope Francis by publishing *Christus Vivit* in a way shortened our Lent 2019 by telling all who work with the young Church, that Christ is Alive!¹

Christ is Alive! is the opening words of Pope Francis' Exhortation. This document while addressed to the youth of world and the entire people of the world is "not a kind of manual of youth ministry or a practical pastoral guide."² *Christus Vivit* is a truly personal and reflective document by Pope Francis. It is a document of hope and challenge. It continues in the tradition of his previous Exhortations.³

It is the fruit of a synodal process. *Christus Vivit* is the first Exhortation post Vatican II on the topic of young people. For that very reason it deserves closer scrutiny. The document can be read through the eyes of a young person or even as a practitioner of youth ministry. However, I would suggest you read the document almost as if you are on the Road to Emmaus; walking on that road and listening and trying to understand what is going on with young people.

BACKGROUND TO EXHORTATION

Approximately two years ago I was in Rome for a meeting preparing for World Youth Day in Panama. At the end of the meeting Pope Francis presented his vision and hope for young people in the Church. He had a plan for a synodal approach to finding out what questions young people had and trying to understand their realities better.

1 Published on 25th March 2019

2 *Christus Vivit* 203

3 The previous Apostolic Exhortations are: *Evangelii Gaudium* 2013, *Amoris Laetitia* 2016 and *Gaudate et Exsultate* 2018

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When it was announced by Pope Francis that he was holding a Synod of Bishops in October 2018 on the theme “*Young people, Faith and Vocation Discernment*” many youth ministers and leaders who worked in this field received a new sense of purpose.

The Synod was directed at those aged 16-29. Pope Francis takes the view that anyone aged outside of this bracket is either a child or a young adult who needs to integrate more fully into the adult world of Church.⁴

Young people from all over the world discerned with Bishops what are the key areas of mission and energy that are needed in Church. In March 2018 prior to the Synod 300 young people attended a pre-Synod week long listening event in Rome which was attended by Pope Francis.

In Ireland regional meetings were held with leaders to try to agree a common approach to finding out the questions that young people are asking. Leaders of youth “walked together” listening to the questions and concerns that young people had. Interestingly many of the views of Irish young people were echoed by contemporaries throughout the Western world. Many are disconnected from Church and find the Church at times distant to their realities. During the World Meeting of Families in Dublin Archbishop Eamon Martin and Bishop Donal Mc Keown took part in a “listening” exercise with many young people to assist them prior to attending the Synod in October.

This worldwide listening to young people views on many topics culminated in the Synod of Bishops in October 2018, which was also attended by some young people. The Church has been touched by the cries, concerns and hopes and dreams of the young people of the world.

RECEIVING CHRISTUS VIVIT

Pope Francis began his Pontificate on the principle that the Church needed to go back to the peripheries to evangelise. Younger generations are a periphery of sorts.

This document reads more like a letter to young people rather than a traditional Apostolic Exhortation. It is very accessible. Unlike other Papal Encyclicals or Exhortations, a lot of the technical language of theology and social analysis are absent.

There is an energy in the text that is not often found in papal texts. Overall the text comes from a spiritual and ecclesial experience of listening, discernment, consultation and synodal process. Pope Francis continues to explore his teaching on “encounter” and Jesus

4 However, this can be difficult as many Church leaders erroneously at times group young people from early teens to late thirties.

is presented as both a friend and leader.⁵ *Christus Vivit* is not the end of the synodal process. It is the beginning of the next step for all who work and minister to young people. It is a vision for evangelisation and young people. Inside the pages it is vast in its understanding of the “world” of young people but also in the challenge that Church has in reaching out to the younger generations. It is to be read by youth ministers, leaders of local churches and those who take an interest in the pastoral outreach to youth. The life of a young person and the vocation to which God calls each one of them is “Holy Ground” which has to be respected, nurtured and encouraged by their parents and pastoral leaders. Pope Francis tells young people “Christ is alive, and he wants you to be alive... he calls you and he waits for you to return to him to start over again.”⁶ It is a document of hope and reality.

GETTING INSIDE CHRISTUS VIVIT

In *Christus Vivit* we are reminded that God is alive and continues to be active in our world. God is on the move and not passive. The revelation of God continues. Young people can connect with God but maybe at times they don’t involve the Church in this journey. The first two chapters reflect on how God used some young people, because “age did not establish privileges”.⁷ In the Bible God was revealed through young people who trusted God. Focusing on the person of Jesus Pope Francis speaks of a young Church when the Church “dares to be different”.⁸

“That is why an institution as ancient as the Church can experience renewal and a return to youth at different points in her age-old history.”⁹

There is an admission that Jesus is not always presented to young people as “attractive and effective”. He also notes that some young people consider the Church “a nuisance, an irritant”. He is asking for a Church that “listens” and not one that condemns.¹⁰ “Who am I to condemn?” was the take away quote from an interview on his return from Brazil in 2013 when he was asked about gay people. Younger generations like Pope Francis’ ability to appeal to them with relevant statements. Pope Francis has not changed the course of youth ministry, but simply has helped to focus the tone of what

5 In *Evangelii Gaudium* 105-106 Pope Francis noted the difficulties in youth ministry and how Church structures can prevent young people from being listened to. He also notes that it is the responsibility of the “entire community” to evangelise and educate the young.

6 *Christus Vivit* 2

7 *Ibid.*, 14

8 *Ibid.*, 36

9 *Ibid.*, 34

10 *Ibid.*, 38 “We need to make more room for the voices of young people to be heard.”

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is said to young people. There is no magic bullet in this text as to how to begin a youth programme or to reach young people. The exhortation is not a panacea and pastoral solution. Rather, it is a very Christocentric document, noting the reality that all our ministry, including our mission with youth begins with Christ. There is an appeal for the document to be reflected on by the wider Church community. At times you can see the direct challenge to young people. Ultimately Pope Francis is trying to inspire a generation of young people and balance with those Church leaders for “general considerations for the Church’s discernment.”¹¹

Young people he reminds us are not the only the future but the “now” of God. They are active protagonists in our world “they are helping to enrich it”.¹² He is critical of a Church that has dictated to young people with pre-packaged answers without trying to understand the questions that young people are asking. A listening Church is one that understands the many ways of being young in the world.

Pope Francis demonstrates he understands that young people live in many different complex realities. He reflects on some of the experiences young people with a changing world. He also notes that young people are on the frontline of crisis when it comes to sexual exploitation, trafficking, war.¹³ He also notes that some young people “struggle to find their place in society.”¹⁴ Pope Francis addresses the sex abuse crisis, a history of sexism and how an overly narrow focus on just several moral issues can keep young people away from the Church.¹⁵ There is a challenge to young people to remind anyone, including priests, if they are “at risk” or have “lost the joy of his ministry”, of their commitment to God. By using images of “dark cloud” and “shadows” and inviting a purification of the Church “young people who love Jesus Christ and his Church... can be a source of great healing if they employ their great capacity to bring about renewal...and demand constant witness...”¹⁶ It is arguable if this is naïve or pastorally useful.

“A church always on the defensive, which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no room for questions, loses her youth and turns into a museum. How, then, will she be able to respond to the dreams of young people?”¹⁷

11 Ibid., 3

12 Ibid., 64

13 Ibid., 72

14 Ibid

15 Ibid., 96-102 deals exclusively with Sexual Abuse.

16 Ibid., 100

17 Ibid., 41

He speaks of young people having a natural desire to improve the life of the Church and the world around them. If older people in the Church will let young people try, it will keep the Church youthful too.¹⁸

CENTRAL TRUTHS

Pope Francis also reveals that there are certain truths that all of us need to keep hearing. He reminds the reader that “God loves you”, “Christ saves you” and “He is Alive”.¹⁹ The tone of the message in the fourth chapter is that no matter what you have done in life, God is a forgiving God who loves each person uniquely. In the lead up to the Synod many young people voiced the reality that the Church seemed to judge them by how they lived their lives. Pope Francis is reaching out reminding them of the compassion of God and the reality that Jesus can offer them a better path through life. He offers hope by saying “stop complaining and look to the future, for with him this is always possible.”²⁰

Young people are challenged to be “courageous missionaries” in the world. “Do not be afraid to go and bring Christ into every area of life, to the fringes of society, even to those who seem farthest away and most indifferent.”²¹ There is an urgency in the tone here as he also challenges further by reminding young people, “don’t wait until tomorrow to contribute your energy, your audacity and your creativity to changing our world.” Inviting young people not just to dream dreams, but to be protagonists for change in our society and Church will only take place when young people are allowed space to do this. However, he does note that in some areas young people are doing this in politics, environmental issues and community building. He is asking young people to reflect and react to their realities considering their relationship with God. He is also connecting the experiences of youth and building on firm foundations and roots.²²

The intergenerational nature of Church and family is evident too. The “preserved memory” of previous generations is important for young people to know the story of what happened in the past. Connecting the dreams and memories with older people and youth is an important lesson. Sometimes to go forward we need to know where we have come from. There is almost an unsaid comment that Pope Francis would love to see the energy of youth more active in the life of the Church. Maybe the leaders in Church need

18 *Ibid.*, 42

19 *Ibid.*, Chapter Four 112-129

20 *Ibid.*, 127

21 *Ibid.*, 177

22 *Ibid.*, Chapter 8

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to invite our young people to take a more active role to reactivate the areas of pastoral life that are tired, maturing and slowing down. The enthusiasm of youth is needed in Church too.

IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH MINISTRY

Youth ministry must change. Pope Francis notes that “young people frequently fail to find in our usual programmes a response to their concerns, their needs, their problems and issues.”²³ Youth ministry has globally become focused only on the few. There is a need for all pastoral programmes to reflect on how they are programmes that reach out rather than are insular. However, this is not just the responsibility for the youth minister but for the “entire community... and the urgent requirement that they take on a greater role in pastoral outreach.”²⁴ Chapter seven is not to be read as one where solutions to problems are to be found. It can assist the reader where to commence youth ministry as well as noting what does not work.

A revised youth ministry needs to be “flexible” with new styles and strategies. Any review of youth ministry should nurture what is working. If something is working and bearing fruit, then we need to make use of it. Youth ministry has to be judged by its “outreach” and “growth”.²⁵ It needs to “awaken and consolidate the great experiences that sustain the Christian life.”²⁶ The inclusivity of youth ministry also has to take into consideration that participants don’t have to be fully accepting of all parts of Church teaching. Referencing what he calls “popular youth ministry” we might translate as youth work. Youth ministry in some parts of Church has become elitist. “Some of our pastoral activities can assume that journey of faith has already begun, but we need a “popular” youth ministry than can open doors and make room for everyone.”²⁷ Pope Francis is correct in insisting that a total review of youth ministry is needed.

“Nor does one have to accept fully all the teaching of the Church to take part....”²⁸

VOCATION AND DISCERNMENT

Vocation is understood as service to others. “In discerning your vocation, it is important to determine if you see in yourself the

23 *Ibid.*, 202

24 *Ibid.*, also paragraph 243 also speaks about the collective role the community plays in accompanying youth.

25 *Ibid.*, 209

26 *Ibid.*, 211

27 *Ibid.*, 234

28 *Ibid.*

abilities needed to perform that specific service to society.”²⁹ Vocation in this sense is not just a religious call. This can happen in their world of work, or relationships and marriage or also priesthood or religious life. The key message is to root vocational discernment in the call to being holy in the world which was a core theme of Vatican II.³⁰ Our vocation is God’s plan for us.

He spends the final chapter reflecting on “wisdom of discernment” and how this is linked to our own vocation in the world.³¹ Young people can benefit from those in Church who have practiced discernment and accompaniment. This task commences with the ability to listen to young people.³²

CONCLUSION – YOUNG PEOPLE WAIT FOR THE CHURCH TO CATCH UP!

Pope Francis concludes with “joyful hope” and encouragement to young people. He also is allowing space for our Church leaders not to be fearful of young people, but to allow space for encounters of faith. There is an urgency and a joy that young people can bring to the “joy of the Gospel”. Implicit in this is the slow changing culture of Church versus the impatient youth who may be further ahead of the institution.

“The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them! And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us.”³³

So how will this document be received in the local Churches it is intended for? We will have to wait and see. From a cursory reading the whole text is very Christo centred. It is not about a plan or a solution. The starting point is a hopeful one. Christ is alive. Not dead. All our ministry and outreach need to begin with the Risen Jesus and the story that can transform.

Pope Francis shows he understands our younger generations because the text relies heavily on the imagery of friendship. Younger generations can relate to this. Friends at times can be more important than family. It is a text to be read slowly. A document to be enjoyed. It can nourish, comfort, challenge and create inspiration for creating new paths of evangelisation to young people in our Church.

“We get the youth we deserve” was one of the conclusions of Cardinal Lustiger the former Cardinal of Paris. He argued that there

²⁹ Ibid., 255

³⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 11.

³¹ *Christus Vivit*, 279

³² Ibid., 291

³³ Ibid., 299

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wasn't as much a gap between the Church and young people, rather young people find it hard to find their place within the Church.³⁴ Our parishes and dioceses at times find it difficult to create pastoral outreach that impacts on the young Church. It will be interesting to see what resources that Bishop's conferences will put into making this exhortation relevant to youth leaders and parishes anxious about the absence of youth. There was great fanfare when Pope Francis published *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Amoris Laetitia*. It has been striking how much quieter this document has been received. A few references to vocations at Chrism masses misunderstands the complete tone of this document. Pope Francis wants young people to be part of the Church today.

It will be important over the coming months for a wider discussion and plan on how to integrate a declining generation of young people active in faith into a Church that seems to be declining in relevance to younger generation. The evangelisation of youth is important. Hopefully *Christus Vivit* can provide a necessary impetus to begin again our ministry towards the young Church.

34 Jean Marie Lustiger, *Dare to Live – Prospects for Christianity today*, St Paul's Publications, UK. 1985

Be Patient. Perhaps the essential quality for anyone who lives in community is patience: a recognition that we, others, and the whole community take time to grow. Nothing is achieved in a day. If we are to live in community, we have to be friends of time. And the friend of time doesn't spend all day saying: 'I haven't got time.' He doesn't fight with time. He accepts it and cherishes it.

– JEAN VANIER, *Life in Community*, illustrated by Seán Maher (London: Darton, Longman and Todd) p. 45.