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THE VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATION OF YOUTH MINISTRY



DOSSIERS

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EVANGELISATION, MINISTRY, DISCIPLESHIP

Without relativising other questions connected with the “how”, the “when”, the “where” or the “with whom”, the key question around which the discussion on youth ministry revolves concerns the “why”. It is precisely the “why” that provides the motive and defines the intentionality of pastoral action. Simply, yet essentially, the Church “does” ministry because this action is a constitutive moment of the “rich, complex and dynamic” evangelising mission for which she exists.¹ Through the great mandate of the risen Lord (cf. Mt 28:19–20)², the Christian community was sent to make disciples of all nations.³ To this end, proclaiming Jesus and bringing people to the life of God and to the Christian faith through Baptism is fundamental. Nevertheless, this is not enough. It is also a duty to recognise, empower and make co-responsible those who have been begotten as children; to educate them, form them and teach them to observe all that Christ has commanded us; to accompany them, guide them, care for them and strengthen them along the paths of existence by walking with them. It is precisely here that pastoral action is situated. Indeed, it is configured as the dimension or sphere of the Church’s mission in which, beginning from witness, proclamation and the subsequent catechetical-initiatory journey, “the faith of the baptised is nourished and they are helped in the permanent process of conversion of Christian life”.⁴ As an expression of the Church’s one ministry, there are no grounds for thinking that youth ministry may exempt itself from this task. There are no alibis that can distract the gaze of those who work with young people from this responsibility shared by every expression of ecclesial ministry. Generating missionary disciples is therefore the specifically theological aim also of youth ministry!⁵ This is the goal that should orient all its interventions! This is the bigger picture that calls for our attention and in view of which we are to adopt “suitable processes” (EG, no. 225)! Ultimately, times, structures and methods are at the service of this objective.⁶ In short, it is in the answer to why one “does” ministry with young people that the profile of this ecclesial action is defined. Certainly, it is directed towards promoting their humanity, restoring their dignity, forming their conscience, accompanying them so that they may be capable of discerning the concrete choices to be made in truth and uprightness and may commit themselves responsibly in life. Furthermore, it seeks to foster their spiritual growth. Above all, however, it aims to proclaim Jesus Christ and the unavoidable demands of Christian life, so as to initiate and foster the growth of their missionary discipleship in the Church together with other brothers and sisters. This is a distinctive uniqueness!

“Youth ministry can present the ideal of life in Christ as the process of building a house on rock”⁷. We ask ourselves: are we aware of this singularity? Are we convinced that, beyond all the good that is done and can be done for young people in multiple and creative ways, youth ministry should be distinguished by proposing a journey of faith that “is expressed in vocation and following the Lord Jesus”?⁸ Are we content with offering praiseworthy social, educational or welfare “services”, without allowing ourselves, however, to rethink “the goals, structures, style and methods” of what we do in the light of the mandate we have received (EG, no. 33)?

1. Cf. PAUL VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi: Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelisation in the Modern World* (8 December 1975), no. 17. Hereafter: EN. For ecclesiastical documents I have chosen not to indicate the complete bibliographical references, but only their title and date of publication, considering that the texts are available online.
2. Cf. FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World* (24 November 2013), no. 19. Hereafter: EG.
3. It is interesting to note that the structure of the Matthean sentence rests on the verb “make”, in the imperative, followed by two disconnected gerunds, “baptising” and “teaching”, which articulate the action of the disciples themselves. In this light, the pivot of evangelisation is not only to bear witness to the Gospel nor only to proclaim it — although both these actions are essential — but to make disciples. Cf. R. FRANCE, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 2007, pp. 1106–1119.
4. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE NEW EVANGELISATION, *Directory for Catechesis*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2020, no. 35.
5. By “theological” I mean that, substantially, generating young people into Christian life signifies enabling them to profess faith permeated with hope in charity. When, for various reasons, such a goal is not or cannot be pursued, ecclesial action with young people takes on other forms that should be understood as “youth ministry” only in a derived and analogical sense. To explore this aspect further, I would refer to my book: G. CAVAGNARI, *Go and Make Disciples. Towards an Evangelising Youth Ministry*, Elledici, Turin 2021, pp. 21–66, especially 56–63.
6. Cf. D. FIELDS, *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry: 9 Essential Foundations for Healthy Growth*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1998, pp. 17–18.
7. FRANCIS, *Christus vivit: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God* (25 March 2019), no. 242. Hereafter: ChV.
8. ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, *Communicating the Gospel in a Changing World: Pastoral Guidelines for the First Decade of the 2000s* (29 June 2001), no. 51.

VOCATION, VOCATIONS, DISCERNMENT

Growing in discipleship

If ministry with young people is configured as “everything that the Christian community does to help young people embrace and mature in their faith so as to become authentic disciples of Jesus Christ”,¹ then it becomes clear that it cannot but “be seen in the light of our Christian vocation” (ChV, no. 254). Not only “because youth is the privileged season for life choices and for responding to God’s call” (FD, no. 140) – a matter of biographical appropriateness² – but also because, were it not so, it would not even be a ministry worthy of such a name nor equal to its role within the Church – a matter of ecclesiological pertinence. Vocation presents itself as the natural destination, the point of arrival and the unifying perspective of every pastoral journey with young people. A youth ministry lacking a vocational soul, imprint and intentionality would therefore prove incomplete. It must create a “vocational culture” and work so that everyone may breathe this “air”.³

The theme of vocation must be considered in depth. It is pointless to claim to resolve it in a few lines. For those engaged pastorally with young people, the documents of the recent 2018 Synod offer pertinent elements in this direction. Indeed, from the synodal journey “it became clear that youth ministry needs a vocational slant”,⁴ considering all young people as recipients and no less as subjects of complete processes of initiation into adult life, of progressive integration of the various dimensions of life and of insertion into the civil and Christian community. One cannot fail to notice, however, the vigour with which, along these lines, “Francis took one of the themes commonly perceived as most exclusive to specific forms of ecclesial life and made it the pivot of youth ministry”.⁵ Clearly, for this purpose, a broad vision of vocation as the definitive orientation of life in the sign of the *sequela Christi* (cf. ChV, no. 257) is foundational at the level of criteria (cf. ChV, no. 248).⁶ In fact, following the Lord is the only calling of which Scripture speaks. The various “particular” callings are merely different ways of going after Him (cf. Mt 4:19; 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23). Beyond the desire to know and choose what God’s plan is “for me”, it is therefore necessary to know and embrace God’s plan “for all”. And God has made this plan known through an objective, universal, necessary, certain and clear way: to come to Him through the Son (cf. Jn 14:6). In this sense, “the ‘vocationality’ of youth ministry should not be understood in an exclusive sense, but an intensive sense”, the Synod affirms (FD, no. 140); Pope Francis reiterates this: not in a “restrictive sense”, but in an inclusive one.⁷ On this point there is enormous work to be done, because it involves changing not only a viewpoint deeply rooted in the imagination of pastoral workers, but also that of young people themselves.⁸

Among the young people and adults we know... how is the term “vocation” perceived? What idea do they have of it? How do they interpret it? How do they react to it? Does a narrow or a broad conception of vocation prevail? Do they hold a univocal or a plurivocal understanding of it?

Only at a second stage, and as an expression of that universally and eternally unifying vocation to discipleship, is grafted that singular call which God addresses to each individual. According to the usual typology, there is the vocation to ordained priesthood, in order to become shepherds of God’s flock (cf. FD, no. 89); the vocation to consecrated life, in order to be prophets of fraternity and to care for the least in the peripheries of the world (cf. FD, no. 88); and the vocation to marriage, in order to bear witness to the Gospel through mutual love, procreation and the education of children (cf. FD, no. 87).⁹ Moreover, today it is recognised that the condition of being single, if “lived in a spirit of faith and gift, can be one of the many roads by which the grace of baptism is realized and a person advances towards the holiness to which are all called” (FD, no. 90; cf. ChV, no. 267). In every case, all the other callings subsist within the first calling. “The different ways of following Christ express, each in its own way, the mission to bear witness to the event of Jesus, in which every man and every woman finds salvation” (FD, no. 84).

Are we aware that the calling upon which the entire vocational edifice is built, and to which we are all summoned together without exception, is the baptismal calling?

As regards particular vocations, we may perhaps know of a certain youth ministry that understands vocation in a “restricted” way. Rather than responding to the existential journeys of young people, it configures accompaniment on the basis of institutional needs and the search for candidates to the priestly, religious or consecrated life. Without trivialising the specificity and the need to foster vocations “to special consecration”, a merely “recruitment”-based perspective ruins the original meaning of accompanying the life process of young people beginning from God’s call.

Let us ask ourselves: is our ministry concerned with offering paths that help everyone to shape their lives according to the Gospel and to make coherent choices?

In short, discovering one’s vocation should be the normal result of a process of evangelisation that leads young people to “follow Christ” (FD, no. 61) and to become part of the Christian community.¹⁰ In this sense, the final line of FD, no. 139 is significant: “The goal of pastoral ministry is to help everyone, through a journey of discernment, to attain to “the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).”

Exploring One’s Path in Life

Understanding concretely the form of discipleship that each person is called to undertake is, obviously, a matter of discernment or, in the words of the Synod, of knowing how to recognise what one is experiencing and to interpret lived events in the light of the Scriptures, so as to embrace God’s will in the concrete reality of one’s own situation and to choose, from a perspective of faith, what the Spirit suggests for one’s life (cf. FD, nos. 4, 87, 104).¹¹ It is a demanding task, in which all the faculties of the human person interact dynamically and integrally, and to which one must devote oneself decisively.

As regards the foundational vocation, namely “to follow Christ” (FD, no. 61) and “to become his disciples and witnesses” (FD, no. 82), discernment first seeks to answer a basic question: am I willing to allow myself to be enlightened and transformed by the great proclamation of the Gospel, namely, that God loves me, Christ is my saviour, He is alive and wants me to live? (cf. ChV, nos. 1, 130, 134). And then: am I prepared to accept its consequences? Indeed, “The first thing we need to discern and discover is this: Jesus wants to be a friend to every young person. This discernment is the basis of all else.” (ChV, no. 250). Not a superficial, fleeting and passing friendship, merely emotional, easy and without particular difficulties, but one capable of becoming discipleship. In fact, “the choice that Jesus sets before us is to follow him as friends follow one another” (ChV, no. 290). Is this not the witness of Scripture?

The disciples heard Jesus calling them to be his friends. It was an invitation that did not pressure them, but gently appealed to their freedom. “Come and see”, Jesus told them; so “they came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day” (Jn 1:39). After that unexpected and moving encounter, they left everything and followed him (ChV, no. 153).

As regards each individual vocation, that is, the personal form of following Christ (cf. FD, no. 82), the questions to be answered multiply.

When seeking to discern our own vocation, there are certain questions we ought to ask. We should not start with wondering where we could make more money, or achieve greater recognition and social status. Nor even by asking what kind of work would be most pleasing to us. If we are not to go astray, we need a different starting point. We need to ask: Do I know myself, quite apart from my illusions and emotions? Do I know what brings joy or sorrow to my heart? What are my strengths and weaknesses? (ChV, no. 285).

In this sense, it is of fundamental importance that the person come to know and reflect, in interaction with others – peer group, family, educational and social agencies – and with his or her own environment, both upon his or her capacities, abilities and competences, and upon the adequacy or inadequacy of the self-image constructed over time and from which he or she will have to choose what to aspire to become. An honest consideration of one's present and potential resources enables the person to re-explore himself or herself, mature in self-understanding and orient life towards a choice. In this commitment, the risk is that of remaining paralysed by an endless self-analysis. Thus, other questions are added to the previous ones: how can my inclinations and qualities “serve people better and prove most helpful to our world and to the Church? What is my real place in this world? What can I offer to society?” (ChV, no. 285). These questions, rather than being considered in the abstract, must be thought of

on others, so that our discernment leads us to see our life in relation to their lives. That is why I would remind you of the most important question of all. “So often in life, we waste time asking ourselves: ‘Who am I?’ You can keep asking, ‘Who am I?’ for the rest of your lives. But the real question is: ‘For whom am I?’” (ChV, no. 286).

The issue, then, is deciding for whom to live, and not merely why to live. This phase of discernment is not merely intellectual. Any answers that emerge must be tested in experiences appropriate to one's growth. This means that, by becoming concretely involved in some form of service, whatever it may be, the person discerning must evaluate the truthfulness of perhaps premature responses, confirm or invalidate assumptions and abstractions, unmask possible illusions, identify operative images – of God, faith, Church, priesthood, consecrated life, family... –, confront unhealthy attachments, identify wounds or false motivations, and recognise habitual patterns. While living the experience, the discerning person will ask: What interior dynamics am I experiencing? Do I feel strengthened or challenged in my choices? Are my perspectives changing? Are my values and spiritual practices deepening? Am I guided by egocentric ambitions, narcissistic expectations, altruistic impulses? Do I experience courage, strength, consolation, peace? These questions should prevent the risk of merely “having experiences” without truly putting oneself on the line, and in that self-involvement discovering one's true self. Furthermore, at this stage of the journey it is also good to listen to the observations of those who know me well: what do they say? How do they see me? Let us be clear: everyone is potentially capable of choosing any path in life, but realistically one must also consider the actual limits that give measure to one's freedom. To put it with an example: who prevents me from becoming a professional diver? No one. But if I suffer from cardiovascular problems, the best way to choose my path in life will be to take this fact into account.

Among young people, are there questions of a vocational nature? Does our ministry allow these questions to emerge? Do our proposals enable young people to ask perhaps unprecedented questions? Does our mediation help them to face these challenges?

From this perspective, discerning one's vocation “has nothing to do with inventing ourselves or creating ourselves out of nothing. It has to do with finding our true selves in the light of God and letting our lives flourish and bear fruit” in and through service to others. In other words, it means “to bring out the best in yourself for the glory of God and the good of others” (ChV, no. 257). The Pope recently repeated that when we welcome God's loving and creative gaze in Jesus, “everything becomes a vocational dialogue between ourselves and the Lord, but also between ourselves and others. A dialogue that, experienced in depth, makes us become ever more who we are”.¹² In more “technical” terms, this is a way of referring to what psychology calls the epigenetic developmental principle, while also combining it with a genetic methodological principle: development always takes place on the basis of something already present, although good conditions must be created in order for this growth to occur. Thus, when a young person – just as an adult – sees only himself or herself on the horizon, lives pathologically centred on self, works solely for personal subsistence and stakes everything on the development of personal potential, he or she sterilises life and excludes himself or herself from every possible vocational dynamic. On the contrary, progress is made insofar as one succeeds in forgetting oneself and giving oneself to an otherness made up of concrete relationships and open to a purposeful vision of existence. In such a vision, the person

emerges from self-referential egocentrism, transcends himself or herself and, precisely by transcending self, achieves self-fulfilment.¹³

From a theological point of view, the question of service is decisive, and can only be understood within the logic of a life which, like that of Jesus and of his ecclesial body, stands under the sign of self-giving. Just as the Word became flesh, lived, died and rose again for us, so too the one who follows Him is “also for others”, and the “many qualities, inclinations, gifts and charisms” that one possesses are not for oneself “but to share with those around you” (ChV, no. 286). As the Pope affirms, the affective, moral and spiritual measure of a person is expressed above all in “this ‘ecstasy’ of coming out of ourselves and seeking the good of others, even to the sacrifice of our lives.” (ChV, no. 163), rather than dying narcissistically drowned in one’s own image. “If the years of your youth are to serve their purpose in life, they must be a time of generous commitment, whole-hearted dedication, and sacrifices that are difficult but ultimately fruitful.” (ChV, no. 108). Christian life is ecstatic, but not immobile!

1. J. BECKMAN, “What is Youth Ministry?”, in J. BECKMAN – E. GALLAGHER, *Discipleship Focused Youth Ministry*, Discipleshipym, Columbia 2016, p. 6.
2. The fact that the conscious discernment of one’s vocation takes place in the transition between youth and adulthood should not lead one to think that vocational accompaniment pertains exclusively to these stages of life. If there is a specific vocational accompaniment, which begins with the manifestation of a particular vocational interest and culminates in a life option, there is also a broader vocational accompaniment which animates and sustains the person along the path of living out the choice made day by day.
3. R. SALA, “The Leaven in the Dough. The Vocational Soul of Ministry”, in *Vocazioni* XXXIV (2017) 6, pp. 32–42: 37.
4. SYNOD OF BISHOPS – XV ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *Final Document* (27 October 2018), no. 16. Hereafter: FD.
5. Cf. A. BOZZOLO, “Young People and Life Choices: A Theological Perspective”, in M. VOJTÁŠ – P. RUFFINATO (eds.), *Young People and Life Choices. Educational Perspectives. Proceedings of the International Congress organised by the Salesian Pontifical University and the Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences Auxilium* (Rome, 20–23 September 2018), LAS, Rome 2019, pp. 391–399: 395.
6. The quotation from the Final Document echoes the affirmation according to which, for a Christian, the encounter with the person of Christ “gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction”: BENEDICT XVI, *Deus caritas est: Encyclical Letter on Christian Love* (25 December 2005), no. 1. Also cited in EG, no. 7.
7. FRANCIS, *Called to Build the Human Family: Message for the 59th World Day of Prayer for Vocations* (8 May 2022).
8. According to the qualitative survey conducted in Italy in 2019 by Toluna on behalf of the National Office for Vocational Ministry (UNPV), among the more than 800 people interviewed online only one out of two (48%) was aware that “everyone has a vocation”, while one third thought that vocation is “a call that God makes to certain people to become priests and nuns”: E. MACRI – P. CORTELLESSA, “A Vocation that Shakes and Questions. A Statistical Survey among Practising Catholics”, in *Vocazioni* XXXVI (2019) 1, pp. 25–28: 27. The figures are similar to those of the sociological survey conducted in Italy in 2006 on the theme of youth vocation, according to which 52% of respondents believed that vocation concerns everyone, while 22% thought that only people who make certain specific life choices have one. Cf. R. FERRERO CAMOLETTO, “To Each Their Own Path: A Question of Choices or of Vocation?”, in F. GARELLI (ed.), *Called to Choose. Young Italians and Vocation*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2006, pp. 51–82: 58.
9. It must be acknowledged that, in the social imagination and in common language, many people still understand the term “vocation” from a professional point of view.
10. Cf. J. PATRÓN WONG, *Mediations of Vocational Ministry*. Conference delivered at the Meeting of those responsible for vocational ministry and the ongoing formation of the clergy (Los Teques, Venezuela, 9 July 2019). Original Spanish.
11. It is noteworthy that, according to the UNPV survey, in the ranking of words associated with “vocation”, “discernment” was chosen by only 5.2% of respondents: P. CORTELLESSA, “Vocation: A Reasoned Interpretation. 1/ The Alphabet of Vocation”, in *Vocazioni online*: <https://rivistavocazioni.chiesacattolica.it/2019/05/30/lalfabeto-dellavocazione/>
12. FRANCIS, *Called to Build the Human Family*.
13. Cf. R. SALA, *Youth Ministry*, vol. 2: *Around the Living Fire of the Synod. Educating Once More to the Good Life of the Gospel*, Elledici, Turin 2020, p. 350.

HOME, JOURNEY, ACCOMPANIMENT

Discerning one's vocation is by no means simple. A prey to subjective whims and objective errors, a person can easily find himself or herself "prey to every passing trend" (ChV, no. 279). The narcissism characteristic of our age can preclude the possibility of placing oneself before God and seeing one's life as He knows it (cf. ChV, no. 280). A sluggish or indifferent conscience can inhibit a person from recognising God's appeals "in our daily lives, in the events of our personal history and the world around us" in which we are immersed (ChV, no. 282). Deceived by fantasies, one may live in the clouds and simply drift away from one's "true path" (ChV, no. 293).

Discernment therefore requires an appropriate space of "solitude and silence" (ChV, no. 283)—something genuinely difficult in our noisy and restless age¹—in which one allows oneself to be challenged by the Word, cultivates prayer and adoration, reads and reflects upon the witness of the saints and the teaching of the great spiritual masters, and undertakes a sincere examination of conscience. Furthermore, discernment requires time, just as the parable of the wheat and the weeds teaches us (cf. Mt 13:24–30), and therefore patience, rejecting haste and the search for ready-made answers, as well as foresight, envisaging at least medium- to long-term periods in which a project may come to fruition.

How is this done today? How can we teach and learn discernment in a culture in which space and time have contracted? How can we help young people develop the capacity to invest in times of waiting, whether passive or active?

Discernment requires reason, prudence and a good measure of common sense. Yet, "for it seeks a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us, which takes shape amid so many varied situations and limitations",² this is not enough. Discernment is also a gift to be asked for and a grace to be received. In this regard, the precious sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, as well as the various forms of devotion, should not be neglected.

Finally, discernment requires that one allow oneself to be accompanied (cf. ChV, no. 291).³ Those who accompany must know how to mediate, so that the person discerning may frame his or her questions, explore legitimate possibilities, test valid alternatives, purify motivations, discover directions and ultimately make a choice.

Youth ministry has precisely the specific task of helping young people shed light on their own vocation by fostering and accompanying discernment and, ultimately, decision-making. Such a statement of principle will be possible, however, only if youth ministry is grounded in the relational dimension, thereby offering young people the opportunity to overcome the situations of orphanhood (cf. ChV, no. 216) and estrangement (cf. ChV, no. 80) in which they live, through concrete forms of communication, relationship and care among persons.

The art of creating a home

It is significant that, when speaking of the renewal of youth ministry from a vocational perspective, the Final Document of the 2018 Synod begins with the idea of the Church as a "welcoming home"; a space characterised by "a family atmosphere built on trust and confidence"; a place where, through "concrete and prophetic gestures of joyful, daily welcome" (FD, no. 138), one can offer "a real witness of fraternity" and make possible the "demande to journey together" (FD, no. 128). In short, a community "in which [young people, but also adults] can discover who they are and how they are able to contribute",⁴ or, in the very words of the Synod, "a welcoming home for adolescents and young adults, who can discover their talents and offer them in service" (FD, no. 143).

The rediscovery of the Church's domestic character invites us to place at the centre an affective relationship that is healthy, authentic, ordered and inspired by the Gospel (cf. FD, no. 149), and certainly called to qualify itself as an educational and evangelising relationship (cf. FD, no. 34). Indeed, "to feel connected to others by more than merely utilitarian and practical bonds" makes "life a bit more human", allows the prophecy of fraternity to "take flesh", renders our hours and days less inhospitable, indifferent and anonymous, and creates "strong bonds" (ChV, no. 217). This conscious, attentive and alert way of being with others stands in direct opposition to the indifference that so often envelops us whenever we meet, come to know or recognise one another. Creating a family environment in which everyone can feel welcomed, supported, realistically encouraged and challenged (cf. ChV, no. 243), and developing "that drama of relationships that can support the person on his journey and furnish him with points of reference and orientation" (FD, no. 92), involves the whole ecclesial community (cf. EG, no. 106). Ministry with young people concerns not only specialists or those particularly trained and dedicated, but each and every member of the Church:

The Christian community also recognises as its task the responsibility of contributing to the generation of styles of encounter and communication. It does so first of all within itself, through interpersonal relationships attentive to each person. Committed to not sacrificing the quality of personal relationships to programme efficiency, the ecclesial community regards the promotion of mature relationships, capable of listening and reciprocity, as a witness to God's love.⁵

Certainly, "creating a home" is not an art easily mastered.⁶ It means locating one's centre of gravity outside oneself and one's personal needs; understanding one's life from the perspective of service; overcoming egocentrism; breaking free from self-enclosure and opening oneself entirely to availability. Familiarity, therefore, is more than a simple style; it is a mature affection, purified along the path of renunciation and made fruitful by theological grace.

Against this background, our attention should be drawn to the fact that, in order to foster "a profound experience of vocational discernment", the Synod "proposes with conviction to all the particular Churches, to the religious congregations, to the movements, to associations and to other ecclesial bodies that they offer the young an experience of accompaniment with a view to discernment", for a period to be determined according to contexts and opportunities and in a setting characterised, among other indispensable elements, by a strong and meaningful "fraternal life" (FD, no. 161). The Synod Fathers thus recognised the vocational potential of a strongly relational environment such as community life, in which young people can share everyday life with adults in a manner that is simple, sober, respectful and rooted in prayer and sacramental life.⁷

The art of personal accompaniment

Among the various mediations, services and forms of support offered by a Church that accompanies, FD no. 97 describes personal accompaniment for vocational discernment as a process intended to help a person progressively integrate the various dimensions of life, interpret them in the light of faith, recognise within them what the Spirit is suggesting, and make decisions from the perspective of discipleship (cf. EG, nos. 169–173). Without attempting to discuss the different forms of accompaniment (cf. FD, nos. 95–96) or to explore every aspect of this personal modality, let us dwell on just three particular features.

a) Accompaniment is spiritual

This adjective is fundamental for clarifying the kind of helping relationship involved. While remaining committed to fostering the unification or integration of "all dimensions of the person" (FD, no. 139), spiritual accompaniment has as its primary objective reading "in the light of the Spirit" what is taking place within the person being accompanied, so as to help him or her recognise, in the interaction between

thoughts and feelings, “a call which God causes to resound” (EG, no. 154) and through which He invites a response; not necessarily only “fundamental decisions for life”, but also “concrete and specific responses to the impulses towards the good that God is awakening in the person’s heart”.⁸

Such a perspective implies that the person being accompanied must avoid retreating into solipsistic introspection and instead grow in the awareness of being called by God and therefore of living according to the logic of a faith that responds. This principle, valid for every disciple at every stage of life, is particularly significant for young people who are searching for their vocation. The success of youth ministry from a vocational perspective can be evaluated to the extent that young people connect their decisions—especially those that commit their lives in a decisive way—to the dynamism of a faith that is “our response to a word which engages us personally”⁹ and graft those decisions onto the following of Jesus (cf. LF, nos. 29, 58).

Beyond the usual messages of encouragement, motivation, exhortation and advice, are young people reminded, at least from time to time, that they have a vocation and that life is “a way of responding” to this call (ChV, no. 248)?

Spiritual accompaniment is a reality of such pneumatological depth that, without excluding them (cf. FD, no. 99), it nevertheless remains distinct “from other forms of personal accompaniment such as counseling, coaching, mentoring, tutoring, etc.”¹⁰ or from other types of psychological helping relationship.¹¹

Although it sounds obvious, spiritual accompaniment must lead others ever closer to God, in whom we attain true freedom. [...] To accompany them would be counterproductive if it became a sort of therapy supporting their self-absorption and ceased to be a pilgrimage with Christ to the Father. (EG, no. 170).

The contributions of a psychology open to transcendence (cf. FD, no. 99) should be regarded as a valuable aid for “the knowledge of oneself and of one’s inner psychological world, of one’s aptitudes and motivations, but also of one’s fragilities and fears”, and therefore for undertaking a process of integrating what characterises each person “within a single vocational perspective”.¹² Yet, beyond certain fundamental psychological insights and skills, accompanying a person in discerning a vocation does not require genuine psychodiagnostic or psychotherapeutic expertise.

How can we build a path that is attentive to technical procedures and faithful to the necessary stages, yet above all recognises the Holy Spirit as its principal actor and protagonist?

b) Accompaniment has a personalised and personalising character

In accompaniment there are two persons, one before the other, whose lives become intertwined in a two-way relationship. Both the one being accompanied and the one who accompanies have their own history; both possess personality traits that either facilitate or limit the relationship; both have a greater or lesser willingness to listen to the other; both are differently sensitive to the issues that are touched upon. Nevertheless, it is clear that, although the relationship may become an occasion of growth also for the accompanier, the dialogue and the proposal for growth are organised around the person being accompanied.

Rather than drawing the other person to himself or herself, assuming “possessive and manipulative attitudes that create dependence rather than freedom in others” (FD, no. 102), the spiritual guide seeks to initiate everyone “into this ‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5)” (EG, no. 169; ChV, no. 67) in order to help him or her discover how to respond obediently to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

There is no shortage of writings describing the figure of the accompanier. Nonetheless, for those who wish “to help others discern their path in life, what is uppermost is the ability to listen” (ChV, no. 291), Pope Francis has recently offered once again—drawing upon the contributions of young people themselves and several indications from the Final Document (cf. nos. 70, 77, 97, 102, 103)—a brief and synthetic description of the essential characteristics of such a person: a faithful Christian engaged in the Church and in the world; constantly seeking holiness; capable of active listening; full of love and self-awareness; conscious of personal limitations and of being a forgiven sinner; experienced in the spiritual life, without considering himself or herself, or being considered by others, perfect; able to guide young people by walking beside them and enabling them to be active participants; respectful of their freedom, convinced of their capacity and confident in their resources; cultivating the seeds of faith in young people without expecting immediately to see the fruits of the Holy Spirit’s work; solidly formed and committed to his or her own continuing growth (cf. ChV, no. 246).

Honestly, comparison with such a profile may provoke in a spiritual guide a sense of frustration and resignation. Nevertheless, neither this ideal nor the complexity of the world of young people should be sufficient reason to discourage the accompanier.

Do young people express a desire to be accompanied? Are there qualified and dedicated people available for accompaniment? Do parish groups, movements and youth associations rely on processes of personal accompaniment? What factors make it difficult to meet young people and accompany them?

It is particularly in the area of active listening that Pope Francis identifies three sensitivities that must be kept in mind.¹³

The first attentiveness concerns the person and what he or she is saying. It means listening to the other who is, through words, entrusting himself or herself to us. During the conversation, the person being accompanied should perceive that he or she is being listened to as though the listener “had nothing else to do”,¹⁴ free from prejudices, judgements or boredom. Attentive, compassionate and disinterested listening reveals the value that the other person possesses in the eyes of the accompanier, independently of his or her ideas or life choices (cf. ChV, no. 292).

Accompaniment is a process in which one offers not simply hearing but listening. It is a process that requires the accompanier to be wholly involved in a contemplative listening that does not seek to provide ready-made answers but rather to facilitate the young person’s own journey of self-discovery.¹⁵

The second attentiveness concerns what the other person “means” by what he or she says, or what he or she wishes others to understand from what is happening in his or her life.

In dealing with the matters that emerge, the accompanier is called first of all to discern between the movements of the good spirit and those of the evil spirit (cf. ChV, no. 293). At the same time, courage is required—together with the necessary affection and delicacy—to help the other recognise the truths, falsehoods and excuses present in his or her life. A good accompanier does not operate with “false indulgence” (FD, no. 102). Nor is he or she fatalistic. On the one hand, the accompanier always invites the person to rise again, to seek healing, to embrace the cross and to set out once more. On the other hand, while taking into account the real situation of young people and avoiding forcing stages of growth, he or she does not abandon the “high standard” of Christian life, namely holiness.¹⁶

The third attentiveness concerns the impulses that the person being accompanied experiences when projecting himself or herself “forward”. Beyond what one feels and thinks about the past, and beyond what may presently appear lacking, attention turns towards what one would like to become, even when this remains difficult to decipher or confused. At this stage, the accompanier is called to help the other look at and name the desires that are perceived within; not so much what is pleasing or what satisfies an immediate need, but rather that intuition or inspiration which, “even if small, is capable of taking on the

features of something all-encompassing”.¹⁷ A second step also requires bringing to light the imagination surrounding what one longs for and outlining the features of the desired object, purifying it from idealisations and misunderstandings and allowing a more mature understanding to emerge.

In this sense, the accompanier is not a naïve person who unquestioningly accepts the interpretation that someone gives to his or her experiences, nor one who passively accepts the kind of help requested and the manner in which it is requested. Neither is the accompanier someone who arbitrarily designs a path for another, still less someone who projects his or her own choices onto another person. Quite simply, the accompanier is one who listens, educates, brings to light what is already present in the heart, opens new horizons for the individual, and encourages possible steps forward.

How can one accompany a young person without stifling the vocational question, without improvising advice conceived in advance, and without falling into a standardised and predictable discourse? Furthermore, how can one accompany while avoiding the illusory and naïve misunderstanding that one must adopt a position of non-directiveness or supposed neutrality? Finally, how can one escape the temptation of telling the young person what to do, thereby encouraging passivity in decision-making and sparing him or her the demanding work of searching for the answer to the very question posed to the guide?

c) Finally, accompaniment is evangelically propositive

As true as it is that one must draw near, listen and respect the gradualness of growth, it is equally true that from the outset one must clarify the implications of following the Lord. The Gospel episode of the rich young man (cf. Mt 19:16–22) teaches that the Lord was not afraid to propose a demanding path of radical discipleship, one which, “if we do not propose it, others will”.¹⁸

1. Cf. FRANCIS, *The Holy House is the House of Young People*. Address on the occasion of the signing of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit* (25 March 2019).
2. ID., *Gaudete et exsultate: Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today's World* (19 March 2018), no. 170. Hereafter: GEx. This theme is specifically addressed in nos. 166–175.
3. According to the survey conducted by the National Office for Vocational Ministry (UNPV), for more than 30% of respondents the way to understand one's vocation is "to have a spiritual guide". Yet fewer than half of those surveyed have undertaken a process of vocational accompaniment during their lives. One third did so in the past, and only 15.9% are currently engaged in such a process. Cf. P. CORTELLESA, "Vocation: A Reasoned Interpretation. 2/ The Dynamics of Vocation", in *Vocazioni online*: <https://rivistavocazioni.chiesacattolica.it/2019/06/30/la-dinamica-della-vocazione/>
4. C. CLARK, "The Adoption View of Youth Ministry", in C. CLARK (ed.), *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: Five Views*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2015, pp. 73–90: 85.
5. ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, "Born Again to a Living Hope" (1 Pet 1:3): *Witnesses to God's Great "Yes" to Humanity. Pastoral Note Following the Fourth National Ecclesial Convention* (29 June 2007), no. 23. The emphasis is mine.
6. Cf. N. DAL MOLIN, "Mission Means... 'Caring for Others'", in *Vocazioni* XXV (2008) 2, pp. 6–13.
7. Cf. S. MARELLI, *Making a Home: Young People and Community Life*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milan 2021.
8. G. PICCOLO, "Handle with Care: The Complexity and Delicacy of Spiritual Accompaniment", in *Presbyteri* LVI (2022) 3, pp. 169–179: 171.
9. FRANCIS, *Lumen fidei: Encyclical Letter on Faith* (29 June 2013), no. 8. Hereafter: LF.
10. SYNOD OF BISHOPS – XV ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *Instrumentum Laboris* (8 May 2018), no. 124. Hereafter: IL.
11. In the strongly psychologised climate of contemporary society, there can arise the conviction that, in order to accompany people well on a personal level, one must be a professional. This is not the case: the spiritual accompanier is not called to be a psychologist. The latter "supports a person in difficulties and helps him or her become aware of personal fragilities and potentialities", whereas the former "directs the person to the Lord and prepares the ground for the encounter with Him (cf. Jn 3:29–30)": ID., *Preparatory Document* (13 January 2017), § II/4. Hereafter: PD. Certainly, there is an interrelationship between spiritual guidance and the psychological dimension of the person which should not be neglected. Cf. G. MAZZOCATO, *Psychological Sciences and the Freedom of the Spirit: Counselling, Helping Relationships and Spiritual Accompaniment*, Messaggero / FTTR, Padua 2009. Indeed, spiritual accompaniment does not exclude the contributions of the psychological sciences, "but transcends them" (GEx, no. 170).
12. G. PICCOLO, "Handle with Care: The Complexity and Delicacy of Spiritual Accompaniment", in *Presbyteri* LVI (2022) 3, pp. 169–179: 171.
13. Cf. A. STECCANELLA, *Active Listening: In the Dynamics of Faith and Pastoral Discernment*, Messaggero, Padua 2020.
14. FRANCIS, *Rise Up*. Address [extemporaneous remarks] to participants in the conference promoted by the National Office for Vocational Ministry (5 January 2017).
15. L. GRECH, *Accompanying Youth in a Quest for Meaning*, Don Bosco Publications, Bolton 2019, p. 141.
16. JOHN PAUL II, *Novo millennio ineunte: Apostolic Letter at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000* (6 January 2001), no. 31.
17. L. ALBERTINI, "Blessed Disappointment! Accompaniment Between Desire and Reality", in *Vocazioni* XXXIX (2022) 5, pp. 20–23: 21.
18. Cf. J.-P. HERNÁNDEZ, "Spiritual Discernment", in *Tempi dello Spirito* LIII/210 (2017) 3, pp. 26–64: 31.

ADULTHOOD, GENERATIVITY, INTERGENERATIONALITY

From what has been said, it becomes clear that accompanying the younger generations is not an optional extra but a duty of every adult and a right of every young person. No experience, meeting, class, course or group activity can take the place of this interpersonal encounter, which possesses its own specific identity. Unfortunately, we realise that the Christian community as a whole is poorly equipped with people adequately prepared for accompaniment. Indeed, in exploring and realising their vocation, young people find it difficult to identify around them significant adult figures capable of guiding them, calling them to a lofty understanding of vocation, and bearing witness to lived forms of vocation.

From the very beginning and throughout its entire course, the 2018 Synod highlighted young people's need to be able to rely on adults who are “authoritative” (FD, no. 71), “well-formed” (FD, no. 97), “prepared and willing” (FD, no. 7) not only to listen but also to educate and accompany them along the path of maturation.¹ Subsequently, Pope Francis also devoted several reflections to the figure of the adult in *Christus vivit*. What emerges from these and other passages, however, is not merely the lack of adults qualified to accompany young people, but rather the «lack of adults “period”» (II, no. 14).

A time without adults

It has been observed that young people, through their sensitivities, expectations, questions, reactions, preferences, and ways of committing themselves, “make the changes taking place in our age at the social, cultural and anthropological levels more readily perceptible”.² This is true, however, also of adults. They too, albeit differently from young people, are indicators of the temperature of the age. Even those who bear responsibility as educators, pastors or companions are affected by the cultural changes currently under way. As one author would put it, today’s adults are no longer what they once were.³ What, then, is happening?

*If an adult is someone who attempts to assume responsibility for the consequences of his or her actions and words—and this is a definition I would propose beyond mere age categories—we can only acknowledge a sharp decline in the adult presence within our society. [...] Adults seem to have become lost in the very same sea in which their children lose their way, with no longer any real generational distinction.*⁴

This new portrait of the adult exalts the myth of Peter Pan, the triumph of immaturity and the cult of youthfulness: “The child has been imposed as the paradigm of an ideal being.”⁵ In all its depth, it confronts us with a defining feature of our age, one that was also recognised during the recent synodal journey. On the one hand, it is true that some adults remain trapped in authoritarian models that hinder acceptance by the world of young people. On the other hand, many more adults have lost credibility because they increasingly suffer from the problem of adult youthfulness,⁶ from the folly of wanting to remain young forever,⁷ from what has been called *adulthood*.⁸

Dependent upon their own needs and limited to pursuing whatever makes them feel good, these “psychic infants”⁹ break the virtuous circle linking receiving and giving and become incapable “to hand on the basic values of life ..., thus inverting the relationship between generations” (ChV, no. 80). While some adults still behave as masters (cf. FD, no. 54), many others either present themselves as allies while in reality being possessive and seductive figures (cf. FD, no. 71), act as competitors,¹⁰ or simply remain marginal spectators (cf. FD, no. 34).

*Adults-who-are-not-really-adults have nothing to teach young people: education comes to an end when adults interpret their own existence no longer as a journey within the possibilities of the human condition, a journey that nevertheless moves towards death, but as a continual attempt to live “against the grain”, to go backwards, to stop the biological clock, to recover a lost paradise.*¹¹

We have thus arrived at a peculiar situation: although some young people think that adults are “a meaningless past” (ChV, no. 201), the majority do not reject engagement with adults. Certainly, it is natural for young people to seek distance from adults, to defend their own spaces from adult interference, and to uphold their own “approach to reality”, even if this may “generate bewilderment or perplexity among adults” (IL, no. 26).¹² Yet this does not mean that they reject adults. On the contrary, research and experience document among young people an increasing need for adults willing to exercise their role, an openness to ideas capable of grasping life and its meaning, and a readiness to welcome proposals marked by clear demands for radical commitment and responsibility.¹³

The *punctum dolens*, therefore, is, on the one hand, “the dismissal of adult life” (IL, no. 14)—one never truly arrives there; one dies perpetually young!—and, on the other hand, the widespread indifference with which these “juvenilised” adults live their relationship with actual young people. Consequently, young people often find themselves living within a society that loves youth more than it loves the young themselves. Indeed, “youth comes to function as a model for the whole of existence”.¹⁴ Yet taking youth as a model means “adults want to snatch youth for themselves, not that they respect, love and care for young people” (ChV, no. 79). Young people are thus left in solitude.

The need therefore becomes evident to create new alliances between young people and adults, reflecting on the proper way to restore a positive relationship between the generations. If the wisdom of life is handed on and received “from generation to generation” (ChV, no. 190), society will never benefit from “a rupture between generations” (ChV, no. 191). Unfortunately, the exaggerated and readily accepted separation between the adult world and the world of youth has obscured the fact that both youth and adulthood “are destined to meet”.¹⁵ This task:

a) presupposes first of all that both stages of life be rediscovered as moments—albeit different ones—of the one human condition, rather than as separate compartments. In other words, the continuity of life must be recovered.¹⁶

b) requires restoring “a specific attractiveness and moral dignity to the ambition of becoming adults”,¹⁷ re-signifying the adult role and shedding some light of truth and hope upon this condition.¹⁸ To this end, a new appreciation of adulthood is needed, both within the Church and in society.

c) entails relaunching in education the role of credible adults capable of supporting young people without imposing the weight of their judgement and with whom relationships can be built beyond merely prescriptive frameworks.

Consequently, d) it demands asking “how such an axis can be created without mortifying the condition of youth, which needs to conduct its own experiments and find its own path”.¹⁹

In all this, the Church must play its part. All the more so because the present cultural situation urges the ecclesial community to invest not only in young people but also in adults. Adults, in fact, ought to be those who recognise the axiological dimension of life and promote it among the young through a genuine osmosis of values.²⁰ Adults ought to be “those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb 5:14); indeed, they should be those who have exercised themselves in choosing the good and rejecting evil.

The decision to invest in adults:

a) highlights the urgency of restoring their function as indispensable subjects of youth ministry, as positive models of identification; as examples and witnesses, though imperfect, of a life that has been lived; as persons capable of proposing, even critically, a way of life, including a Christian way of life; and as facilitators of wise discernment. Let us not forget that it is precisely through processes of identification with persons who are esteemed and loved that a young person begins to imagine for himself or herself the possibility of a demanding vocational choice.²¹

Furthermore, b) presupposes giving priority, wherever possible, to fields of action and relational models that are intergenerational and strongly educational in character:

*This is the task entrusted to the men and women of the Church who truly wish to dedicate themselves to the good life of young people: to restore adults and the elderly to the level of their proper identity as persons capable of genuine love ... for young people. A love whose most basic law consists in being adults when one is an adult, and elderly when one is elderly.*²²

Certainly, “if the significance of the Christian proposal depended solely upon the coherence of the adult community, the game would be lost from the outset”. Yet, despite its limitations, the task of the adult component of the Christian community will always be “to point out to the young person even what it does not itself fully possess and what it sometimes struggles to follow”.²³ We know that an adult is an ordinary person. Yet, as an educator, he or she should possess at least that minimum degree of stability, interiority and personal integration that enables one to be oneself, to use oneself for the good of others, to place oneself at the service of others, and to benefit oneself while benefiting others; in short, to be generative, as we shall explore below.

This highlights the importance, for adults, of revisiting their own adulthood: do we possess the competencies required for accompaniment? Or do we risk seeking precisely in those who ask us for help the answer to our own needs, or the validation of those weaknesses that we find difficult to acknowledge and address within ourselves? Amid the complexity of education, is our presence one of witness that guides others towards growth? Or is our pedagogy, at best, one that merely tells? What are the vulnerable areas that accompanists must first identify within themselves in order subsequently to recognise them in others and propose appropriate remedies?

The processes of generativity

When the Final Document speaks of “credible adults”, it defines them as persons endowed with *auctoritas* and therefore as bearers of a “generative force” (FD, no. 71). It could hardly be otherwise. Generativity is, in fact, one of the qualities that the psychologist Erik Erikson identifies as distinctive of adulthood. Generativity encompasses the characteristics of procreativity, productivity and creativity, and is expressed in the virtue of care, “a form of commitment” towards persons, products and ideas that have been brought forth.²⁴ By contrast, it stands opposed to exclusive self-concern, which leads to stagnation.

With regard to interpersonal relationships, the Italian psychologists Margherita Lanza and Elena Marta specify that generativity consists of three dynamics: in addition to procreating/conceiving and caring for, there is also letting go/allowing departure.²⁵ Let us attempt to reinterpret their contribution in pastoral terms.

a) Generating

Starting from the existence of a psychobiological foundation oriented towards procreation, acquired during the stage of youth but certainly going beyond a merely biological interpretation, the generative adult assumes and accompanies the movement of an “other” life, strengthens its vitality and then “brings it to birth”, enabling it to “see the light”.

According to the logic of transitivity characteristic of procreation, the life being accompanied precedes, passes through and ultimately surpasses that of the generating subject. Consequently, the generative adult can be such only insofar as he or she recognises the irreducible otherness and freedom of the other person. Although the journey shared together is marked by a healthy closeness, the other always remains “other” and does not belong to me.

b) Caring and educating

Strengthening and bringing forth life is not enough. Generation is not an event that ends with birth. Generation is an “iterative” action which, precisely as such, extends birth through care and education.²⁶ The education of the human person and the education of the Christian person belong together.

Indeed, it is through education that the Church, having brought her children to birth through Baptism—the second birth—gives birth to them “again” until Christ is formed in them (Gal 4:19)—the third birth. Here, in fact, we return to the starting point of this study. Ministry is not generative without education and without enabling people to live as disciples. There exists a close connection between introducing someone into the world and educating that person to live in the world as a Christian.

A generative act that did not continue into the educational act would betray the promise made to the child at the very moment when he or she was desired, conceived and brought into the world.²⁷ The educational relationship is grafted onto the generative act, and the life that has been given is learned through the experience of being a child, in dialogue with parents or, more broadly, with adults who serve as witnesses and educators of a life that has been lived.²⁸

Precisely for this reason, anyone who wishes to educate a young person to live in the world as a Christian must first know how to inhabit the world as a Christian.²⁹ In fulfilling this task, the generative adult recognises the precious uniqueness of each person and accompanies him or her with creativity.

God never grows a person in exactly the same way. God is a craftsman, not a mass producer. Now it is your turn. [...] Spiritual growth, too, is handcrafted, not mass-produced. God does not make one-size-fits-all garments.³⁰

c) Letting go

Finally, there is the act of letting go. In birth, the new life leaves the maternal womb and at the same time is released from it. This is the condition for continuing to live.

If something new has been generated, the very moment the generated reality takes shape it begins to live a life of its own, with its own identity and significance. Therefore, letting go is not external to the generative event but intrinsic to it; indeed, it is the condition that allows those who come after us to receive the inheritance:

The true meaning of human existence—the mystery that makes us human—does not lie in the self-referentiality of our own existence, but resides in those individual acts, often ordinary and everyday, through which the world is handed on to someone else. [...] Perhaps the gratitude that adults complain of not receiving from young people has its roots here. Can one return what has not been received, or what has been transmitted ambiguously, half-heartedly, or with self-satisfied superiority?³¹

At the same time, the adult becomes aware that, while young people need the experience of personal and witnessing closeness, the dynamic of life and accompaniment also leads the adult to depart rather than remain. Every act of generation includes a farewell.

Within a generative approach, the expression “striking camp” has the merit of reminding us that we are necessary and useful, but neither indispensable nor irreplaceable. The true educator—whether in matters of faith or otherwise—is the one who, at the appropriate moment, knows how to step aside or withdraw in order to leave room both for the Lord and for His mysterious yet effective presence, and for the person who is now capable of walking independently.

Whoever attempts to monopolise possessively the relationship with a young person, excluding God and others, renders a poor service, because such a person chains young people to himself or herself rather than entrusting them to the Lord and to the community.

In summary, the Preparatory Document of the 2018 Synod, before speaking of the individual figures of reference (parents, pastors, pastoral workers, teachers and other educational figures), sketches a sort of profile of the credible adult who has not lost his or her relevance:

The role of credible adults and their cooperation is basic in the course of human development and vocational discernment. This requires authoritative believers, with a clear human identity, a strong sense of belonging to the Church, a visible spiritual character, a strong passion for education and a great capacity for discernment. (PD, § III/2).

What is at stake is no small matter!

1. Cf. A. GRÜN, *The Art of Becoming an Adult: In Dialogue with Young People*, Pauline Books & Media, Milan 2011, p. 45.
2. G. COSTA, "Interview", in *Misión joven* LIX/510–511 (2019) 6, pp. 17–27: 23.
3. Cf. A. MATTEO, *The Adult We Are Missing: Why It Has Become So Difficult to Educate and Hand on the Faith*, Cittadella, Assisi 2014.
4. M. RECALCATI, "Where Have the Adults Gone?", in *La Repubblica* (19 February 2012).
5. F. CATALUCCIO, *Immaturity: The Illness of Our Time*, new ed., Einaudi, Turin 2014, p. 6. In psychoanalytic terms, the myth of Peter Pan is reflected in the syndrome that bears the same name. Cf. D. KILEY, *The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up*, Dodd, Mead & Company, New York 1983; G. CUCCI, *The Crisis of Adulthood: The Peter Pan Syndrome*, Cittadella, Assisi 2012.
6. In addition to the works cited above, the following may be consulted on the phenomenon of youthfulness in the adult world: F. BONAZZI – D. PUSCEDDU, *Forever Young: The Figure of the Adult in Postmodernity*, Franco Angeli, Milan 2008; G. ZAGREBELSKY, *Without Adults*, Einaudi, Turin 2016; A. MATTEO, *Everyone Young, No Young People: The Unfulfilled Expectations of the First Unbelieving Generation*, Piemme, Milan 2018.
7. The ideal of the *iuvenis aeternus* reflects the image of the *puer aeternus*, the Jungian archetype of the person who refuses to grow up, to face the challenges life demands, and who remains waiting rather than confronting and resolving problems. Cf. C. JUNG – K. KERÉNYI, *Prolegomena to the Scientific Study of Mythology*, Boringhieri, Turin 1972, pp. 102–138; M.-L. von FRANZ, *The Problem of the Puer Aeternus*, Red, Como 2009.
8. Here the term refers to adults who are unable to find meaning in the stage of life they are living and who attempt, in various ways, to turn back, seeking to halt the inexorable threat of passing time. As Peter Beilharz argues, "today no one seems to want to grow up anymore, especially those who are no longer young. We adults, too, behave like children." Preface to H. BLATTERER, *Coming of Age in Times of Uncertainty*, Berghahn, New York 2007, pp. IX–XI: IX.
9. L. ZOJA, *Hector's Gesture: Prehistory, History, Actuality and Disappearance of the Father*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2000, p. 261.
10. Cf. FRANCIS, *God is Young: A Conversation with Thomas Leoncini*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato 2018, p. 32.
11. A. MATTEO, "Honour the Adult Within You", in *Note di Pastorale Giovanile* (2020) 7, pp. 11–42: 28.
12. When this distance becomes insurmountable and ends up confining young people within "a sort of refuge inaccessible to adults" (IL, no. 36), such a situation nevertheless produces frustration, because young people themselves are deprived of the support and guidance of those who have already lived through youth, experienced its crises, overcome its difficulties and now find themselves living adulthood with greater or lesser serenity. Cf. Z. MONTALDI, *Youths: Is There Anything More to Be Said?*, Stella, Buenos Aires 2017, p. 35.
13. Engaging with adults does not, however, mean agreeing with them or accepting what they propose simply by virtue of their authority. On certain questions, the voice of adults still remains distant (cf. IL, no. 165).
14. M. GAUCHET, *The Child of Desire: An Anthropological Revolution*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2010, p. 44.
15. P. SEQUERI, "Mending an Alliance: Beyond the Rhetoric of the 'Youth Condition'", in *Il Regno/Attualità* LXII/1270 (2018) 2, p. 8.
16. Cf. M. DANESI, *Forever Young: The Teen-Aging of Modern Culture*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2003, p. 120.
17. P. SEQUERI, *Against Postmodern Idols*, Lindau, Turin 2011, p. 23.

18. Cf. C. SAINT GERMAIN, *Seeking an Adult: Advising and Accompaniment in Youth Ministry*, Don Bosco, Buenos Aires 2019, pp. 35–66.
19. Cf. SEQUERI, “Mending an Alliance”, p. 9. Emphasis mine.
20. Cf. L. PATI, *Pedagogy of Educational Communication*, La Scuola, Brescia 1984, pp. 103–108.
21. Cf. C. CIO’TTI, “Inhabit Life: Choosing as Believers for Christ”, in *Vocazioni XXXV* (2018) 4, pp. 36–47: 44.
22. A. MATTEO, “When Young People Can Be Young People: A Brief Note on Intergenerational Dialogue”, in *Rivista del Clero Italiano C* (2019) 2, pp. 145–155: 155.
23. C. AVOGRADI – P. CARRARA, “In the Soil of the Inestimable: Youth Ministry Between Realism and Determination. II”, in *Rivista del Clero Italiano C* (2019) 1, pp. 24–37: 33.
24. Cf. E. ERIKSON, *The Life Cycle Completed: Continuity and Change*, new edition with a chapter by Joan Erikson, Armando, Rome 2018, p. 85.
25. Cf. M. LANZA – E. MARTA, “The Transition to Adulthood and Intergenerational Relationships”, in D. BRAMANTI (ed.), *The Family Across Generations. Proceedings of the Sixteenth Conference of the Centre for Family Studies and Research* (Milan, 13–14 October 2000), Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2001, pp. 197–212.
26. Cf. M. SEMERARO, *Towards a Generative Ministry: The Renewal Journey of Christian Initiation*, Mithér Thévé, Albano Laziale 2014, p. 190.
27. Cf. G. ANGELINI, *The Child: A Blessing, A Responsibility*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2006, p. 188.
28. ITALIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE, *Educating to the Good Life of the Gospel: Pastoral Guidelines for the Decade 2010–2020* (4 October 2010), no. 27.
29. Cf. FRANCIS, *Rekindle the Gift You Have Received: Message to the Participants in the Twenty-Eighth General Chapter of the Salesians of Don Bosco* (4 March 2020).
30. J. ORTBERG, *The Me I Want to Be: Becoming God’s Best Version of You*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids 2010, p. 50.
31. F. STOPPA, *The Return: Why the Pact Between the Generations Has Broken Down*, Feltrinelli, Milan 2011, p. 15.

POSTPONING, DECIDING, PLANNING

At this point in the discussion, it becomes clear that youth ministry is called to engage with discernment from a vocational perspective and to become involved in accompanying it.

If a young person embarks upon a process of vocational discernment concerning his or her life, will youth ministry contribute to it, or will it stand by and wait for decisions to be made in the utmost solitude or under the illusion of spontaneity?¹

There nevertheless remains the question of decision. Discernment guides decision-making but, as such, it is not complete unless a choice is actually made. Because many vocational processes run the risk of never bringing discernment to a binding choice, to accompany not only the deliberative moment but also the decisional one is today “a service that is widely needed” (cf. FD, no. 91). Such accompaniment does not mean conditioning or forcing the decision (cf. FD, no. 72), but helping people “regaining the interior freedom necessary to make choices” (FD, no. 111) and then, concretely, to make “valid, stable and well-founded choices” (FD, no. 91), “in the serene awareness of our gifts and limitations” (FD, no. 108; ChV, no. 282).

In this sense, the precondition for a fruitful process of accompaniment is that the person discerning possess a certain decisiveness. In other words, before embarking on the path of discernment, one must at least have a strong desire to make a decision. Otherwise, the experience will be unproductive, a dead end, a waste of time. For those who accompany, discernment must be grounded in signs that indicate the feasibility of the journey, among them the courage of the person being accompanied to make decisions and remain faithful to them.² To this end, appropriate processes and tools become indispensable “so that the process of decision-making does not stall” (PD, § I/3). We must be honest, however. In a context marked by constant change, research and studies have for years highlighted the difficulty of identifying educational pathways that foster decision-making.³

Social complexity and the fear of choosing

Today, decision-making is in crisis. The new global disorder, universal deregulation, social complexity, the dismantling of protective networks, the radical insecurity affecting the social and material worlds we inhabit and the forms of political action available to us, the collapse of inherited certainties, new opportunities, the mobility generated by rapid and recurring transformations, the breakdown of the sequence study–employment–retirement, precarious employment, and the volatility of both present and future all make making choices extremely difficult.

Indeed, many people experience “a sense of chronic uncertainty in the face of every situation involving choice”.⁴ At the level of personal experience, the result is often the struggle to disentangle numerous options without being able clearly to foresee the outcome of each and therefore to manage constructively the various spaces of freedom available. This may translate into a continual postponement of decisive choices or even into a refusal to make them.

The situation is so delicate that the Synod speaks of “a kind of paralysis of decision-making” (FD, no. 68; ChV, no. 140). This can be observed in academic, professional, occupational, social and political spheres and, of course, also looms over vocational choices that give life a defined shape.⁵ The synodal texts attribute this decisional paralysis to “fear of the definitive” (FD, no. 68; ChV, no. 140). According to Zygmunt Bauman, making irrevocable decisions means losing opportunities, foregoing experiences and possibilities, and becoming bound within restricted frameworks. “Once you have reached the summit, there is nothing left to climb,” he observes.⁶

Indeed, an unprecedented multiplicity of options and opportunities for fulfilment exposes individuals to endless alternative possibilities. Consequently, having many experiences is now often regarded as more valuable than conducting one's life according to a single point of reference or living out a comprehensive sense of belonging. People frequently have to make their choices in a climate that renders the effort of finding direction more burdensome and perhaps less desirable.

Moreover, the conviction has become widespread that every choice is reversible and that one can always retrace one's steps and open oneself to further options.⁷ There is little desire—or perhaps little perceived value—in committing oneself to highly binding choices, least of all “for ever”. Thus, a flexible existential orientation is adopted. Everything becomes a matter of choices that create a life trajectory capable of being modified from time to time. Rather than giving existence a definitive direction by progressing through successive stages towards a final destination, individuals today tend to adopt an attitude of continual exploration and experimentation, constantly changing course in search of new shores. Unfortunately, in a fluid society, people play with the possibility of changing their resolutions—perhaps too easily—abandoning commitments and even the consequences of choices previously made, within a biographical path that is constantly being reconstructed or permanently renegotiated.⁸

Can young people still identify what some adults describe as “for life”? Is it possible to focus on the fact that fidelity to a life choice is preferable to constant existential channel-surfing (cf. ChV, no. 279)? If the indications coming from adults and institutions are not always reliable, how can young people be helped to decide which road to take in order to reach their destination?

To fear of lifelong commitment the Synod Fathers add being “afraid to take chances and make mistakes”, lest one have to pay the consequences of a wrong decision (ChV, no. 142). From this arise two temptations. The first is that of escape: postponing, delaying, never actually reaching the point of decision. To be sure, there have always been those who put off demanding life choices (cf. Lk 9:57–60), but perhaps today this tendency has become endemic and almost pathological. The second, illusory temptation is that of finding an infallible formula for making the right and guaranteed choice—perhaps someone who can provide a complete recipe to be followed in every detail. This is why gurus and leaders, to whom responsibility for choosing can be delegated, have become so fashionable.

Why is there such fear of choosing? Is it a matter of personal incapacity, psychological immaturity, or an epochal characteristic? Is it still possible to choose in times of complexity and change? Do those who accompany give adequate attention to the provisional character of the world in which we live?

The situation is aggravated by the difficulty of finding secure spaces capable of supporting the burden and anxiety of decisions that are no longer sustained by stable forms of belonging and enduring points of reference.⁹ Even social institutions, from which one expects long-term reliability, appear fragmented and therefore not always trustworthy. Yet risk is an integral part of the steps required to realise the life project envisioned and chosen through discernment. To a young woman who asked him, “How can we reawaken the greatness and courage of far-reaching choices?”, Pope Francis replied:

Take a risk! Take a risk. Whoever does not risk does not walk. “But what if I make a mistake?”. Blessed be the Lord! You will make more mistakes if you remain still, stagnant: that is the mistake, a bad mistake, closure. Take risks. Risks for noble ideals, risks that soil your hands, as the Samaritan risked in the parable. When we are more or less calm in life, there is always the temptation of paralysis, to avoid taking risks: to be calm and quiet.... your life will slowly become a paralyzed life; happy, content, with the family, but at a standstill there... It is very sad to see a life that is at a standstill; it is very sad to see people who seem more like mummies in a museum than living beings. Take a risk! Take a risk. And if you make a mistake, bless the Lord. Take a risk.¹⁰

Certainly, the Pope's advice is not to act recklessly, without reflection and without genuine necessity. Yet to decide one must dare, and to dare one must first learn to face the fear that accompanies the exercise of freedom.¹¹

Decision-making processes and planning

What further complicates matters is that we are dealing with individuals who are highly attentive to the sphere of feelings, desires and affectivity. The tendency of the contemporary young person is therefore to seek fulfilment primarily through the needs associated with personal bonds. Moreover, we encounter young people who seek immediate satisfaction of their needs without making long-term investments. They themselves acknowledge this when, at the pre-synodal meeting, they stated: "In many places there is a wide gap between the desires of young people and their capacity to make long-term decisions."¹² In short, these characteristics reveal the distance separating younger generations from models of life marked by strong project-oriented commitment.

This does not mean that they have stopped dreaming or that they are no longer attracted by great ideals. In theory, young people remain fascinated by broader horizons, as demonstrated by the question addressed to the Pope mentioned above. They show themselves open to something capable of directing their future commitment. The capacity to dream and desire great things is itself part of a culture of vocation.¹³ Yet young people also reveal the gap between their desires and their capacity to bring them to fulfilment. If not all, many seem to lack the resources necessary to pursue demanding goals. The capacity to "project" one's life forward is linked to a personal system of values, to the ability to find a purpose, and to the possibility of making choices that give meaning and unity to one's existence.¹⁴ It is not a spontaneous acquisition; it requires conditions, dispositions and resolutions if it is to develop. As the Synod states, youth is marked by dreams that are called to take shape through choices which, even through attempts that may sometimes fail, gradually build a life project (cf. FD, no. 65).

Is there not perhaps an excessive insistence on young people's dreams, without recognising that, without commitment and without the means needed to realise them, such dreams become mere fantasies? How can the greatness and courage of far-reaching choices be awakened?

The family, for example, continues to appear among young people as a desired destination. "The desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant, especially among young people," says the 2016 Synod.¹⁵ Yet the desire to "form a family" (cf. AL, no. 40) is often less powerful than the aspiration to "have a beautiful family". Married and family life is not viewed so much as a demanding life project but rather as something beautiful which nevertheless appears unreal or slips through one's fingers. As a result, people may live relationships—sometimes long-lasting—which lack objectives to be achieved, emotionally intense yet simultaneously fragile, intimate yet incapable of becoming concrete commitments. Between the "dream" and the "task" there emerges not merely a tension but a genuine gap, one that becomes problematic whenever choices require perseverance and fidelity:

The integration of ideals and reality must not merely be thought about or desired. It must be acted upon. Even when dealing with small choices, not necessarily extraordinary ones, every action allows a person to experience the capacity to open himself or herself to transcendent values and to cooperate in the fulfilment of the vocational project rediscovered as a gift. It is through action, and not merely through good intentions, that a young person can verify whether the opportunities available are consistent with what he or she wants to do in life, and can use his or her potential freely and responsibly in order to regulate behaviour and open himself or herself to the new meanings rediscovered at every stage.¹⁶

What we observe today, therefore, is a reluctance to establish a shared project that wagers on commitment and takes concrete steps towards definitive self-giving while accepting risk. Unfortunately, wherever there

is a separation between ideal, project, construction and daily effort, vagueness and illusory distortions emerge: “we’ll see later”. Remaining within the sphere of family life,

*this impression has resulted in a significant delay in the age at which people marry. Today, however, it seems that a further step has been taken: this horizon of life itself is disappearing and is presented merely as optional. Marriage may be considered an important ideal, but its great difficulty is used to justify remaining at an intermediate stage without ever arriving at celebration.*¹⁷

Educating to choose

Choice is the affective response to a judgement of our intelligence when it recognises that one path alone is the best among many others.¹⁸ Yet it is precisely choice that today appears as a complex reality which requires education if it is to be lived well. Educating people to make choices presupposes attention to the various individual components—character, aptitudes, abilities, preferences, aspirations, interests and values—that define each person; then to the factors that may condition each individual; and finally to the decision-making strategies that each person employs. It also includes educating the emotions. Regardless of the degree of affective maturity attained, a young person is strongly influenced by the complexity of his or her interior world, often confused and shaped by the powerful emotional drives that inhabit it and which, by their nature, are subject to change. Nor is it easy to accept the possible failure linked to choosing one alternative rather than another. Indeed, the conflict generated by numerous attractive opportunities produces a stress that must then be managed appropriately.

Furthermore, educating for decision-making requires the development of the cognitive skills involved in gathering the information necessary to evaluate possible options and to identify the motivations that incline one in one direction rather than another.¹⁹ In this sense, the educator must be capable of helping the young person understand—or better pursue—his or her aspirations; weigh the different thoughts and feelings that inhabit the heart; deflate unrealistic desires or ambitions too distant from reality; and purify his or her relationship with God. Beyond this, educating people to choose makes it increasingly urgent to insist upon the primacy of personal conscience as the decisive place of freedom. Only a well-formed conscience can make decisions on the basis of values that are not ephemeral. In conclusion, the difficulty of choosing is a challenge that must not be addressed only in the immediate situation. It must be placed within a broader context, because the entire educational process should be conceived as an education in decision-making.

What attitudes and decision-making styles characterise the young people we know? Which factors contribute to determining their choices? Which obstacles or conditions make those choices more difficult? What educational steps need to be taken? Which dimension—affective, cognitive or moral—do we recognise as most neglected in the formation we offer? How can personal conscience be encouraged to assume both personal and social responsibility?

1. Cf. D. SIGALINI, *The Priest and Young People: Companionship in Faith*, Cittadella, Assisi 2009, p. 55.
2. Among others, the following may be indicated: a positive and stable sense of personal identity; the capacity to relate maturely to others; knowledge of one's gifts and limitations; a solid sense of belonging and collaboration; the ability to become enthusiastic about great ideals and to pursue them consistently; the capacity for self-correction; and the ability to integrate one's sexuality. Cf. CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood* (29 June 2008), no. 2.
3. Cf. P. DEL CORE, "Facing Choices: Psychological Dynamics", in *Horeb* IX/27 (2000) 3, pp. 12–23; ID., "The Fear of Choosing: The Dynamics of Decision and Life Choices", in *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione* XL (2002) 3, pp. 442–455; ID., "Young People and Vocational Choices, Between Fear and Trust: Challenges for an Education in Life Choices", in *Ricerca di Senso* IX (2011) 2, pp. 181–216.
4. G. ANGELINI, *The Reasons for Choice*, Qiqajon, Magnano 1997, p. 27.
5. According to the UNPV survey, among the words associated with the term "vocation", only 17.6% of respondents mention "choice". Cf. P. CORTELLESSA, "Vocation: A Reasoned Interpretation. 1/ The Alphabet of Vocation".
6. Cf. Z. BAUMAN, *In Search of Politics* (Italian ed. *La società dell'incertezza*), Il Mulino, Bologna 1999, p. 17.
7. Not all choices are irreversible. Many choices are episodic or temporary. Nevertheless, a "life choice" ought to give existence a definitive orientation. Today, even this idea is being questioned.
8. Without legitimising them, we must nevertheless acknowledge that young people are not the first generation to arrive on the continent of reversible choices. To be honest, they inhabit it at least as a second or third generation. One need only think of the many adults who demonstrate "how, in practice, those choices—whether of marriage or consecrated life—which had been undertaken 'for ever' are in fact reversible, and not necessarily in bad faith": G. COSTA, "Young People: 'Lying Flat' or 'Hungry'? Fundamental Choices in an Age of Uncertainty", in *Vocazioni* XXXIV (2017) 6, pp. 13–22: 18.
9. Cf. U. BECK, *The Brave New World of Work* (Italian ed. *I rischi della libertà. L'individuo nell'epoca della globalizzazione*), Il Mulino, Bologna 2012.
10. FRANCIS, *The Courage to Choose: Questions and Answers During the Visit to Villa Nazareth* (18 June 2016).
11. Cf. P. DEL CORE, "Vocation, Gift and Task: Interior Transitions and Developmental Pathways", in *Spirito e Vita* LXXXIII (2007) 8/9, pp. 397–404; ID., "From Vocational Intuition to Choice and Decision: Accompaniment", in *Note di Pastorale Giovanile* XLIV (2010) 6, pp. 44–54.
12. SYNOD OF BISHOPS – XV ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *Final Document of the Pre-Synodal Meeting* (24 March 2018), § I/3.
13. Cf. PONTIFICAL WORK FOR ECCLESIASTICAL VOCATIONS, *New Vocations for a New Europe. Final Document of the Congress on Vocations to the Priesthood and Consecrated Life in Europe* (8 December 1997), Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997, no. 13b.
14. Cf. F. GARELLI, "Young People and Vocation: Attitudes and Tensions", in *Note di Pastorale Giovanile* XLII (2009) 1, pp. 17–31.
15. FRANCIS, *Amoris laetitia: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family* (19 March 2016), no. 40. Hereafter: AL.
16. Cf. G. CREA, "The Educational Challenge and Discernment as a Process of Growth", in V. ORLANDO (ed.), *Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment. Reflections on the Reality of Young People Today*, LAS, Rome 2018, pp. 143–166: 157.
17. J. J. PÉREZ-SOBA, *Family Ministry: Between Pastoral Planning and the Generation of Life*, Cantagalli, Siena 2013, p. 165.
18. Cf. J. PIEPER, *Reality and the Good*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2011, p. 128.
19. Cf. A. CENCINI, "Discernment", in J. M. PRELLEZO – C. NANNI – G. MALIZIA (eds.), *Dictionary of Educational Sciences*, Elledici, Turin 1997, p. 306.

CONCLUSION

The royal road to a vocationally fruitful youth ministry is that of the gradual gestation and education into Christian life *tout court*. This means practising and proposing Christian and ecclesial paths that embody the journey leading from the *kerygma* to the life of a missionary disciple; it is there, and there alone, that every individual vocation germinates by its very nature, in harmony with all that is Christian. Consequently, the act of “manufacturing” vocations, without the experience of a meaningful encounter of faith with the Lord, of an act of openness to that encounter and of conversion arising from it, and of a life journey that gives it concrete expression, can only produce disasters, as attested by the scandals and abuses of which breaking news continues to reach us: “In a dechristianised context such as ours, and with processes of education in the faith that are rare and elusive, proposing courses, retreats and the like of an exclusively vocational kind, unless within a broader process of Christian formation and not as isolated stand-alone initiatives, is not only a useless operation, it is dangerous.”¹

The pastoral worker will need to discern the concrete situation from which to propose to young people the appropriate vocational accompaniment. He will not be able to act alone or in a sectorial manner, but organically, together with the whole ecclesial community. Within it, adults, without taking upon themselves the burden of the entire journey, are challenged to re-signify their identity and requalify their role as witnesses capable of proposing ways of human and Christian living. Beyond motivations of faith, they are also required to exercise the necessary educational attentiveness so that, in the process of discernment and choice which they accompany, they take into account both the qualities and resources of young people and their limits and fragilities, as well as the progressive stages of growth and maturation of each person, marked both by deep inner dynamics and by environmental conditions.

1. F. ROSINI, “Triggering Life: From the *Kerygma* to Vocational Discernment”, in *Vocazioni* XXXIX (2022) 3, pp. 10–17: 17.