

Preparatory document of the next SYNOD:

Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment



Chapter 2 - FAITH, DISCERNMENT, VOCATION

Through every phase of this Synod, the Church wants again to state her desire to encounter, accompany and care for every young person, without exception. The Church cannot, nor does she wish to, abandon them to the isolation and exclusion to which the world exposes them. That young people's lives might be a good experience; that they do not lose themselves in violence or death; and that disappointment does not imprison and alienate them, all of this has to be of great concern to one who has received life, been baptized in the faith and is aware that these are great gifts.

Because of these gifts, being born opens a person to the promise of a full life and being accepted and cared for is the basic experience which places in the heart of each person not only the confidence of not being abandoned to a lack of a sense of meaning or to the darkness of death but the hope of being able to express one's individuality in a journey towards the fullness of life.

The wisdom of the Eastern Church is helpful in seeing how this confidence might be based in an analogy of "three births": natural birth, that is, one is born female and male in a world which can accommodate and support life; birth in baptism "when someone becomes a child of God through grace"; and then a third birth, that is, the passage "from bodily life in this world to the spiritual life in the next", which opens a person to the full exercise of freedom (cf. *Discourse of Philoxenus of Mabbug*, a fifth century Syrian bishop, 9).

Offering others the gifts that one has received means accompanying them and walking beside them on this journey as they deal with the weaknesses and difficulties in their lives, and especially supporting them in the exercise of freedom which is still being formed. Consequently, the Church, beginning with her Pastors, is called to make a self-examination and to rediscover her vocation of caring for others in the manner recommended by Pope Francis at the beginning of his pontificate: "...caring [and] protecting demand goodness; [they] call for a certain tenderness. In the Gospels, Saint Joseph appears as a strong and courageous man, a working man, yet in his heart we see great tenderness, which is not the virtue of the weak but rather a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love." (*Homily at the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome*, 19 March 2013).

From this perspective, some ideas will now be presented regarding accompanying young people, beginning with the faith and listening to the tradition of the Church, with the clear objective of supporting them in their vocational discernment and their making fundamental choices in life, starting from an awareness that some of these choices are permanent.



1. Faith and Vocation

Faith is seeing things as Jesus does (cf. *Lumen fidei*, 18). Faith is the source of vocational discernment, because faith provides vocational discernment with its fundamental contents, specific development, personal style and pedagogy. Joyously and willingly accepting this gift of grace requires making it fruitful through concrete and consistent choices in life.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another” (*Jn 15:16-17*). If the vocation to the joy of love is the fundamental call that God has placed in the heart of every young person so that each one’s existence will bear fruit, faith is both a gift from on high and a response to feeling oneself chosen and loved.

Faith “is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God’s faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness” (*Lumen fidei*, 53). This faith “becomes a light capable of illumining all our relationships in society”, contributing to building “a universal brotherhood” among the men and women of our time (*ibid.*, 54).

The Bible has numerous accounts of young people receiving a vocational call and their making a response. In the light of faith, they gradually become aware of the God’s plan of profound love for each person. This is God’s intention in every one of his actions, from the time of creating the world as a place that is “good”, a place capable of accepting life and a place offered as a gift in a network of relations to be trusted.

To believe is to listen to the Spirit and, with all one’s powers of mind and emotion, to dialogue with the Word, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (cf. *Jn 14:6*) and to learn to trust in the Word, “embodying It” in the concrete instances of everyday life, in moments when the cross is encountered and when one experiences the joy in seeing the signs of resurrection, just as the “beloved disciple” did. This challenge must be faced by each Christian community and the individual believer.

The place for this dialogue is the conscience. As taught by the Second Vatican Council, conscience “is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths” (*Gaudium et spes*, 16). Conscience is therefore an inviolable place where a promising invitation is present. To discern the voice of the Spirit from other calls and decide how to respond is the task of each person. Others may accompany and affirm a person, but they can never take another person’s place in this regard.

Life and history teach that human beings cannot easily recognize the concrete form of that joy to which God calls each one and to which each one aspires, let alone at the present time of change and widespread uncertainty. At other times, persons have to deal with discouragement or the pressure of other emotional attachments that stalls a person on the path to the fulfilment. Many people experience this; for example, the young man who had too many riches which kept him from accepting the call of Jesus, and because of this, went away sad, rather than full of joy (cf. *Mk 10:17-22*). Human freedom, despite the fact that it always needs to be purified and perfected, never loses the fundamental capacity to recognize the good and carrying it out. “Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning” (*Laudato Si’*, 205).

2. The Gift of Discernment

Making decisions and guiding one's actions in situations of uncertainty and in the face of conflicting inner forces is the place for exercising discernment, a classic term in the tradition of the Church which applies to a variety of situations. Indeed, one form of discernment is exercised in reading the signs of the times which leads to recognizing the presence and action of the Spirit in history. Moral discernment, instead, distinguishes what is good from what is bad. Still another form, spiritual discernment, aims to recognize temptation so as to reject it and proceed on the path to fullness of life. The connection of the various meanings of these forms is evident, a connection which can never be completely separated one from the other.

With this in mind, the focus in the case of the synod is on vocational discernment, that is, the process by which a person makes fundamental choices, in dialogue with the Lord and listening to the voice of the Spirit, starting with the choice of one's state in life. The question of how a person is not to waste the opportunities for self-realization is part-and-parcel of every man and woman. For the believer, the question becomes even more intense and profound, namely, how does a person live the good news of the Gospel and respond to the call which the Lord addresses to all those he encounters, whether through marriage, the ordained ministry or the consecrated life? Where can a person's talents be put to good use: a professional life, volunteer work, service to the needy or involvement in civil and political life?

The Spirit speaks and acts through the happenings in the life of each person, which in themselves are inexplicit or ambiguous, insofar as they are open to different interpretations. Discernment is required to reveal their meaning and to make a decision. The three verbs in *Evangelii gaudium*, 51, used to describe discernment, namely, "to recognize," "to interpret" and "to choose", can be of assistance in mapping out a suitable itinerary for individuals or groups and communities, fully aware that, in practice, the boundaries in the different phases are never clearly delineated.

Recognizing

Above all, "recognizing" concerns how life's happenings, the people one meets, and the words one hears or reads affect the interior life, namely, the various "desires, feelings and emotions" (*Amoris laetitia*, 143) and their diverse expressions: sadness, gloom, fulfilment, fear, joy, peace, a feeling of emptiness, tenderness, anger, hope, apathy, etc. A person feels attracted or pushed in a variety of directions, without enough clarity to take action, a time of ups and downs and, in some cases, a real internal struggle. "Recognizing" requires making this emotional richness emerge and ascertaining these feelings without making a judgment. It also requires capturing the "flavour" that remains, that is, the consonance or dissonance between what is experienced and what is in the depths of the heart.

At this stage the Word of God is of great importance. Meditating on it, in fact, mobilizes the passions as in all experiences which touch one's inner self, but, at the same time, offers the possibility of making them emerge and identifying with them in the events it narrates. The stage of "recognizing" focuses on the ability to listen and on one's feelings and emotions, without avoiding the arduous effort of silence, a critical step in personal growth, particularly for young people who are experiencing with greater pressure the intensity of various desires and cannot remain frightened by them, and thereby, renouncing even the great advances to which they are drawn.

Interpreting

"Recognizing" what has been tried is not enough. The next step is "interpreting", in other words, to understand what the Spirit is calling the person to do through what the Spirit stirs up in each one.



Oftentimes, a person stops to recount an experience, noting that the experience made a “deep impression.” Greater difficulty is encountered in understanding the origin and meaning of the desires and emotions one experiences and verifying whether they lead in a constructive direction or whether they lead to withdrawing into oneself.

This interpretative stage is very sensitive, requiring patience, vigilance and even a certain knowledge. A person needs to be capable of taking into consideration the effects of social and psychological conditioning, which even requires the involvement of one’s intellectual faculties, without falling into the trap of constructing abstract theories about what would be good or nice to do. Even in discernment, “realities are greater than ideas” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 231). Likewise, “interpreting” cannot fail to confront reality and to consider the possibilities that realistically are available.

“Interpreting” desires and inner movements requires an honest confrontation, in light of God’s Word, with the moral demands of the Christian life, always seeking to apply them in the concrete situation that is being experienced. This effort leads the one who does it, not to settle for the legalistic logic of the bare minimum, but instead to seek a way to make the most of one’s gifts and possibilities, which results in an attractive and inspiring message for young people.

The work of interpretation is carried out in an internal dialogue with the Lord, fully engaging a person’s abilities. The assistance of an experienced person in listening to the Spirit, however, is a valuable support that the Church offers, a support which would be unwise to disregard.

Choosing

Once all the desires and emotions are recognized and interpreted, the next step in making a decision is an exercise of authentic human freedom and personal responsibility, which, of course, is always connected to a concrete situation and therefore limited. The choice is subjected, then, to the blind force of impulse, to which a certain contemporary relativism ends up by assigning as ultimate criterion, norms imprisoning a person in continual change. At the same time, a person is freed from subjection to forces outside oneself, namely heteronomy. All of this requires coherency with one’s life.

For a long time throughout history, basic decisions in life have not been made by the individuals concerned, a situation which still endures in some parts of the world, as previously mentioned in the first chapter. Promoting truly free and responsible choices, fully removed from practices of the past, remains the goal of every serious pastoral vocational programme. Discernment is the main tool which permits safeguarding the inviolable place of conscience, without pretending to replace it (cf. *Amoris laetitia*, 37).

A decision needs to be proven by facts to see whether it is a right decision. A choice cannot remain imprisoned in an interiority which is likely to remain virtual or unrealistic — a real danger accentuated in contemporary culture — but is called to be translated into action, to take flesh, to embark on a path, accepting the risk of a confrontation with the reality which caused the desires and emotions. Other desires and emotions will arise in this stage; “recognizing” and “interpreting” them will allow the possibility of seeing whether the decision is good or whether it is advisable to re- evaluate it. Consequently, “going out” is important, even with the fear of making a mistake, which, as previously seen, can be crippling.

3. Paths Towards Vocation and Mission

Vocational discernment is not accomplished in a single act, even if, in recounting the development of a vocation, identifying specific moments or decisive encounters is possible. As for all important things in life, vocational discernment is a long process unfolding over time, during which one continues to



monitor the signs used by the Lord to indicate and specify a vocation that is very personal and unique. The Lord asked Abraham and Sarah to leave their country, but only in a gradual process — not without mistaken steps — which clarified what was initially a mysterious “land that I will show you” (*Gen 12:1*). Mary herself makes progress in the awareness of her vocation through meditating on the words she hears and the events which took place, even those she did not understand (cf. *Lk 2:50-51*).

Time is fundamental in verifying the effectiveness of a decision made. As taught in every page of the Bible, every vocation is directed towards a mission undertaken with reluctance or enthusiasm.

Accepting the mission implies the willingness to risk one’s life and to travel the way of the cross, in the footsteps of Jesus, who firmly set out on his journey to Jerusalem (cf. *Lk 9:51*) to offer his life for humanity. Only by giving up being selfishly occupied with one’s needs does a person become open to accommodate God’s plan in family life, the ordained ministry or consecrated life and seriously to carry out one’s profession as well as sincerely to seek the common good. Particularly in places where the culture is more deeply marked by individualism, choices need to be examined to see whether the pursuit of self-fulfilment might be the result of narcissism or instead includes a willingness to live one’s life logically in compliance with the generosity of the gift of self. Consequently, contact with poverty, vulnerability and need are of great importance on the road to vocational discernment. Above all, members of the formation staff in seminaries should confirm and foster in seminarians a willingness to become imbued with the “smell of the sheep.”

4. Accompaniment

Three basic beliefs underlie the process of discernment, beliefs which are ingrained in every human being’s experience understood in the light of the faith and Christian tradition. The first is that the Spirit of God works in the heart of every man and woman through feelings and desires that are bound to ideas, images and plans. Listening carefully, the human being has the possibility to interpret these signals. The second belief is that the human heart, because of its weakness and sin, is normally divided because it is attracted to different and even contrary feelings. The third belief is that every way of life imposes a choice, because a person cannot remain indefinitely in an undetermined state. A person needs to adopt the instruments needed to recognize the Lord’s call to the joy of love and choose to respond to it.

Among these instruments, the Church’s spiritual tradition emphasizes the importance of personal accompaniment. In accompanying another person, the study of the teachings on discernment is not enough; one needs the hard, personal experience of interpreting the movements of the heart to recognize the action of the Spirit, whose voice can speak to the uniqueness of each individual. Personal accompaniment demands the constant refinement of one’s sensitivity to the voice of the Spirit and leads to discovering a resource and richness in a person’s individual character.

It is a question of fostering a person’s relationship with God and helping to remove what might hinder it. Herein lies the difference between accompaniment in discerning and psychological support, which, when open to transcendence, oftentimes has a basic importance. The psychologist supports those in difficulties and helps them become aware of their weaknesses and potential. Spiritual guidance re-orientates a person towards the Lord and prepares the ground for an encounter with him (cf. *Jn 3:29-30*).

Jesus’ encounter with the people of his time, as recorded in the Gospels, highlight certain elements which are part of the ideal profile of the person accompanying a young person in vocational discernment, namely, a loving look (the calling of the first disciples, cf. *Jn 1:35- 51*); an authoritative word (teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, cf. *Lk 4:32*); an ability to “become the neighbour” (the



parable of the Good Samaritan, cf. *Lk* 10:25-37); a choice to “walk beside” (the disciples of Emmaus, cf. *Lk* 24:13-35); and an authentic witness, fearlessly going against preconceived ideas (the washing of the feet at the Last Supper, cf. *Jn* 13:1-20).

In the task of accompanying the younger generation, the Church accepts her call to collaborate in the joy of young people rather than be tempted to take control of their faith (cf. *2 Cor* 1:24). Such service is ultimately founded in prayer and in asking for the gift of the Spirit, who guides and enlightens each and everyone.

