

Youth Synod Fosters Synodality Between The Church and Young People

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ABSTRACT

The 2018 Youth Synod was a significant milestone in the Church's journey to engage with those young people who are active members of the Church. The Youth Synod has given rise to several realizations within the Church, namely that the Church needs to listen to the voices of the young people. The voices of young people are also a "theological locus" where, through the Holy Spirit, they dare to evaluate, criticize, and place their hopes in the Church. In carrying out its pastoral ministry, the Church needs to walk alongside young people. This is because young people are not only the object of the Church's reflection and recipients of pastoral care initiating by the Church, but they are also the actors of pastoral ministry itself. The purpose of the study is to describe several elements of pastoral activities for young people which are synodal and mission-oriented. The author explains the youth synod as an event which had produced a pattern of pastoral care for young people in relation to synodality. This study employs a qualitative approach through a comprehensive literature review. The Church needs to be synodal in its pastoral ministry for and with young people. This is because, in essence, the Church is always a synodal institution. The Church is born, grows, and develops, remaining sustainable because of its way of life (*modus vivendi*) and way of acting (*modus operandi*) in a dynamic process of walking together.

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Introduction

By its very nature, the Church is always synodal. From the very beginning, the Church has come into being, grown, developed, and endured through a *modus vivendi* (way of life) and a *modus operandi* (way of acting) embodied in the dynamic of "journeying together." This journey is continually guided by the Holy Spirit, who directs the life and mission of the Church itself (Martasujita, 2023; Nampar, 2022). The Second Vatican Council affirms that the Church was prepared from the very beginning in the history of the people of Israel (Lumen Gentium, no. 2). At Pentecost, the Church was established through the outpouring of the Holy

Spirit and will attain its fullness at the end of time (Acts 2:1–4). Throughout salvation history, the Church journeys with God in accordance with.... Christ's promise: ".... and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

The synodal nature of the Church received renewed emphasis through the Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2018, which addressed the theme: "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment". Through a process of listening and spiritual discernment under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Synod underscored the importance of journeying with young people and reaching out to them to bear witness to God's love. This approach demonstrates that a synodal Church involves the entire People of God, including young people, as an integral part of its life and mission. The Synod also revealed that the Holy Spirit inspires a spirit of dialogue, mutual listening, and the courage to bring hope to the world. The presence of young people was recognized as a sign of renewal, for through them the voice of an entire generation resonates within the Church (Nugroho, 2019).

The Church's concern for young people represents a continuation of the reflection that emerged from the two preceding Synods on the family: the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2014 on The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization, and the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly on The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and the Contemporary World. These two assemblies culminated in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, which demonstrates significant concern for young people by referring to them 34 times (Baldisseri, 2017). This concern was subsequently expressed in a particular way through the Synod on Young People.

The methodology adopted for the Synod on Young People further developed the participatory approach previously employed during the Synods on the family. The synodal process not only created the broadest possible opportunities for the participation of the People of God but also placed young people at the center as the principal subjects who articulated their own experiences, perspectives, and hopes (Amendolagine, 2022). Consequently, young people were no longer regarded merely as objects of pastoral reflection but as active protagonists who helped shape the future direction of the Church's life.

This paradigm shift became evident in the reformulation of the fundamental question underlying the synodal process. Initially, attention centered on the question: "What should be done for young people?" This perspective generated various forms of accompaniment, including educating, guiding, encouraging, and supporting them. Although valuable, this approach was considered to leave adults in the dominant position. Consequently, the focus shifted to a different question: "Who are we called to become for young people?" This transition marked a fundamental movement from a one-directional approach toward relationships characterized by communion, dialogue, and mutual accompaniment (Cavagnari, 2021).

The Synod on Young People unfolded through a participatory synodal process consisting of several stages. It began with the announcement of the theme: "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment" on 6 October 2016, followed by the publication of the Preparatory Document together with Pope

Francis' Letter to Young People, the distribution of questionnaires, the International Seminar held from 11 to 15 September 2017, the Pre-Synodal Meeting from 19 to 24 March 2018, the publication of the *Instrumentum Laboris* on 19 June 2018, the Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held from 3 to 28 October 2018, the promulgation of the Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit* on 25 March 2019, and the post-synodal meeting organized by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life from 18 to 22 June 2019. Together, these stages demonstrate the Church's commitment to listening to, reflecting upon, and genuinely involving young people in its processes of discernment and decision-making (Costa, 2018; Amendolagine, 2022; Costa, 2019).

This process was not directed solely toward the production of ecclesial documents but also affirmed that young people are living members of the Mystical Body of Christ. Accordingly, their experiences, aspirations, and concrete realities became essential foundations for the renewal of the Church's life (Nugroho, 2019). This spirit of listening was expressed through questionnaires distributed to the Conferences of Bishops, the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, the Union of Superiors General, and young people throughout the world. The findings were subsequently deepened through an international seminar involving sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and theologians in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of young people (General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2017).

The participation of young people became even more evident during the Pre-Synodal Meeting, which brought together approximately 300 participants from different countries and around 15,000 online participants through social media. The meeting produced fifteen principal themes that subsequently became part of the Synod's Final Document. This outcome demonstrated the capacity of young people to identify significant challenges confronting both the Church and society while making a substantive contribution to the direction of the Synod's reflection (General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2017). This experience illustrates that synodality is realized through authentic dialogue in which young people are given the opportunity to express their perspectives, critiques and proposals as part of the exercise of the prophetic office of the entire People of God, as affirmed by the Second Vatican Council and further developed in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Susanto, 2014; Francis, 2021; Sala, 2019; Abraham, 2025).

The entire synodal journey is understood as the work of the Holy Spirit, who continually guides the Church in journeying together, just as Christ accompanied the disciples on the road to Emmaus. This process renews the Church's life by strengthening a culture of listening, dialogue, conversion of heart, awareness of the *sensus fidei*, shared responsibility grounded in the dignity of Baptism, and recognition of the contribution of the lay faithful (including young people) in building a participatory, missionary Church that remains open to the action of the Holy Spirit (Susanto, 2014; Francesco, 2015; Nugroho, 2019; Francis, 2019; Francis, 2021). Thus, the involvement of young people is understood not merely as a pastoral option but as a consequence of Christian discipleship that directs the Church toward an inclusive communion oriented toward the service of all humanity.

The synodal paradigm shift is also reflected how the Church relates to young people. An approach previously centered on "doing something for" young people has evolved into a commitment to learning, listening, growing, and journeying together with them. Within this perspective, young people are recognized as subjects capable of articulating their own lived experiences while also serving as agents of transformation who assume responsibility for others, for the Church's mission, and for the common good (Nugroho, 2019). This development reaffirms that young people are beloved by God and called to participate actively in the life of both the Church and society. Consequently, synodality brings about a renewal of the Church's pastoral vision, moving from "doing for" young people toward "journeying together, growing together, and working with them" (Cavagnari, 2021).

This discussion focuses on the nature of the synodal Church and on a pastoral style that remains faithful to the Church's teaching while remaining open to the work of the Holy Spirit within the dynamics of mission. Synodality is essential because it provides space for the participation of the entire People of God, including young people, as members of the one Mystical Body of Christ. Furthermore, the shared experience of living out Gospel values enables the Holy Spirit to continually guide the Church in its renewal, liberating it from pastoral tendencies characterized either by self-enclosure or by attachment to comfort (Francis, 2021).

On the basis of this framework, the discussion proceeds by examining the essential elements of a synodal and mission-oriented youth ministry (Nugroho, 2019). It begins by situating the concept of synodality within the Church's Magisterium, continues with an examination of the Synod on Young People as an ecclesial event giving rise to a renewed pastoral model, and concludes by highlighting the contribution of young people in shaping a Church whose ministry is increasingly synodal, inclusive, relational, and grounded in shared responsibility. From this perspective, young people are no longer understood merely as recipients of pastoral formation but as active subjects who participate in the ongoing renewal of the Church's life and mission.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research method through a literature review, textual analysis, and critical interpretation of texts. The processes of data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing adopt the analytical model developed by Miles and Huberman. The first stage involved collecting primary data from ecclesial documents that specifically address Catholic young people, including the Preparatory Document for the Synod on Young People, the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the Final Document of the Synod on Young People, and *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis' Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation. Secondary data were obtained from scholarly books on synodality, academic journal articles, and magazines.

During the data reduction stage, the researcher summarized and refined the collected data by focusing on information relevant to the objectives and research questions of the study. The data analyzed consisted of materials gathered from

both primary and secondary sources. In qualitative research, data is generally presented descriptively in narrative form, as each piece of information is closely interconnected with the others. The final stage involved drawing conclusions based on the findings of the data analysis conducted through a systematic process. The researcher then validated and verified the data obtained from the literature review before compiling the complete research report.

Results

The Final Document of the Synod affirms that the synodal experience has demonstrated the significance of the Church's synodal form in proclaiming and handing on the faith. The participation of young people has also contributed to the revitalization of synodality as a constitutive dimension of the Church. Furthermore, the synodal experience has revealed several fundamental characteristics of the synodal form as the direction for the Church's renewal (Francis, 2019). Synodality, understood as "journeying together" within the Church, calls for a transformation of mentality, one of the essential expressions of which the disposition to listen. A synodal Church is understood as a listening Church, recognizing that authentic listening goes far beyond the mere act of hearing (Francis, 2019). Young people are an integral part of the Church's present, not merely its future. Their presence is manifested in various ecclesial ministries and activities through the generous service they willingly offer (Francis, 2019).

The involvement of young people in the Church's mission must begin from an early stage. As members of the People of God, young people deserve recognition and respect for both their human dignity and their spiritual life. In this context, they serve as the leaven that fosters the Church's growth (Francis, 2019). Merely listening to young people, however, is not sufficient. The Church must embrace them as an integral part of herself, acknowledging them as both the present and the future of the Church (Francis, 2019). Likewise, the Church is called to involve young people from the very beginning as active subjects who enthusiastically engage in the realities of contemporary life. From a missionary perspective, the Church is called to manifest a relational face characterized by attentive listening, hospitality, dialogue, and communal spiritual discernment within a process capable of transforming the lives of all who participate (Francis, 2019).

Thinking Together with Young People

Many young people desire to become more deeply involved in the life of the ecclesial community by offering their talents, abilities, and creativity, while willingly assuming responsibility as principal protagonists in the Church's mission (Francis, 2019). The Church is called to be present in a charismatic and authoritative manner, manifesting the authenticity of Christian life through the lived experience of journeying together with young people. The communion between young people and the ecclesial community constitutes a mutually enriching relationship. The active participation of young people enriches the life of the Church, for they are no longer merely children but have begun to assume responsibility for its life and mission (Francis, 2019).

Young people learn from the authentic human values embodied within the ecclesial community. Such learning fosters new sensitivities and gives rise to

reflective questions that accompany the process of faith development (Nugroho, 2019). The reciprocal relationship between young people and the ecclesial community is grounded not merely in anthropological or sociological considerations, but also in the theological conviction that young people constitute a *locus theologicus* through which the voice of God may be heard (Nugroho, 2019). This conviction affirms that the knowledge of God is acquired not only through historical tradition, the signs of the times, and Sacred Scripture as the source of the Word of God, but also through the human person, who is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26).

Synodality in the Church is rooted in the spirit of journeying together, a reality that transcends the merely technical dimensions of pastoral ministry. Synodality encompasses empathetic discernment, namely, the capacity to make room for the perspectives of others, to understand their emotions, aspirations, and efforts as expressed within relationships of genuine dialogue (Francesco, 2024). In the light of the Word of God, every member of the Church is called to listen to one another while, at the same time, listening to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth (Jn 14:17), who continually speaks to the Church. The process of discerning together, speaking the truth in charity, and listening with respect and openness forms the foundation for journeying together in faith (Martasujita et al., 2023).

The experience of journeying together as the People of God deepens the understanding of authority as service. Pastors are called to foster collaboration in witness and mission while accompanying the communal process of spiritual discernment. This process seeks to interpret the signs of the times in the light of faith and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with the active participation of all members of the ecclesial community, including young people (Nugroho, 2019; Rongan, 2019).

Planning Together with Young People

Pastoral planning with young people is not merely a pastoral strategy but a concrete way of fostering shared discernment and directing it toward pastoral action (Vojtáš, 2015). Such planning encompasses not only objective and indispensable elements, such as knowledge of the realities of young people gained through studies, research, and sociological analysis, but also reaches the depth of the pastoral minister's faith. This process leads to the discernment of God's will, not in an abstract sense but concretely within history and everyday life (Costa, 2019). Such planning becomes possible through shared responsibility, the participation of the People of God, and the *sensus fidei*, including the active involvement of young people (Susanto, 2018).

Planning together with young people means that the Church intentionally creates space for their insights and intuitions of young people. This is an act of faith within the ecclesial community and an expression of openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who directs hearts toward unity and communion. Planning is therefore understood not as an attempt to control or predetermine the future, but as a process of preparing the way for the future as a gift revealed for all (Falabretti, 2019). It also entails openness to God's dream for the community, the construction of a shared vision with young people, the recognition of the newness brought forth by the Holy Spirit that rekindles hope and enthusiasm, and the

clarification of the journey ahead within the horizon of the Church's mission (Vojtáš, 2015; Nugroho, 2019).

Young people expect the Church, at every level, to be a "prophet of fraternity." Without such a presence, the Church risks losing its significance both for young people and for society at large. This appeal emerged powerfully during the Synod on Young People and was reaffirmed in the Final Document, which states that the Church's common vocation is to live in fraternity and with a missionary spirit. The Church is one because she has one Teacher who makes all people brothers and sisters (Matt 23:8) and sends them forth in one common mission (Matt 28:16–20; Sala, 2020).

During the Synod, the reflections of young people revealed profound insight as well as a strong hope that the Church would be present in places that have seldom been reached—or have never been reached at all. This expectation includes the Church's presence in orphanages, hospitals, marginalized communities, conflict zones, and rehabilitation centers (Amendolagine, 2022; Secretariat Sinodo dei Vescovi, 2018). Together with young people and in a synodal spirit, the Church embarks upon a process of planning as a missionary Church that goes forth. Particular emphasis is placed on initiatives that emerge collaboratively with young people, are inspired by the Holy Spirit, and are encouraged, strengthened, and accompanied with generous commitment. The willingness to continue moving forward, even when the concrete path has not yet been fully discerned, is a distinctive characteristic of pastoral action carried out in a synodal manner (Nugroho, 2019).

Missioning Together

The Church exists in order to carry out its mission. Mission constitutes the very life of the Church, and young people are called to "walk" through life by sharing responsibility for the Church's mission (Francesco, 2017). The experience of synodal reflection and discernment is not an end in itself. To fulfill this mission, the Church must go forth from the community and share the experience of faith with the People of God (Nugroho, 2019). Young people's sensitivity to the diaconal dimension is manifested in their active involvement in volunteer service. Through such ministry, they discover a path to encounter the Lord (Nugroho, 2019).

For many years, diakonia has been understood as both a practical expression of faith and an opportunity to embody theological principles and Gospel values. Through diakonia, the faithful experience the concrete practice of faith by rediscovering the love that lies at the heart of the Gospel and serving as the foundation of Christian life (Nugroho, 2019). Consequently, participating together in mission is understood not merely as service to those in need but as an authentic encounter with the Lord, who is present in the least and the lowly (Matt 25:40).

Such an authentic encounter becomes an opportunity for the growth of faith within the community. Pope Francis, in his address to the International Youth Forum, affirmed that the presence of Jesus is experienced within the community and throughout the journey of daily life. The more Christ's presence is shared with others, the more deeply His presence is experienced in one's own life (Francesco, 2019). The missionary vocation of young people is expressed through their

participation in social ministries, community outreach, and volunteer initiatives, all of which provide concrete opportunities to walk together in the spirit of synodality (General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2017).

The planning and implementation of mission together with young people bear witness not only to evangelical service but also to the fruitfulness of the synodal process. In a world increasingly marked by individualism, unity of purpose and action in mission has the power to awaken consciences. Ministry carried out with sincerity and love, communication characterized by joy, and collaborative service inspired by the spirit of communion all testify to faithful obedience to the calling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:41–47).

Conclusion

The primary aim of youth pastoral ministry is to journey together with young people. This means that the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, walks with young people so that they may come to know Jesus Christ more deeply, love Him more fully, and allow Christ to live within them. In carrying out its pastoral mission, the Church must actively involve young people themselves as the principal agents of pastoral ministry. In short, the Church is called to embrace a synodal approach in its pastoral ministry both for and with young people. This is because the Church is, by its very nature, synodal. The Church was born, has grown and developed, and continues to endure through its *modus vivendi* (way of life) and *modus operandi* (way of acting), manifested in the dynamic process of "journeying together."

Recommendations

Those engaged in youth pastoral ministry are encouraged to continue cultivating an attitude of empathetic listening as a defining characteristic of the synodal Church. Such an attitude calls for a transformation of mentality toward a relational, dialogical, and participatory approach. Pastoral planning should be carried out collaboratively with young people in a continuous and context-sensitive manner. The Church must have the courage to listen to the intuitions, creativity, and aspirations of young people. In this way, pastoral planning transcends mere technical considerations and becomes a genuine process of faith that remains open to the newness of the Holy Spirit.

For future research, it is recommended that empirical studies be conducted on the practice of synodality with young people at the local level, such as within parishes or Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). Such studies would enrich theological reflection with contextual data and make a concrete contribution to the development of a synodal and missionary youth pastoral ministry.

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