

Youth, faith and vocational discernment

Introduction

The great appeal of Pope Francis (World Youth Day, Rio de Janeiro) is that young people today become 'actors of history' and 'protagonists of change'. This is our vision for our young people and that, in this engagement, they will be close disciples of Jesus, formed and supported in faith by their families and the entire community of the Church. With this in mind, we have looked closely at the 'face' of young people in Europe and at the response that we as bishops and our communities might make.

1. Uncertainty, fear and thirst.

In the lives of young people we sense much uncertainty, fear and anxiety, yet also generosity and great desires for good.

Young people have real thirsts, and they entertain great hopes: for love, for a family of their own, for a clear pathway in life, to be able to improve the world into which they are entering. At the same time, they have fears as to whether any of this is truly possible and whether they can take the risks involved. The risks of commitment sometimes seem too great.

Many young people have the experience of fragile or broken family life, which leaves them wounded and not well equipped to face the challenges and sufferings of life. Levels of dependency and depression, including suicide, are signs of this fragility.

Young people live in a fluid and rapidly changing culture, dominated by image, sound, sound bite, and which is often manipulative.

If we are to accompany young people we have to learn to love this culture and not to belittle it or disparage its characteristics. Indeed we have to be ready to enter fully into this culture ourselves so as to speak into it.

2. Identity

Young people often live with an uncertainty about their deepest identity. This can be experienced in many ways. Sometimes national identity is problematic as events and conflicts of the past make that identity seemingly very burdensome. Sometimes identity is challenged by many cultural factors, including economic pressures, future prospects, and conflicting ideologies and consequent public policies.

It is important to assist young people to rediscover their roots, as members of families, church communities and of nations. Often those roots will bring with them something of the richness of faith, or a testimony of bravery and generosity which evokes faith in God. Intergenerational relationships, especially with grandparents, are very important and often affirm identity and give stability to

young people. These are to be enhanced, although in many countries they are still an important feature of family life. At the level of national identity, an example of this is the programme in Lithuania 'Mission Siberia'.

3. Intersections.

One of the paradoxes of youth culture is that while social media gives immense capacity for connectedness, many young people live with a sense of isolation.

We must look for points at which the world of young people intersects with other cultures, including those of the Church. These points of intersection can be identified and developed. They include the family (creating opportunities for family catechesis); universities (where pastoral action needs to be one of mission and outreach, not invitations to tea); volunteering via social engagement (for which young people are ready and enthusiastic and which can lead to engagement with Jesus and the realities of faith); the activities of music, the arts, sport and travel; the tradition of pilgrimages; the question of meeting with 'the other', in which young people have particular openness (e.g. engagement with the world of Islam).

In all these points of intersection we (representatives of the Church: bishops, priests, chaplains etc) must be prepared to go beyond our comfort zone and to 'waste time'.

4. Meeting places.

There is a need to develop meeting places which may grow out of these 'intersections'. Such meeting places, which give space for dialogue, conversation, mutually shared activities, could lead the Church to be 'the new family of young people', showing a particularly 'maternal care'. Here young people can discover the wonder of their baptism and their baptismal vocation.

Such meeting places can serve to ensure that social engagement is fashioned and directed by the love of God. We do good because God is good. We love because we are loved first by the Lord. It is love of the Lord that inspires us to serve those in need and which completes and transforms the natural desire to serve. Here we observe that while often Eucharist leads to agape, today it is more often agape that can lead to Eucharist. In this a knowledge of Catholic Social Teaching, as presented in the World Youth Day in Krakow 2016, with the DoCat, is formative and crucial.

A great characteristic of such places will be that in them all interaction will be 'heart speaking unto heart', a positive acceptance and recognition that ultimately any teaching that is not an exercise of loveliness and care is ineffective. They also offer opportunities of realising that discovering the Lord leads to the discovery of self, as we see in the example of the saints.

Among these meeting places a priority will be given to places for prayer and contemplation. Silence, filled with prayer and shared, is key to establishing the primary relationship, with Jesus, which is then the foundation of all trust and relationships with others. Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament is a primary form of such meetings. Young people are particularly open to the transcendent

and thirst for a place in which to focus on that presence, discover its meaning in the Incarnation, and build a relationship with 'God in our midst'. For the growth of this relation, the sacrament of Reconciliation is necessary and opportunities for its celebration need to be provided. An appeal from young people is 'Teach us how to pray!'. An appeal to every parish and monastery (from Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church) is 'Become a school of prayer!' In this, the richness of the Word of God is a life-giving source to be opened to young people.

5. Pastoral conversion for pastoral discernment.

A challenge to all bishops and ministers is to undergo a true pastoral conversion in order to be ready for ministry/accompaniment with young people. Such pastoral conversion means much more than going out to meet them. It means going out of ourselves, out of our preconceptions and expectations, out of our fears and timidity. It means taking risks in facing awkward questions and answering them truthfully. It means not hiding our own dilemmas and uncertainties. Pope Francis leads us in this important and necessary conversion with his own example. His life has an simplicity and an authenticity - he lives as he speaks; he speaks 'heart to heart'; he is not afraid of the difficult questions; he takes the realities and limitations of life seriously; he knows the power of the ordinary gesture and of the simple image.

Such conversion is vital if we are to learn the art of discernment, which is the most important theme of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops.

Conclusion.

Our concluding images are those provided by the Gospel account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Accompanying the two disciples, Jesus walks with them, in the direction they are taking, even if it is away from Jerusalem with disappointment and emptiness in their hearts. He speaks openly with them, speaking heart to heart, explaining the mystery of God's love revealed in the Scriptures. He gently leads them to a Eucharistic discovery of who he is. Their 'conversion' comes in an instant and they immediately become missionaries, no longer afraid to proclaim their faith.

Such was the testimony we heard from one young man here in Minsk.

29 September 2017
Feast of the Archangels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael.