

The Synod: a path of future and of hope

Dearest Sisters,

The Bishops Synod on the theme: *The Young, Faith, and Vocational Discernment* ended recently and I wish to write a Circular immediately on this theme that touches us closely. Sr. Alessandra Smerilli and Sr. Lucy Muthoni Nderi participated in the Synod as auditors. The Institute was present through them at this great event of the Holy Spirit. This ecclesial experience, both exceptional and enriching, was lived as a gift from God that is poured out on our whole Family. The participation of the Rector Major, Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, and numerous Salesians was very meaningful for sharing the riches and timeliness of the charism in the Assembly.

I wish to interpret all of you in thanking Pope Francis who courageously called this Synod on the young. It was an event prepared in detail for a long time and that required a laborious and dynamic process that was new and very involving, especially for the young people. An event, the Holy Father specifies, in which the Holy Spirit acted: “Now the Spirit gives us the document so that it may work in our heart. We are the recipients of the document...and we need to pray with the document, study it, ask for light” (*Discourse at the conclusion of the Synod Assembly, October 27, 2018*).

It is a direct consignment to each one of us and which we receive with a ‘synod heart’ to walk together with Gospel courage, hope, optimism, and with great trust in the young.

The Document is very rich. I limit myself to sharing some aspects that I feel are in complete harmony with the path the Institute is following, especially in the post-Chapter period: *listening, synodality, accompaniment*.

Climate of listening

There is a profound desire in the young: to be listened to, accepted, understood. They need credible and trustworthy adults who are real witnesses. Not only this, however; they need to be listened to and they are also aware that they must listen. The young are capable of listening and of deciding when they feel they are accepted with empathy, supported in trust, accompanied; not left alone or betrayed on their journey (Cf. *Final Document, Df*, no. 7)

Pope Francis highlighted that the young are the present, not only the future. By thinking of them only for the future, we are deprived of their healthy protagonism today.

They should not only be prepared for the life they will live tomorrow, but favored today in a dignified, happy life, responsible for the common good; a life of social commitment and evangelization itself, in which they have much to offer and we adults have much to learn (cf. *Df*, n. 155).

We want to listen to their silences as well, to their indifference with respect and discretion within a renewed generational covenant. It is even necessary to understand their sense of annoyance in the face of a Church that at times they feel is distant because it has betrayed them in their need for authenticity, transparency, Gospel, closeness to the poor.

We believe that favoring contact with the poor in the young urges them to open their eyes and spurs them to a sense of responsibility. When as Church the young live the dynamism of going outside themselves, a situation of encounter is realized in which the person can evaluate self and enter into the world of another, make a vocational discernment, and deepen the faith journey (cf. *Df*, n. 46).

The listening asked for by the young was the key word to understanding other dimensions as well. A Church that lives a *culture of listening* is a Church that is more relational and empathic. “It can make the young listen to it only by listening to the young” and reserving more space for women as well. The requests of young people regarding these spaces were echoed by very frank interventions on the urgency of a change in this direction (cf. *Df*, n. 55)

This is quite other than a dark and sad Church! The Youth Synod gave a touch of concreteness, beauty, youth. They said to us: “Present!”.

On the other hand, the awareness of the fragility of the People of God reawakened the need to receive salvation from Jesus and made us perceive the availability of all the members of the Church to walk together in humility with the young, trusting the Lord: a wounded Church can better understand the wounds of humanity.

The Church that listens to the young is the Church that listens to its Lord above all. Faith is born from listening and the listening of the Church is based on the power of the Word that the Holy Spirit helps us to understand in its truth and fullness. The Spirit is fire in the heart, light for the journey toward Jesus and allowing ourselves to be encountered by Him. Strong in His word, the Church is able to go out, to ‘let itself be touched’ by situations, including those of degradation, waste, marginalization, self-sufficiency and self-referentiality, poverty, indifference, and even distress at the scandals of some Church people that diminished its credibility.

During the Synod some *particular themes* emerged: evangelization starting from the poor and from other peripheries of life, accompaniment along the path of affective maturation, ecclesial belonging of all young people beyond their faith or no faith, the digital world. We live together in this world that must be inhabited with intelligence, love, and hope. Attention to the dignity of the human person and in particular to the woman, often discriminated against, is a must. Life comes first of all. In this context, taking care of migrants must be considered: a complex reality that must be addressed in terms of acceptance and integration.

Finally, it is interesting that during the Synod good practices were shared: *a true corner of hope*. There is so much good in the Church and outside of it. If we know how to draw benefit from this, the world will certainly be better. The young do not ask for a reserved space, a dicastery for the young, almost a parliament in which they can say what they want. What serves is a renewed covenant between truly committed adults and young people to live in the synodal style, which was the journey of the Church from its beginning. “The journey of *synodality* is the path that God expects from the Church of the Third Millennium” (*Df*, n. 118).

A journey in the synodal perspective

The presence of the Holy Spirit cast light on the specific mission of the Church and of its style of discernment and accompaniment. The Church desired by Jesus is a Church that walks together: A Church that is a community.

It is a *journey made together*: young and old in reciprocal listening and discernment: this is the secret of change. The young are certainly a marvelous resource for the elderly and for the whole Church that

is to be considered as the Body of Christ. At the same time, the elderly are a precious wealth for the young. Drawing from their wisdom means encountering memory and prophecy, sharing these gifts of the Spirit that make the community grow under the sign of unity and of communion (cf. *Df.* n. 121). Walking with the young going toward everyone to witness to God's love is in synthesis the journey made by the Synod Assembly. In this sense, we can describe the process launched by speaking of synodality for the mission, or better, missionary synodality. "Putting in place a synodal Church is an indispensable presupposition for a new missionary impulse that involves the entire People of God" (*Df.*, 118). We are convinced that this choice, fruit of prayer and of sharing, will allow the Church, through the grace of God, to be and to appear more clearly as the 'youth of the world'.

It is reiterated that the conclusion of the assembly and the Document that collects its fruit do not close the synodal process but constitute a stage. The process must continue, not only with adults and young people, but with families, associations, parishes, communities, and I add, also in our educating communities.

Certainly, the participation of the young contributed to 're-awakening' *synodality* very concretely, beginning with the reality where they live and their daily life with all its labors and hopes. It is in this reality that the Church's synodal form becomes visible and it is the right way to proclaim and transmit the faith. It is here that the generosity of the *diakonia* is lived. It is here that migrants are met, integration takes place, and the Church can think of itself as and be the *home for the young*. Vocational pastoral makes sense if it is inserted in this broad context, which is the context of life and of educational relationship with the young (Cf. *Df.*, n. 137).

The expression *on the way* leads us back to the beautiful icon of the disciples of Emmaus (Cf. Luke 24: 13-35), the icon present in the Synod Document. It is a paradigmatic Gospel text for understanding the ecclesial mission in relation to the young generations and desirable to be accomplished today as well in every part of the world (cf. *Df.*, n. 4)

That of the disciples of Emmaus is a marvelous path marked by the reciprocity of 'giving and receiving', which we too are called to experience every day with the young, as we meditated on for a long time in GC XXIII.

I do not hide my emotion from you when, as I read the Document, I 'met' the episode of Emmaus, the same one that had accompanied us throughout the whole journey of the Chapter and that still accompanies us.

The Holy Spirit gave us the gift of intuiting that for us as well, it was the road to take, the door to open wide. We did it with humility, open to the indications that, step after step, emerged in the Chapter Assembly. Like the participants at the Synod, we let ourselves be guided by this icon. We broadened our gaze and heart towards horizons of hope, allowing Jesus to transform us through the encounter with Him and thus be 'new' in joyfully proclaiming the Gospel of joy *together with the young*. The certainty matured in everyone that they are protagonists with us in a Church in missionary outreach, which calls to *pastoral conversion* to give our life as consecrated educators the deep and radical dynamism that makes it prophecy for the world today (Cf. *Presentation of the Acts* of GC XXIII).

I deemed it opportune to re-visit our choices as Institute to be with you and with the young on a 'synodal journey' in the spirit that our Founders transmitted to us, strengthened also by what emerged in the Synod.

From my visits made in many parts of the world, meeting many young people, and dialoging with them, I understand how important it is to listen to their dreams, their doubts, and to value their availability to *walk together*. In fact, in the voices of the young at the Synod I recognized the expectations of those who participated in the Triennial Verificas. How can we listen to their requests in a new way? How can we help them to elaborate their dreams so that they finally become reality?

We have the young at heart because they are the heart of our mission (Cf. C 6). We must not only *start from them but vibrate for them and with them*. With the young, we are missionaries of hope and joy.

Remaining among them is the source of joy because it identifies us with our vocation and it is the mission of the entire educating community. It is here that the young can measure themselves with the vocation to which the Lord calls them.

Fear of the young cannot exist in our hearts! They guard the authentic needs of humanity. It is essential to know how to read, beyond their expressions, the need for life and the great requests for meaning they carry *inside* them.

The young especially need to be loved and to feel loved! It is not a question of age: it is a matter of love, trust, ability to bet on the future, and to open horizons of hope.

Walking together is a pilgrimage that commits us to seek, to dialogue, to face the fatigue of the journey by having hope as its goal (cf. *Df*, n. 136). The true hope is Jesus. It is He for whom the heart searches even without knowing it. Our task is to help young people to go deep into their hearts to find out where the Lord is calling them. This path requires from adults and all of us, the *art of accompanying* on which much was shared by the Synod.

The art of accompanying the young

The Synod Document gives ample space to discernment and accompaniment: two inseparable realities. Discern and accompany are two verbs that characterized the assembly work and that express the relationship of the Church with the young people. It is a Church that decides to not only speak to those who are closest, but that knows how to reach out even those young people who no longer search for God, who are distant or indifferent. In fact, the Synod questions itself not only about the young who are an active part of the Church but has given attention to those who have other visions of life, who profess other faiths, or who declare themselves alien to the religious horizon (cf. *Df*, n. 15). All young people, none excluded, are in the heart of God and therefore also in the heart of the Church. In all of them there is the desire for a happy life. To each of them we can show gestures of humanity, which is the most credible ‘word’ and awaited above all by those who live in situations of poverty, of persecution, of war, of exploitation, or other forms that violate their rights.

The restlessness the young carry *within* themselves is a challenge that requires *accompaniment* to highlight and share essential questions, the important ones, in a reality characterized by an ever more evident pluralism. It is a fragmented reality that presents itineraries of life that are not very linear; a reality ready to offer ever broader choices. Among them is the digital world. In fact, the young live in a digitalized culture that greatly influences their perception of self, of the world, and on the way to relate reciprocally. *The Web and the social networks* are the place of encounter for many, opportunities for dialogue, access to information. They constitute a good possibility for active citizenship, but can become the territory of solitude, of dependence, of a loss of contact with concrete reality. This is why accompanying them to make life choices that are well-founded, stable, and valid is an urgent service of which we are aware. It is really a mission for the Church and for each one of us who are a living part of it (cf. *Df*, n. 22).

Don Bosco and Mother Mazzarello were true ‘artists’ in accompanying the young with a constant but discrete *presence*, on ‘tip toe’, respecting their freedom and proposing ever broader horizons. A presence ready to listen, to share labors, victories, and to express trust in their possibilities.

How is it possible to accompany the young if we do not place ourselves at their side with a great deal of humanity? How can we discern what the Lord expects of them if we do not take to heart their life and their story?

I have a dream that I would like to see realized in all the educating communities: to give the young people in all our environments, the precious gift of our presence (Salesian assistance!) (Cf. C 67). Only in this way can we offer them an educative accompaniment where personal dialogue, the group experience, the readiness *to walk with them* facilitate sharing and vocational discernment.

Accompaniment is like gestation to give new life, opening up new perspectives for the future, as long as the young find us to be mature and free persons. Adults who commit themselves to educate to interiority, to encounter with the Word to know Jesus in whom we can all meet, with their fears and their hopes, their doubts and their dreams.

With Him we learn to read in faith our experience and the events of history, find support to witness to love and to work for the promotion of justice, of peace, of the defense of creation (cf. *Df*, n. 133).

They are not frightened by our vulnerability and fragility but expect us to know how to show them the beauty and joy of vocation, the joy of being Church. Even fragilities, fatigues, question, the criticism of the young help us to be better. They ask of us conversion of heart and the renewal of structures if necessary (cf. *Df*, n. 116).

Now I wish to express a deep thank you to all of you sisters and collaborators who untiringly and passionately live your service with educational professionalism and authentic love for the numberless children, teenagers, and young people entrusted to you. To Mary, Mother of the young, Woman of unwavering faith, expert in discernment, we entrust our journey together with the young and for the young.

I conclude by wishing you a holy feast for the Solemnity of the Immaculate and a holy Christmas. I wish to extend them to your families, to the young, to the Rector Major Fr. Ángel Fernández Artime, to the Salesian confreres, to the members of the Salesian Family, and to all people with whom we share the educational mission.

God bless you.

Rome, 24 November 2018

Affectionately, Mother