

YOUTH MINISTRY IN THE LIGHT OF *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*

“This is what we have always been doing ...”: yet the Spirit opens up new ways.

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“This is what we have been always doing ...”: yet the Spirit opens up new ways.

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The moment we try to work out what are the main characteristics of our society, the dimension of change is surely one of the most evident. Change seems to have moved from being an ‘action’ or a ‘choice’ to a ‘state of being’. Liquid society, so thoroughly commented by Zygmunt Bauman, does not possess form. Being constantly in a state of change somehow seems to be its identity. Such a situation is necessarily in deep contrast with anything that has preceded it. The gradual weakening of anything that sounds ‘institutional’, the absence of a logic formed and informed by a scale of objective values, can easily be detected. Anybody who is part of this society, and who happens to be equipped only with the previous social tools and maps, all of a sudden feels himself / herself as a stranger in that same physical place that previously was his / her home.

1. THIS IS OUR HOME

So much has been written around this theme of transition and change. I would like to refer some points offered by Christopher Dawson in his book *The Crisis of Western Education*.¹ The reflection by Dawson, even though it was written more than half a century ago, outlines an anatomy of the change that still has something to say to us today. Departing from his own faith experience as a Catholic, Dawson offers some insights that reading them now they still contain a prophetic force. He starts by outlining the nature of the challenge.

The real threat to Christianity and also to the future of Western culture (...) is not the rational hostility of a determined minority, but the existence of a great mass of opinion which is not anti-religious but sub-religious, so that it is no longer conscious of any spiritual need for Christianity to fulfill. (...) What is the explanation of this change? I believe it is due above all to the artificial character of modern culture, which is unlike anything that previous ages have experienced. Our modern Western secularized culture is a kind of hothouse growth. On the one hand, man is sheltered from the direct impact of reality, while on the other he is subjected to a growing pressure that makes for social conformity. He seldom has to think for himself or make vital decisions. His whole life is spent inside highly organized artificial units-factory, trade union, office, civil service, party – and his success or failure depends on his relations with this organization. If the Church were one of these compulsory organizations modern man would be religious, but since it is voluntary, and makes demands on his spare time, it is felt to be superfluous and unnecessary (p. 132).

What Dawson proposes is first and foremost an analysis free from any pessimism or fatalism.

¹ Dawson C., *The Crisis of Western Education* (The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 2010) This work was first published in 1961 by Sheed and Ward, New York.

We have an explanation which contains analysis but also the need to look around and identify the choices to be made in this new territory. While naming the artificial nature of today's culture, called as a 'hothouse growth', where persons give the impression of being free and autonomous, in actual fact they carry within them a deeply felt and rooted sense of solitude. A reality that is becoming more and more familiar. We inhabit a society where we are more considered as customers, less as persons. In the ever more virtual connectedness in actual fact we feel more as 'solitary' subjects. If there is a common denominator that somehow defines being part of this society it is 'indifference'. We can even say that such a dimension has become systemic, transversal, whereby not one social reality escapes from its shadows.

For the contemporary indifference to religion is accompanied by an indifference to many other things which are necessary for the welfare of society. It is essentially a negative attitude which implies the absence of any deep moral conviction and of any effective social dynamics beyond the appeal to self-interest. It is a sort of spiritual vacuum, which can produce no cultural fruit whatever (p.133).

If these are some of the facets of our new home, Dawson tries to define fixed points that facilitate inhabiting this new territory.

The first being **conviction of one's faith**. It does not sound immediately impressive, but without doubt essential and much more demanding than what it might initially seem to be.

The second point is the pastoral ability to **capture and cultivate spaces of convergence** that are to be found between a believing community and an indifferent one. What is crucial here is not only one's willingness and desire, but even more so the commitment, contemplation, study, reflection and listening of our roots as much as those hidden underground rivers that are to be found in the heart of each person in our society, our new home.

a. Conviction of one's faith

As it was in the times of the first apostolic community even today the power of testimony is as crucial as ever. A coherent life, where faith is proclaimed through actions and gestures before being transmitted through words, remains the most powerful and incisive moment of a believing community. In this regards Dawson writes these words:

From the Christian point of view there is not much to choose between passive agnosticism or indifferentism and active materialism. In fact, both of them may be different symptoms or phases of the same spiritual disease. What is vital is to recover the moral and spiritual foundations on which the lives of both the individual and the culture depend: to bring home to the average man that religion is not a pious fiction which has nothing to do with the facts of life, but that it is concerned with realities, that it is in fact the pathway to reality and the law of life. This is no easy task, since a completely secularized culture is a world of make-believe in which the figures of the cinema and the cartoon-strip appear more real than the figures of the Gospel (pp.133-134).

Getting at the core of the challenge means understanding that it 'is vital to recover the moral and spiritual foundations'. The strength of the good news is made evident by the sole fact that

it becomes an experience, a proposal, shedding light on time and history. The reflection of Pope Francis, borrowing Pope Benedict's words – "the Church grows through attraction, through the attraction of the witness that each one of us gives to the People of God" (Cathedral of San Rufino, Assisi Friday, 4 October 2013) – is thus commented by Dawson:

So long as the Catholic Church is free to lead its own life and to show in its life and teaching the truth for which it stands, it is bound to make an impression on society, however secularized the culture of the latter has become. But if the gap between the Church and secular culture becomes so wide that there is no longer any means of communication or possibility of mutual understanding between them, then there is a danger that the reaction to the Church may be one of repulsion rather than attraction (p.134).

Attraction that finds its roots in a life that is of itself a message. A life that while it grows is capable to name the questions about meaning. While doing so it integrates these same questions within a life-process that is nurtured by faith in Christ. A faith that while being familiar with the unknown it nurtures empathy and compassion. Remembering the *Letter to Diognetus* we can borrow the same idea saying that believers pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law.²

b. Cultivating spaces of convergence

The second point invites believers to complement an inward looking approach – *ad intra* – with an outward looking one – *ad extra*: time and history, together with politics and culture have great meaning in the incarnation process of a faith joyfully embraced and coherently lived out. The experience of faith is not one of exclusiveness or worse still isolation. Faith in Jesus Christ is a call to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28,19). This does not happen unless, as Dawson rightly points out, we acknowledge that there is not always a necessary link between religious practice and the development of a culture that breathes the Christian spirit:

And so it is not enough for Catholics to maintain a high standard of religious practice within the Catholic community, it is also necessary for them to build a bridge of understanding out into secular culture and to act as interpreters of the Christian faith to the world outside the Church. This work is not limited to direct missionary activity and religious propaganda in the formal sense. It is the business of every Catholic and especially of every educated Catholic. We see in the past, especially on the Continent in the nineteenth century, that the secularization of Western culture was not the fault of the clergy and the religious orders, which did their work well, but to the failure and passivity of the Catholic laity, who allowed the case for Christianity to go by default and abandoned the field of higher education to the secularists (p.134).

It is precisely here that we encounter one of the central challenges of youth ministry, one that we need to be familiar with. Ministering to the young demands the fine art of listening to their

² From the *Letter to Diognetus* (Nn. 5-6; Funk, 397-401).

story, which many times starts within a Christian witness that connects with the deepest part of their heart. A heart that once alive desires to move on. Journeying with the young, acknowledging their desire to be welcomed and listened to is not merely an exercise of pure sympathy, it is a call for empathy, being close to them, capturing the inner search for real and lasting meaning. An empathic experience which is pastorally intelligent. That *intus legere* capable of capturing the longing of a thirsty heart in search of meaning. That *intus legere* which reads beyond the exterior forms of being. That *intus legere* which knows how to create a bond overcoming prejudices and pre-concieved ideas; a bond that is honest, transparent and compassionate.

It is this pastoral attitude which arrives at favouring convergences where the young, on one side, do not feel that their space is being invaded, but on the other that they are not being taken for granted. Human spaces where life's deep questions take their shape: simple but not superficial. Spaces where the search for meaning is handled with newly found language, at times even incomprehensible. Spaces of thirst and hunger of the transcendent that need to be offered with deep humility and always with the attitude of the servant.

With this real life gospel logic, our witness and the subsequent pastoral proposal are not simply events that the young like and consume. Faith becomes like the fire of a furnace that kindles our hearts for a deeper listening, that renders them free to be challenged and open to sharing. It is within this pilgrimage experience that many times we live what Dawson has already commented:

Yet however sub-religious and lacking in spiritual culture and awareness modern society may be, it has a real, if rather foggy, respect for education, and its chief criticisms of orthodox religion are that Christianity is out of date, that the Church takes up a reactionary and obscurantist attitude to modern science and sociology, and that Christians are out of touch with modern thought. Consequently any Catholic who is intellectually alive and is at the same time obviously convinced of the truth of his religion administers a shock to their preconceived ideas (pp.134-135).

2. YOUTH AND THE CHURCH

Within this new scenario it is appropriate to say a word on the two main agents that take centre stage – young people and the Church. Abundant is the literature that we have on the young and from varied points of view. The picture that comes out of these studies in these last 20 years besides offering us information about the young it is also inviting us to read their story within the wider context of reality. For us who dedicate our attention to the young with the heart of the good shepherd, our understanding of their story goes beyond the purely academic and sociological dimensions. For us it is not enough to offer a commentary on the youth situation. Each young person's story within this new home is for us a call to join their journey as Jesus did on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24,15).

The following are some aspects that help us better understand the story of our young people today. Theirs is a story marked by the absence of the institution, any institution as a fixed point of reference. This absence has created a space for a proliferation of points of reference that create contact with one's own personal needs. It is not that the latter are disappearing; it is

that the former have drastically changed and multiplied themselves like mushrooms, thus creating a series of systems complex and intricate in themselves.

The young person today is searching for belonging. His being orphan with living parents, has rendered him a nomad, but not without the desire to have an abode which can be called 'home'. Being without any fixed points of reference, he / she lacks time and space to stay with oneself. Ultimately the end result risks being that of trying to build an identity out of the many fragmented pieces that are available which are not necessarily connected or compatible. Time is consumed, but without the opportunity of it being savoured. Home-less and without belonging the young feel the absence of adults who can help them to deal with one's own existence in a unified manner. Theirs is a life where the different parts come together by chance and not as a project.

The absence of vision deprives the young of the opportunity to plan and project the future. Without the prospect of 'tomorrow', 'today' contains no hope that is necessary to build any future project.

It is within this larger perspective that we have to examine the challenge of how both the spiritual dimension and the religious experience find it quite hard to find a place and be rendered visible. Without entering into the very important distinction between the spiritual and the religious, we need to acknowledge the fact that this generation in its own way is one that is in search of the spiritual experience. It is by no means refusing in a categorical way any religious experience. Being bereft of the imaginary and lacking the vocabulary both spiritual and religious, the young do not succeed to name what they are looking for.

On the other hand, regarding the Church, our approach should forcibly be an extended one. In a recent speech that has as its title *Crisis and Future of the Church*,³ this is what Cardinal Walter Kasper writes:

This story is sometimes complicated, but it is also enormously comforting. Since it indicates that the Church is not only in trouble today, but ran into difficulties, as it were, from the very beginning and has already overcome many crises, out of which it usually became stronger. The whole history of the Church is a story of crisis and Jesus has not announced anything different to his disciples: "Ye shall have tribulation in the world, but take courage; I have overcome the world!" (Jn 16,33).⁴

With this parting shot, Kasper points out three challenges that the Church needs to come to terms with. The first consists in those "concrete difficulties and crises that vary according to each country". The second one is that of a Church in Europe that "presently finds itself in a difficult phase of history, in transition". And the third one Kasper sees it "in our secular and pluralistic situation, the true and most profound challenge of all." He calls it "the God question." On the same wavelength with Christopher Dawson, Kasper says:

We are not only referring simply or summarily to the new aggressive atheism which is there, but to indifference towards God, the darkening of God's awareness and the

³ This is a *lectio magistralis* in Italian which bears the title *Crisi e Futuro della Chiesa*. It was delivered at the Accademia Cattolica of Brescia. The present quotes are translated from the Italian text as it appears in *Il Regno – Documenti* 21, 2012, pp. 652-658.

⁴ *Id.*, p. 654.

apparent absence of God. Many in our society live as if God does not exist and thus they think that they can lead a very good life. Besides this, there are many others, more than we think, who define themselves agnostics, but they are in actual fact devote agnostics. Within their inner heart they are looking for something, in a way they are like pilgrims, and so they find themselves in what is called the courtyard of the gentiles.

They have no interest to internal issues of ecclesial structures, like celibacy, ordination of women, issues which are more of concern to those who are considered *insiders*. These ones ask if and what has the Church to say on basic questions which touch their existence, mainly the question of God, which is imprinted in an indelible way within the heart of each person created in God's image. I am convinced that the future of the Church in our societies is going to depend on this: are we or are we not capable to answer this question; are we able not only to give a verbal answer, but to give a credible witness through our own lives.⁵

Here we find ourselves closing the circle with the starting point: that is the indispensable need to get familiar with this new abode, this unknown territory, its inhabitants and its main players. During these reflections we will again take up this theme after a careful reading of where is the heart of the Church, that same Church which despite of bearing the scars of the challenges that need to be met, will always be a Church which never ceases to believe, to hope and to love.

3. MAIN PILLARS OF *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*

The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) offers us the map and the route for this second part of our reflection. It is useful to recall that the privileged standpoint we have here is that of youth ministry. We are to study EG keeping at the centre of our minds and hearts the profound conviction that any experience of youth ministry is an ecclesial one. We have to avoid the temptation that sees us bringing something from EG to the experience of youth ministry. Here it is not a question of bringing or adding. What is at stake here is how to strengthen that original ecclesial experience of the believing community within which journeys of faith take place, where faith choices are made, where journeys of commitment are proposed and mature growth happens.

Giving a quick look at the main titles of the five chapters of EG, we can immediately notice a very precise pastoral plan. It starts from the **Church** (chapter 1), as a **community committed in dialogue with the world** taking up the challenges that ensue (chapter 2). The **proclamation of the Gospel** (chapter 3) is the call that necessarily has a strong **social dimension** (chapter 4). Finally, the Church assumes this call acknowledging that her efforts are sustained by the **Spirit** and on the footsteps of **Mary** (chapter 5). Church – Gospel – Society – under the guidance of the Spirit on the image of Mary: here we have the synthesis.

a. The Church

⁵ *Id.*, pp.645-655.

The starting point is the Church. It is a statement that enlightens and accompanies all youth ministry. It is here that we lay our foundations. It is here where our plans and projects find their *raison d'être*. Only thus do they help the Church to flourish and bear abundant fruit.

EG presents the Church as an experience of joy, of being close to, never of being far from: “the Church’s closeness to Jesus is part of a common journey; «communion and mission are profoundly interconnected»” [*Christifideles Laici* 32]” (EG 23). It will be a huge mistake for any experience of youth ministry if this basic conviction is taken superficially or compromised. One of the first dangers and temptations of youth ministry lies precisely here. For reasons fear, or negligence or shame we either risk offering youth events and services that simply consume time without any vision or plan that can enhance young people’s lives; or that we do in fact offer spiritual experiences which end up gratifying the need for intimacy but do not favour journeys of integral maturity. Not much to choose between the two!

Secondly, we need to go beyond simply saying what our call is: we need to make sure that it is translated in a **pastoral conversion process**. It is not enough to speak about ‘missionary conversion’ if this ‘going out’ does not enlighten and focus our paths: “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. «Mere administration» can no longer be enough [Aparecida 201]. Throughout the world, let us be «permanently in a state of mission»” [Aparecida 551] (EG 25).

Thirdly, the ecclesial dimension desperately needs an **open and intelligent heart**. Reaching out to others is never an improvised act; it is never an artificial action. Meeting others is an eminent gesture of a “Church which «goes forth» (...) a Church whose doors are open. Going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity does not mean rushing out aimlessly into the world. Often it is better simply to slow down, to put aside our eagerness in order to see and listen to others, to stop rushing from one thing to another and to remain with someone who has faltered along the way. At times we have to be like the father of the prodigal son, who always keeps his door open so that when the son returns, he can readily pass through it” (EG 26).

Having a ‘sense of direction’ and ‘focus’ in youth ministry experiences means being also clear about the “where” we want to arrive and what contents we need to deepen. An ecclesial ministry that does not have a clear journey risks offering fragmented ministerial experiences, individualistic, improvised, where the gospel ends up like the seed that is sown in poor shallow soil, left to die and perish.

Finally, the ecclesial call invites one and all to put at the centre the **cry of the young** who within the silence of their existence have even lost the ability to name their suffering, to express their dim hopes. We owe them our care, listen to them, welcome them: “if something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: «Give them something to eat» (Mk 6,37)”

(EG 49).

The call to be Church has been beautifully expressed by Blessed Paul VI in his personal diary when he writes: “the Church to love, serve, bear, build with all one’s talent, with all one’s dedication, with inexhaustible patience and humility. This is what always remains to be done, beginning, starting all over again, till all is consumed, all obtained (will it ever be?), until He returns.” In this Church Jesus shares with us the intimacy of the pilgrim – itinerant intimacy – which gives life and strength to the needed process of conversion, pastoral and missionary, that each one needs to undergo. A process that is enriched by an open and intelligent heart ready to get in tune with the cry of the young.

b. A community announcing the Gospel

An essential aspect that we do well to recall is that the **Gospel proclamation presupposes knowledge both of methods as well as the cultural environment, even though in the end it goes beyond them**. What Pope Francis names as “a «diagnostic overload» which is not always accompanied by improved and actually applicable methods of treatment” goes hand in hand with “a purely sociological analysis which would aim to embrace all of reality by employing an allegedly neutral and clinical method” (EG 50). This danger is present as long as there is within youth ministry a lack of an “an evangelical discernment”, that is “the approach of a missionary disciple, an approach «nourished by the light and strength of the Holy Spirit» [*Pastores dabo vobis* n.10]” (EG 50).

Thus the second point lies in the fact that “**an evangelical discernment**” has to encounter the “need to look at our cities with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and square” (EG 71). It is a process that does not happen in thin air. It needs to be an expression of a communal effort, to be envisioned, sustained and promoted. Our ministerial experiences teach us that we are faced with “new cultures (that) are constantly being born in these vast new expanses where Christians are no longer the customary interpreters or generators of meaning. Instead, they themselves take from these cultures new languages, symbols, messages and paradigms that propose new approaches to life, approaches often in contrast with the Gospel of Jesus. A completely new culture has come to life and continues to grow in the cities... This challenges us to imagine innovative spaces and possibilities for prayer and communion which are more attractive and meaningful for city dwellers” (EG 73).

Thirdly, we need also to recognize the fact that even when the evangelical discernment is in place, there will always remain that **challenge that touches the depth of each minister’s heart**. In the section that treats the *Temptations faced by pastoral workers* (EG 76-109) we have words that can and may be should constitute a text for an examination of conscience in relation to the various processes in youth ministry. These paragraphs touch on the personal and communal commitment of each person who is engaged in youth ministry. Temptations that hint at those challenges that the sooner they are named and recognized the better they can be dealt with.

Without entering in the various points of this section, it could be useful to concentrate on just two challenges that capture the essence of what needs to be addressed.

The first one: “today we are seeing in many pastoral workers, including consecrated men and women, an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, which leads them to see their work as a mere appendage to their life, as if it were not part of their very identity” (EG 78). Words that lay bare the constant danger that is frequently witnessed in youth ministry processes: a danger which leaves a deep impact on the young much stronger than anything else we could do or say.

The second danger: “spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization” (EG 78).

These words are as strong as much as they are true. The more the challenge that these dangers are pointing at is accepted, the better we grow into servants of the young. The last phrase of this paragraph sums it all up: “as a result, one can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervour. These are three evils which fuel one another” (EG 78).

c. The Gospel in today's reality

Chapters 3 and 4 present a panorama that we would like to present as one for the following reason: true evangelization educates in an integral manner. The real proclamation of the good news (chapter 3) necessarily has a social dimension (chapter 4). The following points form a train of thought that further highlights the ecclesial and communitarian dimensions developed so far.

The first one is that **proclaiming the good news belongs to everyone**. For those who belong to the believing community, that is “all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization” (EG 120). The life of the gospel is one that demands commitment: “the new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized” (EG 120).

For youth ministry this above-mentioned belief clears the ground of any misunderstanding that might interpret this mission as something that is aimed and reserved only for some and not for all. Proclaiming Jesus to the young, ministering to them and with them is a call given to all the community of believers.

The second point regards the **contents**. In any youth ministry pastoral project attention cannot be lacking to the **kerygma**, as well as to those processes that encourage and favour that spiritual maturity that each young person's freedom is capable of. We should not be afraid to call these processes by their proper name: these journeys offer mystagogical experiences. The first proclamation of the gospel – “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you (...) is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways” (EG 164). This good news “is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways” (EG 164). This proclamation remains fundamental. It always and everywhere calls for that attitude of respect, on one side, to the received truth while on the other to the freedom of those to whom we witness its beauty. In this delicate phase of youth

ministry there are “certain attitudes which foster openness to the message: approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental” (EG 165).

Mystagogical initiation, attention to which is growing in many youth ministry experiences, is a call that invites us to examine the way these proposals are presented and lived. They are systematic and progressive processes in which attention needs to be given to the communal dimension so as not to fall in the danger of sterile spiritual intimism. The mystagogical experience is not a privilege of the few, but an invitation to all even though the perception could still exist that only the few chosen can embrace it.

A third point in this area that needs to be valued more and more is that of **personal accompaniment**. A solid youth ministry experience needs to consider seriously how are the young being accompanied to build their future. The absence of this aspect of ministry, in the long run renders youth ministry an experience without horizon, future-less. The art of accompaniment is a gift to which youth ministers need to be introduced. To learn “to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5)” (EG 169) means that our accompaniment is “steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life” (EG 169). This is an invitation to all evangelizers and educators of the young to be guided by a missionary spirit, thus becoming “missionary disciples accompany missionary disciples” (EG 173).

The fourth aspect is that of the **social dimension of evangelization**. The richness that EG has on this aspect cannot be fully appreciated here. It is important to point out that this section needs to be further studied and reflected on. It has the force that can shed more light on our youth ministry projects, on the way they are planned and on the way they can be applied.

Let the following quote to just one single point be of help to us to complete this section. It is a plea that Pope Francis shares with the whole Church: “I would now like to share my concerns about the social dimension of evangelization, precisely because if this dimension is not properly brought out, there is a constant risk of distorting the authentic and integral meaning of the mission of evangelization” (EG 176).

Words that seriously encourage us to be engaged with the indispensable social dimension of the kerygma: “at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others. The content of the first proclamation has an immediate moral implication centred on charity” (EG 177). It is our responsibility as ministers for the young never to lose the conviction that at “the heart of the Gospel we see the profound connection between evangelization and human advancement, which must necessarily find expression and develop in every work of evangelization” (EG 178). This commitment is an expression of how “by her very nature the Church is missionary; (that) she abounds in effective charity and a compassion which understands, assists and promotes” (EG 179).

Within this social dimension of evangelization, Pope Francis in particular indicates **two areas**: the **inclusion of the poor** and the theme of **social dialogue as a contribution to peace**.

It would surely be helpful if we have to examine if and how our youth ministry journeys offer our young people an experience of faith where the attention to the poor and needy is being

lived, shared and prayed about, and not simply limiting it to the level of sporadic activities. The same can be said in relation to the theme of dialogue.

We need to ask ourselves on how are we in our youth ministry experiences helping our young to deal with the challenges they encounter in their existential crossroads. How are we helping them to move on from the space of faith to that of science, of pluri-religiosity, and the space of indifferentism and agnosticism. In a social context where faith is at best a private affair, we are all called to offer youth ministry experiences capable of giving meaning to one's faith choice.

d. With the strength of the Spirit

At this point the Pope seems to close the circle of his reflection: back to the point where we started so as to put the seal, that of the **Spirit**: "Spirit-filled evangelizers means evangelizers fearlessly open to the working of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, the Spirit made the apostles go forth from themselves and turned them into heralds of God's wondrous deeds, capable of speaking to each person in his or her own language" (EG 259).

It is here that we find our bearing, the nourishment and source of our hope that will never fail us. There is no doubt that youth ministry will benefit from research, study and serious reflection. We are all convinced that we cannot evangelize in a world that will largely remain an unknown neighbour. But, if we are to limit ourselves to these instruments, indispensable though they are, our journey will be a short-lived one. Already Blessed Paul VI has pointed out this danger in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

Techniques of evangelization are good, but even the most advanced ones could not replace the gentle action of the Spirit. The most perfect preparation of the evangelizer has no effect without the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit the most convincing dialectic has no power over the heart of man. Without Him the most highly developed schemas resting on a sociological or psychological basis are quickly seen to be quite valueless. (...) It must be said that the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization: it is He who impels each individual to proclaim the Gospel, and it is He who in the depths of consciences causes the word of salvation to be accepted and understood (Cfr. *Ad Gentes*, 4). But it can equally be said that He is the goal of evangelization: He alone stirs up the new creation, the new humanity of which evangelization is to be the result, with that unity in variety which evangelization wishes to achieve within the Christian community. Through the Holy Spirit the Gospel penetrates to the heart of the world, for it is He who causes people to discern the signs of the times – signs willed by God – which evangelization reveals and puts to use within history (EN 75).

These words are a strong reminder never to forget that "what is needed is the ability to cultivate an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity. Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out. The Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer" (EG 262). This solid spiritual experience lived out in a coherent manner

helps us to be more and more convinced that “it is impossible to persevere in a fervent evangelization unless we are convinced from personal experience that it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to. It is not the same thing to try to build the world with his Gospel as to try to do so by our own lights” (EG 266).

Experience teaches us that when this core belief is not given its due importance, the evangelizer loses that authenticity which the young feel it when it is there: “a person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody” (EG 266).

4. *EVANGELII GAUDIUM* – SHEDDING LIGHT ON YOUTH MINISTRY

In the last part of this reflection, having commented our new home with its main protagonists, young people and the Church, and having presented the main elements that EG presents us, we now move on to propose four dimensions that will hopefully enlighten the journey of the youth minister and the young. These four dimensions have their roots in EG.

a. Rooted in a mystical experience – Faith

Whoever is called to live the vocation of a youth minister needs to be **mystically rooted**. Usually there is a general agreement on this. Yet, we are also aware that the danger that such an identity weakens by time is real. And this does not come about because of any direct decision to the contrary, but because of the various forms and shapes this ministry assumes.

Commenting on the danger of “**spiritual worldliness**”, Pope Francis writes: “spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, consists in seeking not the Lord’s glory but human glory and personal well-being. It is what the Lord reprimanded the Pharisees for: «how can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?» (Jn 5,44). It is a subtle way of seeking one’s «own interests, not those of Jesus Christ» (Phil 2:21). It takes on many forms, depending on the kinds of persons and groups into which it seeps. Since it is based on carefully cultivated appearances, it is not always linked to outward sin; from without, everything appears as it should be. But if it were to seep into the Church, «it would be infinitely more disastrous than any other worldliness which is simply moral» [Henry De Lubac, *Méditation sur l’Église*, Paris, 1968, p. 321] (EG 93).

And how true it is!

Young people are in search of authenticity. To each one of us they only ask us to be witnesses so that “their **thirst for authenticity**”, as Blessed Paul VI calls it in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, can be met. Paul VI’s words still bear the spirit of the one who wrote them: “it is often said nowadays that the present century thirsts for authenticity. Especially in regard to young people it is said that they have a horror of the artificial or false and that they are searching above all for truth and honesty. These «signs of the times» should find us vigilant. Either tacitly or aloud – but always forcefully – we are being asked: Do you really believe what you are proclaiming? **Do you live what you believe?** Do you really preach what you live? The

witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness in preaching. Precisely because of this we are, to a certain extent, responsible for the progress of the Gospel that we proclaim” (EN 76).

Prophetic is the reflection of Paul VI especially in the light of what we are asked to live today. His is a call which at the same time contains hope and courage to us all: “the world which, paradoxically, despite innumerable signs of the denial of God, is nevertheless searching for Him in unexpected ways and painfully experiencing the need of Him – the world is calling for evangelizers to speak to it of a God whom the evangelists themselves should know and be familiar with as if **they could see the invisible**. The world calls for and expects from us simplicity of life, the spirit of prayer, charity towards all, especially towards the lowly and the poor, obedience and humility, detachment and self-sacrifice. Without this mark of holiness, our word will have difficulty in touching the heart of modern man. It risks being vain and sterile” (EN 76).

b. Prophetic Vision – Community

From nn.105 to 109, Pope Francis dwells on youth ministry in a direct manner. It is good to point out the main elements present in these paragraphs. They contain a brief synthesis of prophetic youth ministry, predominantly marked by the communitarian dimension.

First of all, the Pope indicates the urgent need of **patient listening** and to **speak the language that is theirs**: “youth ministry, as traditionally organized, has also suffered the impact of social changes. Young people often fail to find responses to their concerns, needs, problems and hurts in the usual structures. As adults, we find it hard to listen patiently to them, to appreciate their concerns and demands, and to speak to them in a language they can understand” (EG 105).

The second prophetic element is the **determination “to meet their expectations and their search for a deep spirituality** and a more real sense of belonging” (EG 105). If the prophet is the one who speaks in God’s name, he must therefore cultivate those attitudes and develop a language that is in tune with the story of the young. Only thus we fully answer to the call as educators and evangelizers, taking on ourselves the commitment to be part of their story, helping them in their search for meaning and their deep-seated desire to belong.

The prophet does not extinguish but brings light. He does not close but opens up horizons as yet hidden and unexplored. As a Church we must strengthen those processes where young people are encouraged “to **exercise greater leadership**” (EG 106). The area of volunteering needs to be more and more understood in relation to other ministry experiences within the Church where young people “take part in the life of the Church as members of service groups and various missionary initiatives in their own dioceses and in other places. How beautiful it is to see that young people are «street preachers» (*callejeros de la fe*), joyfully bringing Jesus to every street, every town square and every corner of the earth!” (EG 106).

The third element of prophecy is **fraternal life and community experiences**. In a society that bears the hallmark of individualism, the believing community in its daily communal interaction is already a message in itself. Within this context that the Pope comments the theme of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. Pope Francis insists on the need for

communities that bear witness to that apostolic fervour that becomes contagious. Only a life marked by fraternal relationships is able to attract and puts young people's heart on fire: "the fraternal life and fervour of the community can awaken in the young a desire to consecrate themselves completely to God and to the preaching of the Gospel. This is particularly true if such a living community prays insistently for vocations and courageously proposes to its young people the path of special consecration" (EG 107).

c. Pastoral empathy – Human experience

In EG the call to announce the good news does not have as its starting point our response to God's call, but rather the **acknowledgement of God's mercy poured on us**. The primacy is God's mercy for us, only then the rest will follow: "the salvation which God offers us is the work of his mercy. No human efforts, however good they may be, can enable us to merit so great a gift. God, by his sheer grace, draws us to himself and makes us one with him [Ecclesia in Asia 2]" (EG 112).

Within this logic of mercy, the believer's response is one which answers to goodness acknowledged, goodness received, and goodness embraced. The more God's loving gift is recognized and his initiative discovered the more one is willing to live and share this gift. In EG, we find a quote from Pope Benedict that elaborates this "principle of the primacy of grace must be a beacon which constantly illuminates our reflections on evangelization" (EG 112): "it is important always to know that the first word, the true initiative, the true activity comes from God and only by inserting ourselves into the divine initiative, only begging for this divine initiative, shall we too be able to become – with him and in him – evangelizers" (EG 112).⁶

Pastoral empathy means, then, that each minister seriously engages in God's loving project for humanity. We are all called "to be God's leaven in the midst of humanity. It means proclaiming and bringing God's salvation into our world, which often goes astray and needs to be encouraged, given hope and strengthened on the way. The Church must be a place of mercy freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel" (EG 114).

On this aspect, *Evangelii nuntiandi* has some very pertinent insights. Pastoral empathy is the consequence of that love that is deeply felt and made one's own: "the work of evangelization presupposes in the evangelizer an ever increasing love for those whom he is evangelizing... What is this love? It is much more than that of a teacher; it is the love of a father; and again, it is the love of a mother. It is this love that the Lord expects from every preacher of the Gospel, from every builder of the Church. A sign of love will be the concern to give the truth and to bring people into unity. Another sign of love will be a devotion to the proclamation of Jesus Christ" (EN 79).

d. Pastoral methodology – Mission

⁶ Meditation of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI during the First General Congregation, of the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Monday, 8 October 2012.

The fourth and last dimension is that of pastoral methodology. If as ministers to the young we firmly believe that their future forms itself and matures on a daily basis, then this means that our proposal cannot suffer from genericism or superficiality. Ours cannot be a pastoral journey that is marked by lack of synergy or improvisation. Whoever holds dear the future of the young, looks at the present moment as that sacred space where life is called to grow in faith, hope and love through a communal experience.

One of the convictions that is gradually gaining ground is that of allowing our youth ministry proposals be the fruit of prayer, reflection and planning. Various experience confirm that there where youth ministry teams with humility and pastoral intelligence engage themselves to study the signs of the times, the pastoral proposals that emerge do not suffer from lack of identity, they are not generic, even less improvised or individualistic.

Youth have a right today for a dignified tomorrow. To deprive them of hope should not happen, neither knowingly nor by omission.

Youth ministry that emerges from the furnace of faith is nurtured by a **kerygmatic and mystagogical catechesis**. It is a ministry which is gradual, fully respects their story, but is also fully engaged in letting the hidden questions for meaning and desire for transcendence come to the surface.

We need to foster a pastoral methodology that offers and encourages **processes of growth through personal accompaniment**. True integral development of the young does not happen by itself, it needs to be followed. The young are looking for authentic witnesses able to accompany them, wisely to open up horizons for them. They are looking for prophets who embody in themselves that which is then offered and proposed as a journey.

Together with these two pastoral choices, we should never forget that **God's word is at the centre**, not simply in a functional or cosmetic manner. God's word is not something to be passed on, a product to be promoted. God's word is the light for our journey, as it was for the disciples on the road to Emmaus. God's word is the bread that once broken helps us on our way back to Jerusalem. God's word is the message that springs forth from our hearts for the benefit of so many.

CONCLUSION

It is fitting to conclude by returning on the point of never losing sight of the journey of the Church. What we have reflected is aimed at strengthening the desire of each one of us to journey on as a believing community, as the Church. Following the path that has been traced in these years by so much reflection and commitment, we do gather the fruits of so many centuries of laboured love and dedication. So many followers of Jesus have through their witness shared that spiritual light which they have received. It is the light of faith welcomed with joy and translated convincingly in acts of charity.

In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* there is a phrase in one of the articles on the *Credo* which summarizes all this: "the Church has no other light than Christ's; according to a favourite image of the Church Fathers, the Church is like the moon, all its light reflected from the sun" (n. 748).

Embracing the beauty of the Church, the first theme of EG, remains the departure point that prepares the encounter with the ‘Other’, and eventually with all the ‘others’, both near and far. Only thus do we really avoid the risk of falling into one of the pitfalls of ministry – “self-secularization”. It is a theme that Pope Benedict XVI has dwelt on in one of his reflections with the Brazilian Bishops: “in the decades that followed the Second Vatican Council, some have interpreted openness to the world not as a requirement of the missionary zeal of the Heart of Christ, but rather as a passage to secularization, seeing in it several values of great Christian depth, such as equality, freedom and solidarity, and showing that they were ready to make concessions and to discover areas of cooperation. So it was that certain leading clerics took part in ethical debates in response to the expectations of public opinion, but people stopped speaking of certain fundamental truths of faith, such as sin, grace, theological life and the last things. They were unconsciously caught up in the self-secularization of many ecclesial communities; these, hoping to please those who did not come, saw the members they already had leave, deprived and disappointed. When they meet us, our contemporaries want to see what they see nowhere else, that is, the joy and hope that come from being with the Risen Lord.”⁷

Being Church is what we need to be and to live. This can only become a reality as long as we are rooted in the mystical Body of Christ, the Church. It is for this Church that we give all our selves with joy and hope.

In his opening address to the III Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 27th September 1974, Blessed Paul VI ended by saying the following words: “and, finally, keep a healthy optimism, supported by a firm trust, on which, as on two wings, you must let your work venture towards new achievements of the gospel: faith in your efforts, because you work for the Church; and faith, above all, in Christ who is with you, who lives with you, who needs your cooperation and experience so as to extend in the world the boundaries of his Kingdom of justice and holiness, of love and peace.”⁸

May the se words be the prayer that we present to the Lord, that our efforts will be always supported by Him and that all our youth ministry experiences will be constantly led by His Holy Spirit.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Brazil on their «*ad limina*» visit, Monday, 7 September 2009.

⁸ Pope Paul VI Opening Address to the III Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Thursday, 27 September 1974.