

ISSUE BULLETIN

Examining Critical Issues in Faithful Catholic Education

September 14, 2018

Youth Need Truth! A Better Way for the Synod

By Dan Guernsey, Ed.D.

The Vatican's "working document" that will guide the discussions and directions of October's Synod on Young People is flawed.¹ It puts tremendous emphasis on personal experience and accompaniment as the primary means for reaching young people today. But what young people most need—what, deep down, they most desire—is the Truth of Christ boldly proclaimed. And what the Church desperately needs to help young people is a thorough renewal of faithful Catholic education as its primary means of evangelization.

There is little sense in this working document of the important role that strong and faithful education—whether in schools, parishes, or homes—should play in teaching truth and virtue to young people. Instead, there is great danger that the Synod will continue the now commonplace tendency of too many Church leaders and programs to soft-pedal the Truth of the Gospel and leave young people lost and drowning in the relativism of "liquid modernity."

The Synod on Young People will fail if the Synod fathers do not confront the common culture that champions radical autonomy and a false concept of freedom that satisfies desire and a thirst for power instead of conforming to reality. The lives of many youth have become fragmented, incoherent, and indifferent to truth and meaning. The Church must address this crisis head-on, confident that—underneath this culturally sanctioned indifference—every person knows that truth is what they were made for. At their core, youth need truth, and youth *want* truth!

¹ Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops, "*Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod 2018. Young People, The Faith and Vocational Discernment." *Synodus Episcoporum* (May 8, 2018). Available at: <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione/instrumentum-laboris-for-the-synod-2018--young-people--the-faith.html>

Confidently Proclaim Truth

The Catechism reminds us, “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to Himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.”² In other words, the game is rigged in our favor, if we can break through the anesthetizing effects of many elements of modern life. Even though the common culture seems to have the upper hand at the moment, we need not cower in despair. Instead, we need to take our advantage and teach the truth boldly.³ “Man tends by nature toward the truth,” but he is also “obliged to honor and bear witness to it.” The Good News, confidently proclaimed, is what the youth need to hear—and to what we are obliged to give witness!

Some parts of the synod document assist toward this end, but its meager and disjointed musings on the critical issue of truth need more robust development. This is even more necessary amid the crisis of the age, in which the dictatorship of relativism has entranced and enslaved so many people, young and old. The document’s main reflection on truth is limited to two paragraphs (out of more than 200), and they merit scrutiny. Here is the first:

54. With varying degrees of intensity, many countries in the world are dealing with “fake news”, i.e. the uncontrollable spreading of fake information through (digital and other) mass media and the growing difficulty of distinguishing it from real news. In the public debate, truth and reasoning seem to have lost their power of persuasion. This is why the term “post-truth” was coined. As one [bishops’ conference] points out, “in social networks and digital media there is no hierarchy of truth”.

This short section is titled “New Inquiring Paradigms and the Search for Truth.” However, neither the youth nor the modern Church has discovered any new paradigms in the search for truth. We can relax, go about the hard work of every age before us, and join them in the grand conversation, unburdened by any special enlightenment tied to youth or the modern age.

The section unhelpfully clouds the philosophical and theological pursuit of truth with the shallow political reality of “fake news” in “public debate.” The paragraph ends with a more helpful notion of this age being “post-truth” and lacking a “hierarchy of truth.” Unfortunately, these insights are just left hanging, without reflection, resolution, or guidance, as if there is nothing we can or should be doing about them other than to acknowledge them and silently surrender.

² “Catechism of the Catholic Church – Man’s Capacity for God.” The Holy See. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s1c1.htm

³ “Catechism of the Catholic Church – You Shall Love Your Neighbor as Yourself.” The Holy See. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s1c1.htm

This seems to be pattern in other parts of the sprawling 61-page document: stumbling articulation of a challenge (often using the language and lens of sociology), acceptance of the situation as an irrefutable reality to which we must submit, and a sense that the youth are a superior foreign species beyond our ability to educate, rather than our children requiring confident teaching and parenting.⁴

Young People Want Truth

We see this unfold in the second paragraph:

55. Young people are particularly exposed to this climate, because of their communication habits, and of their need to be accompanied to ultimately find their way. In the world of post-truth, the sentence, “Christ is the Truth which makes the Church different from any other worldly group with which we may identify”, that [the pre-synodal meeting] uses, inevitably ends up having a different significance compared to earlier ages. It is not a matter of giving up the most precious hallmark of Christianity to conform to the spirit of the world, nor is this what young people are asking for, but we do need to find a way to convey the Christian message in changed cultural circumstances. In line with biblical tradition, the recognition that truth has a relational basis is a good thing: human beings discover truth once they experience it from God, the only one who is truly reliable and trustworthy. This truth must be testified to and practiced and not just corroborated and demonstrated, something the young people of the [the pre-synodal meeting] realize: “The personal stories of Church members are effective ways of evangelizing, as personal experiences cannot be placed in question.”

To unpack what is disconcerting about this paragraph, first consider the quote from the pre-synodal meeting that is cited in the second sentence above. The pre-synodal meeting was intended to gather the input of young people. The full paragraph from the meeting report is as follows:

All the more, the Church draws the attention of young people by being rooted in Jesus Christ. Christ is the Truth which makes the Church different from any other worldly group with which we may identify. Therefore, we ask that the Church continue to proclaim the joy of the Gospel with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (11)⁵

Contrary to the conclusions drawn by the authors of the working document, there is no indication in this quote that young people today need the Church to abandon past methods of

⁴ Dan Guernsey, “Should the Church Be a Permissive Parent?” Cardinal Newman Society (September 4, 2018). Available at: <https://newmansociety.org/should-the-church-be-a-permissive-parent/>

⁵ Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops, “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment.” Synodus Episcoporum (May 24, 2018). Available at: <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/news/final-document-from-the-pre-synodal-meeting.html>

evangelization. They ask the Church to “continue to proclaim” truth. There is no suggestion that the statement, “Christ is the Truth,” has any “different significance compared to earlier ages.”

If we accept the guidance in the working document, we might falsely conclude that Saint John Paul II’s inspiring World Youth Day VI message (the very theme was “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”) is incapable of resonating with this generation:

Jesus Christ meets the men and women of every age, including our own, with the same words: ‘You will know the truth and the truth will make you free’ (Jn 8:32). These words contain both a fundamental requirement and a warning: the requirement of an honest relationship to truth as a condition for authentic freedom, and the warning to avoid every kind of illusory freedom, every superficial unilateral freedom, every freedom that fails to enter into the whole truth about the human being and the world. Today also, even after two thousand years, we see Christ as the one who brings men and women freedom based on truth...⁶

In fact, this message still speaks—perhaps even especially—to this generation. As the darkness increases, so does the brightness of these words.

Young People are Capable of Reason

Paragraph 55 of the working document states that “truth has a relational basis,” and we only discover it when we “experience it from God.” This leads to the problematic advice to primarily evangelize with personal experiences, “since they cannot be called into question”—as if calling things into question was a bad idea or inimical to evangelization or to the pursuit of truth!

The advice relates to the pre-synodal meeting report, where the participants state, “We also desire to see a Church that is empathetic and reaches out to those struggling on the margins, the persecuted and the poor. An attractive Church is a relational Church.” But that is far from suggesting—as the working document appears to do—that a relational approach to evangelization is the primary approach worth pursuing in this “post-truth” age.

In fact, youth need and want so much more. In the pre-synodal meeting report, young people call for the use of “modern communication and expression” to proclaim truth with “answers which are not watered-down, or which utilize pre-fabricated formulations.” The Church, they say, should frankly address gender and sexuality issues and “dialogue with the scientific community.” So young people want, as they have always wanted in every age, the use of contemporary tools of communication, forms of expression, and topics of discussion. But this does not—as the

⁶ Pope John Paul II, “Message of the Holy Father John Paul II to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the IV World Youth Day.” Holy See. Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/youth/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_27111988_iv-world-youth-day.html

working document argues—alter the “significance” of the Christian message to young people today or suggest changes to the Church’s approaches to evangelization. Instead, young people need and even want the Church to continue to appeal to reason and to explain Catholic teachings—not to retreat from Catholic education, but to better help today’s youth know and understand truth.

We can and must do more than just share personal opinion and experience; we must share truth itself. In Catholic philosophy, truth has an ontological (reality-based) nature. A primarily relational basis for knowledge is the seed of relativism, by which truth is seen as a social construct or based on a relationship of power.

The working document does not itself embrace relativism, but it does read as if the authors have lost confidence in this generation’s response to appeals to reason, which abandons young people to the influence and temptation of relativism. It is false to claim that we need to experience truth to know it. We know many truths by reason, revelation, and trust in the wisdom of others: we will die; Washington crossed the Delaware River; there are atoms; murder is wrong; a thing cannot both be and not be at the same time in the same location; there is the Sacrament of Holy Orders. The crisis of this age persists because the secular world limits truth to personal experience and denies our ability to make binding truth claims on others. This denial of the ontological basis of truth is not Christian.

The Synod’s approach, then, risks giving into the post-truth world, rather than rescuing our youth from it. The Church has a remedy and way out. It is the same remedy that we have always had, if we only remain faithful to it.

Restore Conviction, Renew Education

Catholic thinking, as philosopher Curtis Hancock reminds us, holds that when our senses are in good condition and functioning properly under normal circumstances, and when our reason is functioning honestly and clearly, we can come to know reality and have the ability to make true judgments about reality. We know that through study, reflection, experimentation, argument, and discussion—and especially divine revelation—we can know real things about the world, Man, and God. Of course we must share our personal compelling stories of conversion and belief; they are among the most powerful means of persuasion to be sure. But we must not surrender reason or objective truth in the process. This is precisely what the common culture already demands of our youth.

St. John Paul II, in addressing this crisis of truth, noted that:

The greatest challenge to Catholic education in the United States today, and the greatest contribution that authentically Catholic education can make to American culture, is to restore to that culture the conviction that human beings can grasp the truth of things, and

in grasping that truth can know their duties to God, to themselves and their neighbors. In meeting that challenge, the Catholic educator will hear an echo of Christ's words: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:32). The contemporary world urgently needs the service of educational institutions which uphold and teach that truth is "that fundamental value without which freedom, justice and human dignity are extinguished."⁷

Contrast this with the working document's brief section on catechesis (paragraphs 190-193), which indicates no apparent concern about "the educational crisis" that Pope Benedict XVI so often lamented, describing it to American educators as a "'crisis of truth' rooted in a 'crisis of faith.'"^{8,9} The "religious illiteracy" of young Catholics and the exodus of young people from the Catholic Church are alarming, yet the working document makes no call for extensive, much-improved catechetical instruction. Instead, it claims that catechesis has a bad reputation among many young people as "compulsory and unchosen," invites a review of catechetical programs with respect to their "validity for new generations," and encourages "experience-based" as well as "content-based" catechesis.

The entire working document says little about Catholic education, as if the truths of our faith are not the keys to human happiness. To the extent that Catholic education is mentioned, the document fails to emphasize its traditional role as the Church's primary means of evangelization. The document repeats Pope Francis' ambiguous warning "not to proselytize" in Catholic schools, which was first made in 2015 and provoked some controversy—yet still, no clarification is offered.

This is no way to go forward with a Synod on Young People, especially amid the scandals in the Church and the secular assault on Christianity. We must be ready to restore conviction and actively uphold the truth. Modern culture is not infallible, and our youth are not oracles; both are subject to confusion and manipulation. Our job is to help young people find their way.

If we only tell youth what they already know or believe as driven by the common culture and their limited experience, they will rightly ignore us, because we have nothing new to say or

⁷ Pope John Paul II, "Address of the Holy Father Pope John Paul II to the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Regions of Chicago, Indianapolis and Milwaukee (U.S.A.) on their 'Ad Limina' Visit." Holy See. Available at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19980530_ad-limina-usa-vi.html

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, "Apostolic Journey to the United States of America and Visit to the United Nations Organization Headquarters: Meeting with Catholic Educators." Holy See. Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080417_cath-univ-washington.html

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants in their Convention of the Diocese of Rome." Holy See. Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/june/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070611_convegno-roma.html

different to offer. To effectively reach them, we must be faithful and authentic in making radical truth claims. Since the youth are wired to be bold, we must be bold; since youth is daring, we must be daring. They are attracted to misunderstood underdogs like us, as long as we are personally authentic and proud about who we are. It is radical and appealing to stand athwart this culture and proclaim that there are truths that exist, that hold true in all times and places, and that we must bear witness to for the good of all.

Many idealistic Catholic youth, eager to help change a world they know is in absolute shambles, will respond to this call. Because their world is already a mess, they do not need our permission or encouragement to make it messier. We can authentically challenge them to be more. To be advocates of beauty, seekers of truth, and architects of freedom is a task and adventure worthy of their properly oriented youthful restlessness and idealism. They are looking for answers, not confirmation of their confusion. They know the world they live in. They know it does not satisfy. It was not made to satisfy.

We, however, can play to our strengths by renewing faithful Catholic education and formation. We can embrace the human reality, “Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.”

October’s Synod on Young People must reject dependency on experience as the primary means of knowing and learning, and instead strengthen the Church’s appeal to youth by reason and divine revelation. Young people, like all of us, need our Holy Mother Church to boldly and confidently proclaim the Gospel. Youth need truth.

Dr. Dan Guernsey is the director of K-12 programs for The Cardinal Newman Society, which promotes and defends faithful Catholic education. He has 13 years’ experience as a high school principal and has served an associate professor and education department chair at the university level. He and his wife Lisa have 6 children.