

The Way Forward: We Create the Path by Walking

By Joseph G. Healey

As we put to action the results of our 2017 symposium, and as we prepare for the Fifteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to take place in Rome in October, 2018 on the theme "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment," a good metaphor is *We create the path by walking.*¹

Pope Francis calls Catholic young people in Africa and Catholics around the world to participate in a new reflection and action process called “synodality” that is the entire Catholic Church walking, discerning and evangelizing together. This process of synodality is a journeying together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For Pope Francis synodality is the way of being church, that is, a collaborative search or discernment of the divine path for God’s people, by God’s people. There is a famous African proverb: *If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together.*

Our 2017 symposium has described the life and activities of many Catholic Youth Movements/Organizations/Associations (alphabetically):

Campus Ministry Apostolic Groups and Clubs
 Christian Life Communities (CLCs) Christian Life Communities (CLCs)
 Kenya Association of Vocation Animators (KAVA)
 Missionary Youth Movement (MYM)
 Young Adults Catholic Association (YACA)
 Young Christian Students (YCS)
 Young Christian Workers (YCW)
 Young Professionals
 Youth Serving Christ (YSC)
 Youth Small Christian Communities (YSCCs) – parish-based and school-based.

What are some of the qualities, characteristics, values and charisms that we (both young people and youth ministers) are called to live and emphasize in our pastoral and spiritual ministry.

Listening

Pope Francis’ challenge to bishops and other leaders in the Catholic Church is loud and clear: Be a “Listening Church” first and a “Teaching Church” second. In a separate letter released with the *Preparatory Document* for the 2018 synod in Rome, Pope Francis directly

¹ The Spanish is *caminante no hay camino* based on the words “make the road by walking it” of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1875 – 1939).

addresses the youth and young adults of the Global Church, saying that he wants them "to be the center of attention" for the entire process "because you are in my heart." He adds: "The Catholic Church also wishes to listen to your voice, your sensitivities and your faith; even your doubts and your criticism. Make your voice heard, let it resonate in communities and let it be heard by your shepherds of souls."

During a recent mass in Nairobi, Kenya one of the "Prayers of the Faithful" was: "That bishops, other church leaders, parents and teachers try to understand 16 to 29-year-olds from their unique perspective and point of view." For young people to be truly heard by their pastors and bishops not only enhances our understanding of their experiences of God, but also helps them to see their own dignity and membership in the Catholic Church.

Pope Francis has invited Christian and non-Christian young people from around the world to a pre-synod meeting in preparation for the October, 2018 Synod of Bishops on Young People. He said that this 19-24 March, 2018 meeting in Rome will be an opportunity for the church to listen to the hopes and concerns of young men and women. "Through this journey, the church wants to listen to the voices, the sensibilities, the faith as well as the doubts and criticisms of young people. We must listen to young people."

Providing a Safe Space/Place for Prayer, Sharing and Reflection

Many Catholic young people are hungry for participating in a small faith sharing community that goes by many names in Africa (alphabetically):

Peer group small faith sharing community
 Small Bible Study Group for college students
 Small Bible Study Group for young adults in parishes
 Small Bible Study Group for Young People
 Youth Small Christian Community

Our experience is that "small community" and especially "Small Christian Community" give a specific identity and focus. In Eastern Africa we capitalize the terms "Small Christian Community" (SCC) and "Small Christian Communities" (SCCs) because it is a key pastoral priority in our parishes and dioceses and the official pastoral policy of the Catholic bishops.

These various small communities connect prayer with our everyday life and link the *Bible/the Gospel* (the Good News of Jesus Christ) to our daily experience. They offer a safe space/place for young people to share and reflect together on deep issues related to their faith, their spirituality, their relationships, their human sexuality, their concerns, their doubts – yes, and even their hopes and dreams.

Accompany

The *Preparatory Document* emphasizes the ministry of accompaniment of young people in their journey of discovery. The aim of the synod is to "accompany young people on their way of life towards maturity so that, through a process of discernment, they can discover their life project and realize it with joy, opening the encounter with God and with humans, and actively participating in the building up of the church and society." The Catholic Church recognizes four vocations: married life, single life, religious life and ordained life.

Pope Francis also emphasizes the importance of welcoming, listening to and accompanying young people today. Here are some concrete examples of pastoral and spiritual accompaniment in the 16 to 29 age group in Africa:

1. Accompanying young people in vocational discernment.
2. Accompanying teenagers on their way of life towards maturity.
3. Accompanying college age students on the path of missionary discipleship.
4. Accompanying engaged couples throughout the stages of marriage.
5. Accompanying newly married couples especially in their first five years of marriage.
6. Accompanying single mothers in their daily challenges.
7. Accompanying families and couples who are wounded and on the periphery.

Animating and Mentoring

Animation and mentoring of young people takes place on many levels and by youth ministers and formators as well as by the youth to one another. Some examples include our personal and ecclesial relationship with Jesus Christ,² vocational discernment, *Bible* formation, sacramental formation and catechesis, contemplative practice, facilitating life skills, coaching in character strengths, responsible citizenship, social action and church self-reliance.

Being Prophetic: Speaking the Truth to Power

The "Prayer Intention" of Pope Francis for February, 2018 is: "Say 'No' to Corruption: That those who have material, political or spiritual power may resist any lure of corruption." This is a clear message for our young people to be prophetic and work for justice, honesty and transparency in both the Christian Churches and in general society. The challenges in Kenya are huge where the expression "mega-corruption" has now entered into our vocabulary. Youth can also lead the way to breaking down the barriers of tribalism and nepotism.

² "Personal relationship to Jesus Christ" has many meanings for young people including: "Jesus and me" spirituality; accepting Jesus Christ as my personal savior (especially in the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions); meeting Jesus in the poor and suffering. "Ecclesial relationship with Jesus Christ" relates to young people's participation in the community dimensions of the Catholic Church— the Body of Christ, the People of God, the Family of God.

Being Missionary Disciples

Pope Francis challenges everyone “to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, No. 33). This includes African young people creatively using the internet, websites, social media and social networks in evangelization such as What’sApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and other platforms. In 2016 Father Febian Pikiti, the AMECEA³ Pastoral Coordinator, conducted a survey about where you find Catholic youth and young adults on Sunday morning in Nairobi, Kenya, the largest city in East Africa. The results: “You do not find them outside of the Catholic Church after mass. You find them on social media.”

Pope Francis urges all Catholics to reaches out to the marginated and those on the periphery of society. In recent years we have struggled with the exodus of many young people from the Catholic Church in Eastern Africa (and around the world). The number of African “nones” is growing. Catholic young people are joining the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches due their lively singing, dancing and participation. In peer group ministry (the ministry of like to like), this means that active African Catholic young people should visit and evangelize the African young people who have drifted away from the Catholic Faith.

Because we want to share the fruits of our 2017 symposium with people around the world, especially young people, we should be aware of shifting terminologies and meanings. The *Preparatory Document* for the October, 2018 synod states: “The word ‘youth’ refers to persons who are roughly 16 to 29 years old, while bearing in mind that the term needs to be adapted to local circumstances. In any case, it is good to remember that the term ‘youth,’ in addition to referring to persons, is a stage of life that each generation understands in an unequal, original manner.”

Terminology varies according to the local place and context. Worldwide, “young people” is the umbrella word that covers “youth” (often referring to teenagers and those in high school) and “young adults” (after college in their 20s). In Swahili, the main language of Eastern Africa, *vijana* (often translated as “youth”) covers the 16 to 35 age bracket.

In this year 2018 the voice of African young people – young men and young women -- is important. Recently I saw poster that says it well: “Synod 2018: African Young People Make Your Voice Heard.”

³ AMECEA is an acronym for "Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa." It is a service organization for the National Episcopal Conferences of the nine English-speaking countries of Eastern Africa, namely Eritrea (1993), Ethiopia (1979), Kenya (1961), Malawi (1961), South Sudan (2011), Sudan (1973), Tanzania (1961), Uganda (1961) and Zambia (1961). The Republic of South Sudan became independent on 9 July, 2011, but the two Sudans remain part of one Episcopal Conference. Somalia (1995) and Djibouti (2002) are Affiliate Members. AMECEA is one of the eight Regional Episcopal Conferences of [SECAM](#) (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar).

Rev. Joseph G. Healey, MM
Maryknoll Society
P.O. Box 43058
00100 Nairobi, Kenya
0723-362-993 (Safaricom, Kenya)
973-216-4997 (AT&T, USA)
Email: JGHealey@aol.com
Skype: joseph-healey

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