

## **Processes and structures for accompaniment in vocational youth ministry**

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I put as the main focus of this reflection the word vocation. Today this word has great importance in pastoral reflection. Let us not forget that our fundamental objective as pastoral agents are to help young people to live their existence as Jesus has seen it and dreamed of it. In essence, that is what a vocation consists of.

### **1. Vocation is one of the great themes of the Synod:**

In this first point I propose to gather the lines of reflection that the Synod on young people has introduced to speak of vocation and vocational ministry. To this end, I will focus not only on the post-synodal exhortation *Christus Vivit* (ChV), but I will also use the other documents that have been produced in recent years: the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod on Youth (IL) and the Final Document (DF).

#### **a) The IL, frame of reference:**

As we well know, the topic of vocation entered the Synod's reflection from the very beginning and has been one of its great arguments. The IL addresses the vocational theme in the second chapter of the second part between numbers 85 to 105.

The perspective that it proposes is reflected in the title **"the vocation in the light of faith"**. It is worth dwelling on this approach because it is the key where the subsequent reflection is located. Pope Francis said in *Lumen Fidei* that "The faith that we receive as a supernatural gift is presented as **light on the path**, which guides our path in time" (LF 4).

In this sense, the vocation in the light of faith can be understood through these three categories: light, gift and path. In other words, vocation is a light that illuminates existence, it is more a gift than an achievement, it is a process that accompanies us in life. One only has to look at one's own vocation to be able to see the scope of these affirmations.

#### **I synthesize these numbers in three statements:**

- **Being human and vocation go hand in hand.** "The Second Vatican Council clearly recovered the vocational horizon of humanity when it used this terminology to express both the destiny of all men to communion with Christ and the universal call to holiness, later inserting in such interpretive horizon the understanding of vocations individual: those of the ordained ministry and of the consecrated life, as well as the lay vocation, especially in the conjugal form" (IL 87).
- **There is a direct relationship between vocation and love.** "The fullness of joy can be experienced only at the moment when one discovers being loved and, as a consequence,

personally called to love in turn in the concrete circumstances in which each one lives (family, work, social and civil commitment)” (IL90).

- **Discernment and accompaniment are necessary.** “In fact, each young person is in some way king of his own existence, but he needs help so that he can ask for discernment and needs to be accompanied so that he can reach fullness in the gift of himself” (IL 83).

#### **b) The Final Document, vocation as a generative thematic nucleus:**

What can we understand by generative thematic nucleus? It is a topic of such importance that when we take it seriously, we discover that great pastoral dynamism is generated. In fact, for the Federal District, the vocational perspective of youth ministry is one of the express requests that were made in the Synodal Assembly. If youth ministry takes the vocational dimension seriously, it will have a future, if it does not, it will be a sterile ministry.

The Final Document speaks about vocation in three moments. In the first place I refer to numbers 77 to 90 of the second part (“interpret”). If in the IL we place vocation in the light of faith, in these issues a pastoral theological discourse on vocation is proposed in which some aspects are highlighted: the analogical character of vocation, vocation as a gift, the vocation that unifies person, vocation as a process.

In this second part (“interpret”), when the document makes a beautiful Christology, from the category of the bond that unites us to Jesus, such beautiful things as these are said:

- **Jesus has a deep bond with every human being.** “The Church knows that this is due to the fact that Jesus lives a deep bond with every human being, because “Christ, the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully manifests man to man and reveals to him the greatness of his vocation» (Gaudium et spes, 22) (DF 81).

- **Jesus calls.** “In fact, Jesus not only fascinated with his life, but also explicitly called for faith… Belonging to the community of Jesus has always known various forms of following” (DF 82).

- **There are different ways of following Jesus.** “The various forms of following Christ express, each in its own way, the mission of bearing witness to the Jesus event, in which every man and every woman finds salvation” (DF 84).

And, finally, the DF also talks about vocation in the third part (“choose”). In this sense, it is good to focus on numbers 139 (Promotion of vocations in pastoral care) and 140 (vocational ministry for young people) of the Federal District. This is where a **vocational youth ministry** is proposed.

### c) ChV, a vocational youth ministry:

Let's go to the exhortation ChV. Pope Francis has not wanted to repeat everything that has been said previously, which, on the other hand, is already a good orientation for vocation ministry. The Holy Father chooses some elements that he wants to highlight.

In the eighth chapter he talks about vocation. He starts from **the call of the Lord and from his friendship**. «The fundamental thing is to discern and discover that what Jesus wants from each young person is above all his friendship. That is the fundamental discernment” (ChV 250). “Because the life that Jesus gives us is a love story, a life story that wants to mix with ours and take root in the land of each one” (ChV 252).

The anthropological perspective is clear when the exhortation speaks of "your being for others." **The anthropology of the gift** has a prophetic character in a world that is often based on an anthropology of indifference.

For Pope Francis there is a direct **relationship between vocation and love**. "Young people strongly feel the call to love, and they dream of finding the right person with whom to form a family and build a life together. Without a doubt it is a vocation that God himself proposes through feelings, desires, dreams» (ChV 259).

And, in a practical way, Pope Francis underlines the relationship between **vocation and work**: “Work defines and influences the identity and self-concept of a young adult and is a fundamental place where friendships and other relationships are developed because work is not usually only... It enables young adults to meet their practical needs, but more importantly to seek meaning and fulfillment for their dreams and visions” (ChV 268).

There is also talk of **vocations of special consecration**. “In the discernment of a vocation, the possibility of consecrating oneself to God in the priesthood, in religious life or in other forms of consecration must not be ruled out. Why exclude it? Be certain that if you recognize a call from God and follow it, that will make you whole” (ChV 276).

## 2. Vocational anthropology according to Francis:

The human being is the only creature that can say "that's me". The human being is capable of wondering about his identity. The Genesis account (Gen 1-3) shows that Christian anthropology is based on God. Creation is a labor of love. It is not strange that a culture that puts God in parentheses, or that sees in God a hindrance, can forget the human being.

What anthropological features do we discover in the first chapters of Genesis? Namely:

- The human being has been created in the **image and likeness of God**;
- this implies the **equal dignity of all human beings**;
- the human being in the light of the mystery of God presents himself as a **being in relationship**;
- the human being is **open to the meaning and foundation of being**;
- the human being is not only a being of nature but a **free protagonist of a story**;
- the human being is a growing being **thanks to education**;
- The human being is a **vocational being in search of the best of himself**.

I would just like to underline what has been called **the anthropology of the gift**. And I do it because of the importance it has in a typically Christian category such as the **person**. The person is not defined as an individual or as a thinking subject, but as someone who comes into existence from a relationship with the Other and as a relationship of dialogue.

**The most substantial thing in life has been given to us.** In this logic we can say that donation is the key to existence and not the domain of the strong. The gift is an expression of Love, the Donor is the lover par excellence. Can we base human life from the gift? Placing ourselves in this perspective is to open a door to what is not in my hands but rather what I have to receive as given. The given restricts the territory of the wanted and the will opens a crack to the need. In this sense, love is the only medicine to heal modern man. **The human being knows that in order to exist he is not enough for himself but that he needs others.**

It must be remembered that this anthropological perspective is very dear to Pope Francis. The Holy Father proposes the anthropology of the gift as opposed to other anthropologies based on the “ego” or on “excellence”. Self-referentiality is the opposite of openness towards the other, which is advocated by the anthropology of the gift. The self-referential closed me in myself, in my small world, my ends. Self-referentiality bends me over.

Where does the anthropology of the gift stand? In the exit of oneself and in the mission. He had already said in EG “I am a mission” (EG 273). According to this expression, the mission is within the expression 'I am', a typically anthropological expression. For this reason, the anthropology of the gift illuminated from the mission leads to going out of oneself: being for others and with others.

- **Existence under the sign of the mission opens to the gift.** “Many times, in life, we waste time asking ourselves: But who am I? And you can ask yourself who you are and spend a lifetime searching for who you are. But ask yourself: Who am I for? This affirmation profoundly illuminates decisions about life, because it reminds us that they must be assumed in the liberating horizon of self-giving... I am a mission on this earth, and for that I am in this world» (Francis, EG 273). (DF 69).

- **The gift asks to make room for the other.** “Through the fraternity and solidarity lived, especially with the least, young people discover that authentic freedom is born from feeling welcomed and grows, leaving space for the other” (DF 74).

### **Freedom:**

For Francis another pillar of the anthropology of the gift is found in freedom. The DF deals with the subject of freedom in the section where he speaks of the gift of youth. Freedom is a virtue closely linked to the youthful soul.

- **Freedom is essential in the choice of life.** “Freedom is an essential condition for any authentic decision about life” (DF 73).

- **Freedom has a relational character.** “In the light of the Gospel, today it is opportune to recognize more clearly that freedom is constitutively relational and to show that passions and emotions are relevant to the extent that they guide us towards an authentic encounter with the other” (DF 73).

- **Freedom carries a risk.** “Freedom always entails a dimension of risk that must be valued decisively and accompanied gradually and wisely” (DF 70).

- **Faith liberates.** “Faith, then, is not an element that is added externally to freedom, but rather it is the fulfillment of the conscience's longing for truth, goodness and beauty, which are fully found in Jesus” (DF 75).

- **Forgiveness and mercy are the cause of growth.** “From an educational perspective, it is important to help young people not to be discouraged in the face of mistakes and failures, even humiliating ones, because they are an integral part of the path towards a more mature freedom, aware of their own greatness and weakness” (DF 76).

### **Awareness:**

Another anthropological pillar is found in the conscience that challenges all men and all women. At the base of consciousness there is a subject aware of gift and freedom. Perhaps the theme of conscience is one of the themes that the Youth Synod dealt with greater theological force. It has gone unnoticed by many.

- **Conscience is the place of intimacy with God.** “The Christian tradition insists on conscience as a privileged place for a special intimacy with God and an encounter with him, where his voice is present...This conscience does not coincide with immediate and superficial feeling, nor with a “consciousness of oneself”: testifies to a presence transcendent, that each one finds in his own interiority, but that he does not possess” (DF 107).

- **The formation of consciousness.** “In order to reach the deepest dimension of conscience, it is important to take care of interiority above all through moments of silence, prayerful contemplation and listening to the Word, and with the support of sacramental practice and the teachings of the Church” (DF 108).

In these pages I wanted to talk about the anthropological discourse. And within Christian anthropology, I have made explicit emphasis on the anthropology of the gift, which is proving fruitful in people's lives.

### **3. A youth ministry in a vocational key:**

At this moment I want to focus on youth ministry in terms of vocations. I will propose advancing in a relational youth ministry, and I will especially comment on the importance of accompaniment and discernment.

#### **A relational youth ministry:**

This pastoral proposes: to listen; to be present where life is precarious; not be trapped by ideologies and the desire for power; cultivate the quality of relationships; recognize the charisms present in the community; give value to dialogue; give importance to discernment; recognize the presence of the Other in pastoral dialogue; commit to pastoral accompaniment; give importance to the Word of God in pastoral work; strengthen the identity of the disciples. I intend to underline the importance of relationships in pastoral action. We could say that many times in pastoral the key is in relationships. For Pope Francis, the word relationship is fundamental. Suffice it to remember that in LS it appears 98 times and on 18 occasions it is said that “everything is connected”.

#### **Emotional closeness is important.**

“Let us try to make our ordinary life, in all its expressions, more accessible. The effective closeness, the sharing of spaces and activities, create the conditions for an authentic communication, free of prejudices” (DF 130).

**And also, to the assessment of one's own charisma.** “A characteristic feature of this style of Church is the valorization of the charisms that the Spirit grants according to the vocation and role of each one of its members, through a dynamism of co-responsibility. To activate it, a conversion of the heart and the availability to listen to each other are needed, which builds an effective common feeling. Encouraged by this spirit, we will be able to move towards a participatory and co-responsible Church, capable of valuing the richness of the variety that makes it up, that welcomes with gratitude the contribution of the lay faithful, including young people and women, the contribution of male consecrated life and feminine, that of groups, associations and movements. No one should be excluded, nor should anyone be allowed to exclude themselves” (DF 123).

### **Accompany:**

In youth ministry in a vocational key, accompaniment acquires importance. This word clearly shows the pastoral attitude that this moment in history proposes. The DF also talks about accompaniment. He says that it is a fundamental mission of the Church. Here are some features of the accompaniment:

- **Community accompaniment.** “Jesus accompanied the group of his disciples, sharing with them everyday life. The community experience highlights the quality and limits of every person and makes a humble conscience grow, because without sharing the gifts received for the good of all, it is not possible to follow the Lord” (DF 96).

- **Group accompaniment.** “In the groups, educators and animators represent a point of reference in terms of accompaniment, while the friendships that develop in this area constitute the place for accompaniment among equals” (DF 96).

- **Personal accompaniment.** “Spiritual accompaniment is a process that wants to help the person progressively integrate the various dimensions of life to follow Jesus Our Lord. Three instances are articulated in this process: the listening to life, the encounter with Jesus and the mysterious dialogue between the freedom of God and that of the person. Whoever accompanies welcomes patiently, raises the deepest questions and recognizes the signs of the Spirit in the response of young people” (DF 97).

- **Comprehensive accompaniment.** “The Synod also recognizes the need to promote comprehensive accompaniment, in which the spiritual aspects are well integrated with the human and social aspects” (DF 99).

- **The importance of the companion.** “The service of accompaniment is an authentic mission, which requires the apostolic availability of those who carry it out... In short, accompanying requires making oneself available to the Spirit of the Lord and to those who are accompanied, with all one’s own qualities and abilities, and then having the courage to humbly step aside” (DF 101).

**Discern:**

The IL said that many young people do not know how to undertake discernment processes (IL 106) and that many communities lack the capacity for discernment (IL 106). The DF presents discernment as the objective of accompaniment. For this reason, the Federal District speaks first of accompaniment (mission of the Church) and secondly of discernment (an art). In DF the word discernment is progressively approached: there is a great diversity of meanings of the term discernment; discernment is typical of the style of Jesus; we discern in the light of the Lord; discernment leads to recognize, interpret, choose; awareness and confrontation with reality are important.

- **To discern is to recognize and accept the will of God.** “In a more general sense, discernment indicates the process by which important decisions are made; in a second sense, more typical of the Christian tradition and in which we will dwell particularly, it corresponds to the spiritual dynamics through which a person, a group or a community tries to recognize and accept the will of God in their concrete situation” (DF 104).

- **Conditions for discernment.** “During the Synod we recognized some common elements...: the presence of God in the life and history of each person; the possibility of recognizing his action; the role of prayer, sacramental life and asceticism; the continuous confrontation with the demands of the Word of God; freedom from acquired certainties; the constant verification in daily life and the importance of adequate accompaniment” (DF 104).

- **Provisions for discernment.** “Opening to listen to the voice of the Spirit requires some precise interior dispositions: the first is the attention of the heart, favored by silence and the emptying that asceticism demands. Equally important are awareness, self-acceptance and repentance, together with the willingness to put order in your life, abandoning what could prove to be an obstacle, and recovering the inner freedom necessary to make decisions guided

only by the Holy Spirit. Good discernment also requires attention to the movements of one's own heart, growing in the ability to recognize them and give them a name. Finally, discernment requires the courage to engage in spiritual struggle, since the temptations and obstacles that the Evil One places in our path will not be lacking" (DF 111).

- **Role of conscience.** "Spiritual discernment is presented as the sincere work of the conscience, in its effort to know the possible good, on which to responsibly decide the correct exercise of practical reason, in the personal relationship with Jesus Our Lord and in light of this" (DF 109).

#### 4. Some conclusions:

I am going to conclude this reflection on vocational ministry by underlining some pastoral keys.

The first is to ensure that the **vocational dimension is the fundamental axis of our ministry.** How can we get it? I believe that the most direct path leads to promoting a pastoral care of the faith, that is, ensuring good itineraries of education in the faith. It also helps if we encourage in our proposal everything that leads to a more relational ministry. And also, if we understand accompaniment as an important mission and if we advance in the art of discernment.

The second key refers to the broad vocational perspective. **Valuing one's own vocation** but also the vocation of others: laity, religious, priests. The synodal context that we are living encourages us to do so. I am convinced that it is possible to speak of a we when he "is in himself" leaving "space for the other". In other words, the better adorers we are, the more space we will leave to other vocations to take their place in the adoration mission. Let us not forget that each one has a gift because it is that gift, and it is that gift that he offers to others.

I wonder if lay people help consecrated people. I think we have to answer yes, they help us a lot. Speaking of the synodal style, I would like to insist on the importance of the laity in our growth as consecrated persons. Many times, we think what we can do for the laity, but we could also ask ourselves what the laity are doing for us, how they are helping us in our own vocation.

Our vocation is not only the management of problems, the animation of groups, the organization of events, nor is it anxious to find strategies to succeed in our mission. Our

vocation is to exist, live and vibrate through God, with God and in God. Our mission also requires responsibility to accompany people with their humanity, to manage the material life of projects, to explore and exploit our own talents and those of others for the youth mission. And we do all this together with other people and other vocations, who also want to exist, live and vibrate in God.

The third key is learning to work in synergy and coordination between departments. **Youth ministry and vocation ministry cannot be uncoordinated.** One of the dangers that the IL spoke of was sectorization. The Federal District proposed to work in synergy and as a network. It can be done one way or another, but that is the direction. This coordinated work proposes **working on shared projects.** A more integrated pastoral is proposed that emphasizes the centrality of the recipients. Therefore, it is proposed to work on projects. “If this is the priority, it is necessary to develop greater coordination and integration between this is the priority, it is necessary to develop greater coordination and integration between the different areas, moving from office work to project work” (DF 141).

I also see that there is a link between **generous service and vocational discernment.** There is a lot of generosity distributed in many volunteer projects, it would be good to ask if this generosity moves vocational discernment.

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