

# 20-Week Discernment Series

*Inspired by the Preparatory Document  
For the Oct. 2018 Synod of Bishops:  
"Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment"*

*By  
Patricia Nguyen*

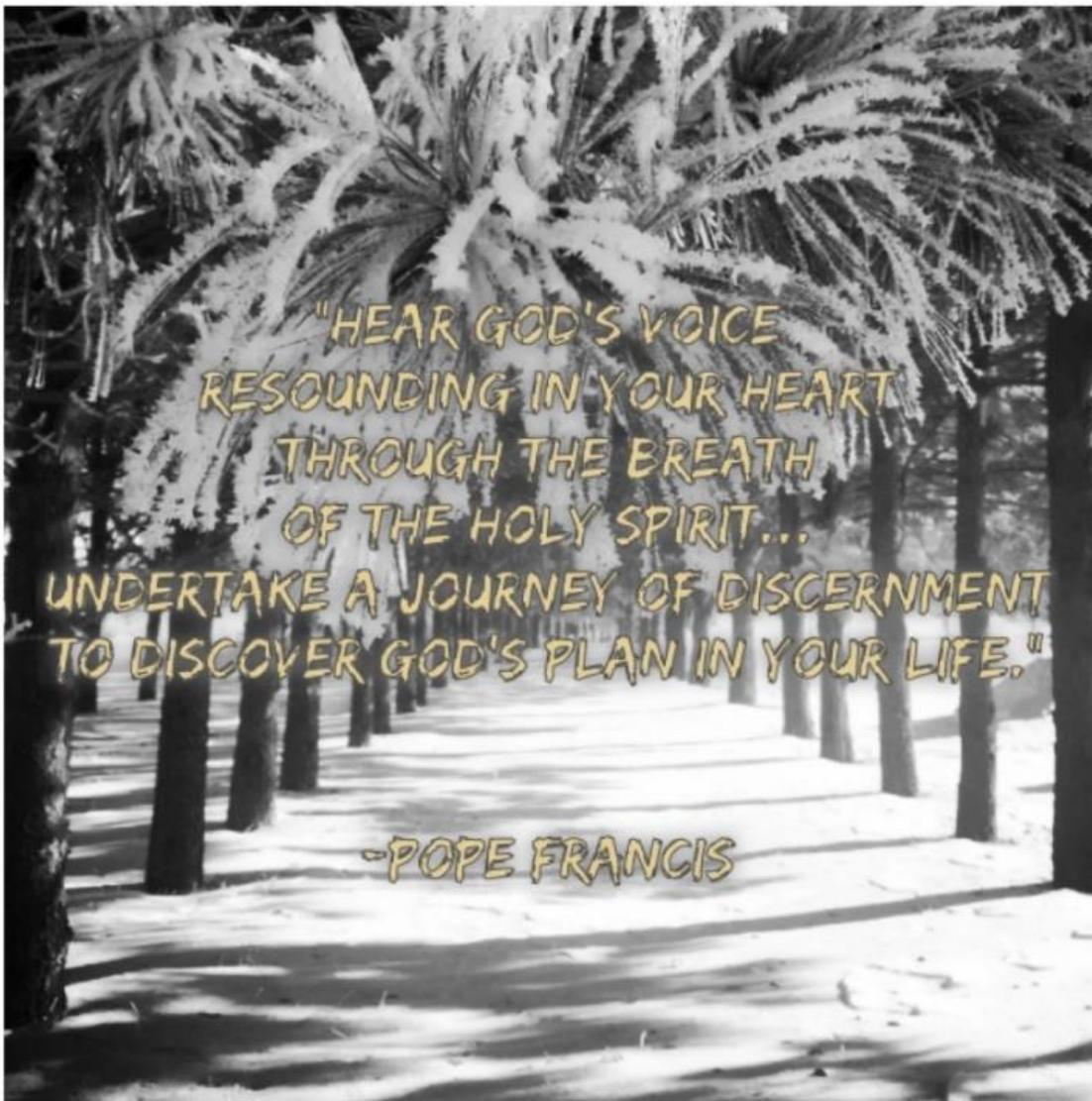
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-Week 1-  
*Introduction to the Series*



-Week 1-

*Introduction to the Series*

On January 13, 2017 Pope Francis wrote a letter to young people of the Church announcing that the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2018 will address the theme, “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment.” Pope Francis’s letter invites us to join the Synod of Bishops on this journey. On this same day, the Synod released a *Preparatory Document* on this theme. We are excited and enthused by the contents of this document and the ‘compass’ it can offer the young Church today. Inspired by and in response to the *Preparatory Document*, the purpose of this 20-week discernment series is to invite others to explore and engage with their own personal discernment journey and also, to inspire other groups and organizations to unpack the series together. As we break open the *Preparatory Document* we suggest a weekly discernment topic for reflection and prayer. We invite you to read Pope Francis’s Letter to Young People and, as you can, the Synod’s *Preparatory Document* (pages 67-90 of this booklet) as we embark on this new and exciting 20-week faith journey together.

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*Pope Francis' Letter to Young People on the Occasion of the  
Presentation of the Preparatory Document for the  
October 2018 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of  
Bishops*

January 13, 2017

My Dear Young People,

I am pleased to announce that in October 2018 a Synod of Bishops will take place to treat the topic: “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment”. I wanted you to be the centre of attention, because you are in my heart. Today, the *Preparatory Document* is being presented, a document which I am also entrusting to you as your “compass” on this synodal journey.

I am reminded of the words which God spoke to Abraham: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you”. (Gen 12.1). These words are now also addressed to you. They are words of a Father who invites you to “go”, to set out towards a future which is unknown but one which will surely lead to fulfilment, a future towards which He Himself accompanies you. I invite you to hear God's voice resounding in your heart through the breath of the Holy Spirit.

When God said to Abraham, “Go!” what did He want to say? He certainly did not say to distance himself from his family or withdraw from the world. Abraham received a compelling invitation, a challenge, to leave everything and go to a new land. What is this “new land” for us today, if not a more just and friendly society which you, young people, deeply desire and wish to build to the very ends of the earth?

But unfortunately, today, “Go!” also has a different meaning, namely, that of abuse of power, injustice and war. Many among you are subjected to the real threat of violence and forced to flee your native land. Your cry goes up to God, like that of Israel, when the people were enslaved and oppressed by Pharaoh (cf. Ex. 2:23).

I would also remind you of the words that Jesus once said to the disciples who asked Him: “Teacher, where are you staying?” He replied, “Come and see” (Jn. 1:38). Jesus looks at you and invites you to go with Him. Dear young people, have you noticed this look towards you?

Have you heard this voice? Have you felt this urge to undertake this journey? I am sure that, despite the noise and confusion seemingly prevalent in the world, this call continues to resonate in the depths of your heart so as to open it to joy in its fullness. This will be possible to the extent that, even with professional guides, you will learn how to undertake a journey of discernment to discover God's plan in your life. Even when the journey is uncertain and you fall, God, rich in mercy, will extend His hand to pick you up.

In Krakow, at the opening of the last World Youth Day, I asked you several times: “Can we change things?” And you shouted: “yes!” That shout came from your young and youthful hearts, which do not tolerate injustice and cannot bow to a “throwaway culture” nor give in to the globalization of indifference. Listen to the cry arising from your inner selves! Even when you feel, like the prophet Jeremiah, the inexperience of youth, God encourages you to go where He sends you: “Do not be afraid, because I am with you to deliver you” (Jer. 1:8).

A better world can be built also as a result of your efforts, your desire to change and your generosity. Do not be afraid to listen to the Spirit Who proposes bold choices; do not delay when your conscience asks you to take risks in following the Master. The 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. St. Benedict urged the abbots to consult, even the young, before any important decision, because “the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best.” (Rule of St. Benedict, III, 3).

Such is the case, even in the journey of this Synod. My brother bishops and I want even more to “work with you for your joy” (2 Cor 1:24). I entrust you to Mary of Nazareth, a young person like yourselves, whom God beheld lovingly, so she might take your hand and guide you to the joy of fully and generously responding to God’s call with the words: “Here I am” (cf. Lk 1:38).

With paternal affection,

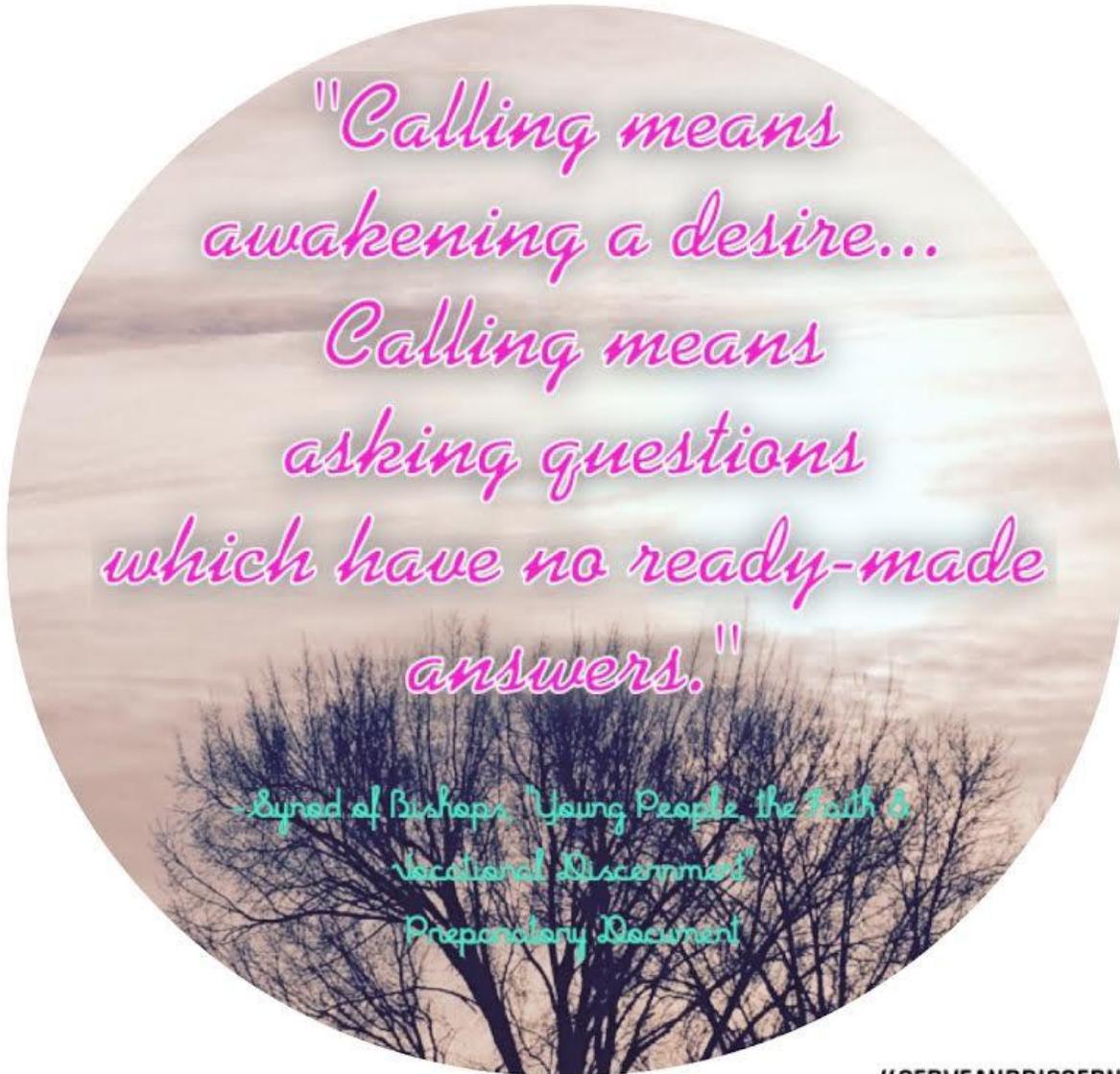
FRANCIS

Vatican City, 13 January 2017

*The above letter is from: The Summary Bulletin from the Holy See Press Office,  
<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/01/13/170113b.html>*

-Week 2-

*Calling: Awakening to the Mystery with Brave Response*



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## -Week 2-

### *Calling: Awakening to the Mystery with Brave Response*

Continuing into this second week of our Benedictine Volunteers 20-weeks Vocational Discernment Series inspired by the Synod of Bishops' "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment" Preparatory Document, we explore "Calling: Awakening to the Mystery with Brave Response." What is 'calling'? How does it appear in our lives? When we hear its messages, how can we posture ourselves to receive its meanings?

The *Preparatory Document* describes calling as 'awakening a desire.' To hear a call, we must first be awake. Awake-ness is a conscious posture of seeing and hearing. When we are awake, we choose to see, hear, and receive what is happening both around us and within us. Calling is also explained as 'asking questions which have no ready-made answers.' When we are awake to all that is happening around and within us, we can then begin to ponder and ask questions about these experiences. The questions associated with calling often carry an intimate quality of mystery, unknowing, and discomfort.

Calling can appear in a variety of forms. Sometimes it's a soft nudging, an intuitive sense of the heart. Sometimes it's a strong, direct message that seems to be screaming at us straight in the face. Other times it's a quiet, almost silent murmur deep within the soul. God speaks to everyone differently, so the ways calling appears in our lives will also be unique to our own journey, our relationship with God, and the creative happenings around us. Often times, calling appears and reappears in our lives, again and again. If we are open to it, we can receive its sacred messages and implications for our lives.

Mystery is both magical and uncomfortable. The magic of mystery is its newness, possibility, and opportunity. The discomfort of mystery is the holding of the unknown before the newness can birth itself into fullness of life. Jesus experienced this very mystery of calling in his own life. From a young age, Jesus had an intimate relationship with God and sensed that God was asking of Him something very special. A young Jesus who senses a nudging leaves his parents and goes to the temple to ask questions of the elders. A young Jesus who experienced a strong urging, directly shares his thoughts and feelings with his family. As the nudging and urging becomes more frequent and increasingly clear, Jesus chooses to leave home and embark on a journey in order to respond to God's calling.

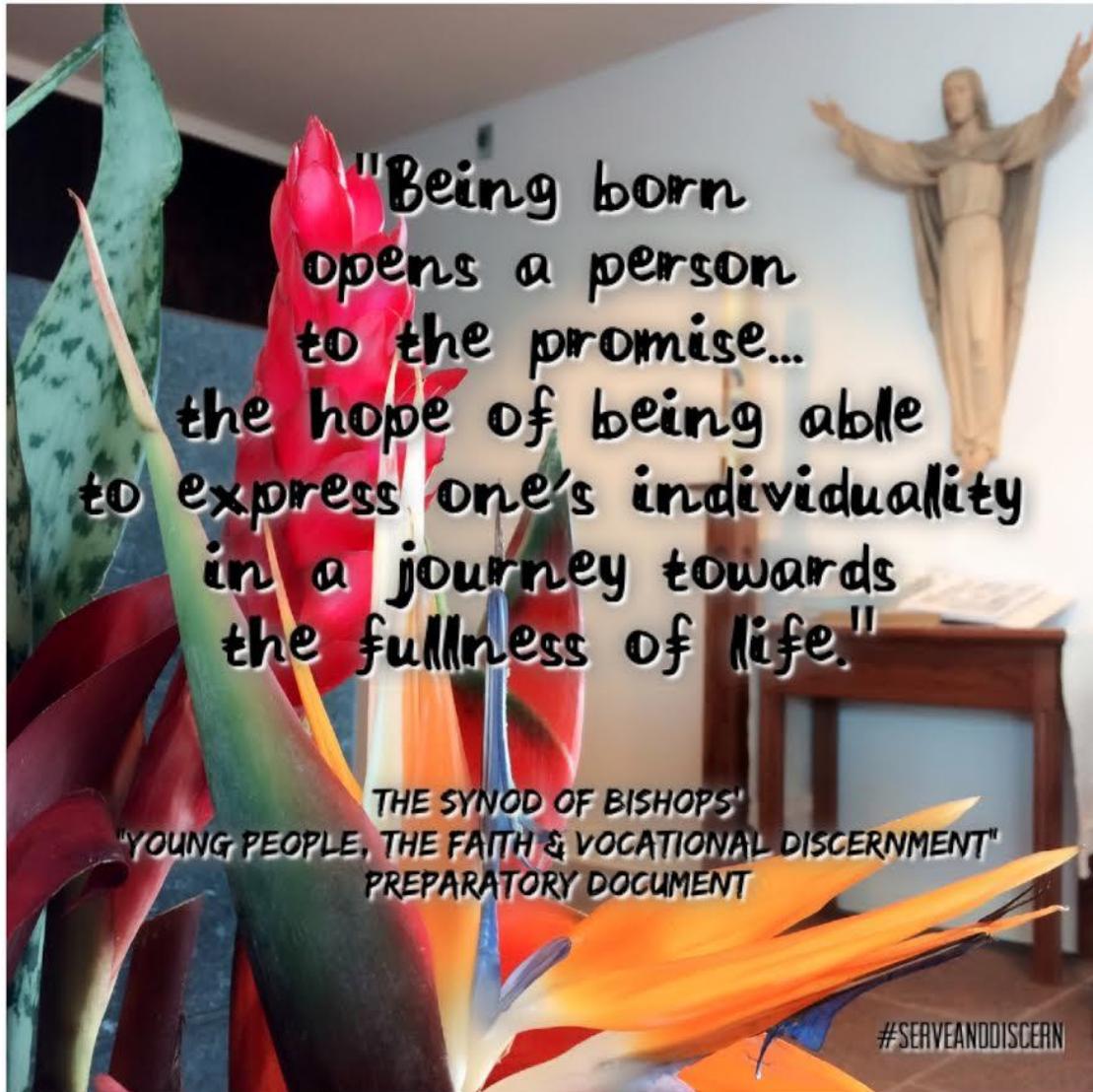
We each have choice in calling. We can choose to overlook, ignore, suppress, and pause. Or, we can choose brave response to the mystery. To be brave doesn't mean we have all the answers. To be brave means we are open to listening and exploring God's unknown plan for our lives. To be brave means to be like Jesus who in his humanness, did not fully comprehend God's plan, but was willing to engage with the questions authentically and invite God's tenderness into the journey of mystery.

## *Questions for Reflection:*

- How has 'calling' appeared in your life's journey? In what ways have you listened or, not listened, to the calling?
- Name a few roadblocks or resistances (i.e. personal, familial, cultural, and societal) you have experienced along this journey.
- What in your life currently feels like a 'mystery'? When you sit prayerfully with this mystery, where does God seem to be nudging and urging?

-Week 3-

*The Gift of Baptism: Receiving God's Grace*



## -Week 3-

### *The Gift of Baptism: Receiving God's Grace*

Last week we explored “Calling: Awakening to the Mystery with Brave Response,” which invited each of us to name and reflect on the different kinds of callings we have experienced in our life’s journey. We were also invited to prayerfully reflect on the element of ‘mystery’ that accompanies calling. Continuing into this third week of our 20-week Vocational Discernment Series, we explore “The Gift of Baptism: Receiving God’s Grace.” How does baptism relate to calling? In what ways does the sacramental gift of baptism support our discernment journey?

The *Preparatory Document* cites the wisdom of the Eastern Church, which describes baptism as a kind of birth or, awakening, “when someone becomes a child of God through grace.” By the very nature of our baptism, each of us has received a spiritual calling from God as sons and daughters. Let us recall how Jesus was baptized. Matthew illustrates an image of heaven opening, the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus like a dove, and a voice saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17). God recognizes Jesus as his loving son and offers words of support and encouragement. Jesus hears these affirming words and accepts in them a special calling, for it is shortly after his baptism that Jesus embarks on his journey of public ministry.

Similarly, in our own receiving of the sacrament of baptism, God intimately extends relational love to us as his daughters and sons. Baptism naturally graces us with God's parental love and care. This love is like a parent's loves for a child. There are no prerequisites or conditions. Simply by being born and being who we are, we are loved and we are all called by God. In this call of baptism, we are also challenged— like Jesus who is challenged towards public ministry— to identify how the uniqueness of our calling can extend out into the world by sharing God's love with others. Baptism gives us the grace, comfort, and confidence in knowing that God's love is always with us and that this love can inspire our hearts to go out into the world in a variety of ways.

## *Questions for Reflection:*

- Recall the memories and events around the day of your baptism. Perhaps it is useful to do so by having a conversation with family and friends or, revisiting albums and pictures. What images and feelings stand out to you from the day?
- If few or no memories of your baptism arise for you, perhaps it may be helpful to read and pray over Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3: 13-17 and also, Luke 3: 21-22 and Mark 1: 9-11. Image yourself in these narratives. What images stand out for you? How do you imagine Jesus feels? How do you imagine God feels?
- When you prayerfully ponder God's parental love gifted to you through baptism, what qualities does this love inspire in you?

-Week 4-

*Allowing the Soul to be Shepherded:  
Setting Aside Our Own Mental Framework*



## Week 4-

### *Allowing the Soul to be Shepherded: Setting Aside Our Own Mental Framework*

Last week we explored “The Gift of Baptism: Receiving God’s Grace,” which invited us to ponder the sacrament of baptism as calling. We were also invited to reminisce about our personal memories of baptism and pray with the baptism of Jesus. Continuing into this fourth week of our Discernment Series, we explore “Allowing the Soul to be Shepherded: Setting Aside Our Own Mental Framework.” In our exploring together the nature of calling—how it appears and how it is given—let us further ponder the ways calling can be received. Particularly, let us ponder the image of the shepherd and his flock as a metaphor for one way of relationship that helps us to freely open our hearts to God’s voice and let go of attachments that may inhibit us from engaging authentically with calling.

Scripture offers us again and again images of Jesus as shepherd and we, his flock. The shepherd is a special kind of leader. He is a leader that guides and protects his flock. He is also a guardian that watches over, gathers, and feeds his sheep. A flock of sheep, too, is a special kind of group. It is a group of animals that desires to be fed so that it can produce materials such as milk, cheese, and wool. Together, the shepherd and his flock learn the way of leading and following together. The dynamic of this leading and following relationship is very unique as it requires an open posture of vulnerability and trust. The shepherd must learn the ways and culture of the sheep. The flock must choose to be led and to follow freely because it sees goodness in the shepherd. Over time, this bond increases and deepens, resulting in a natural relationship of mutuality. Similarly, in our own personal experiences of call, we must first choose to be led before we can follow from the heart.

In order to be led and follow from the heart, we must be willing to throw away the things to which we have attachments. Matthew illustrates the parable of a rich young man who approaches Jesus with a request to enter heaven. Jesus says to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mt 19:21). In order to receive the desires of his heart, the young man is asked to let go of his attachment to his personal belongings. For us in our own lives, these ‘riches’ may appear in a variety of forms—things, people, places, ideas. Jesus’ invitation to sell what we have and come follow him can be understood as an invitation to set aside our own mental framework regarding how we think God ‘should’ answer our desires. These ‘should’ desires may lie in our own personal preferences, the opinions of those around us, and/or the cultural norms of the society we live in. Consciously or subconsciously, when we pre-determine the path, we give power to these ‘should’ voices. To enter the mystery of God’s calling with an open heart, we must first abandon our attachment to any perception, judgment, and preconceived idea about how and where we

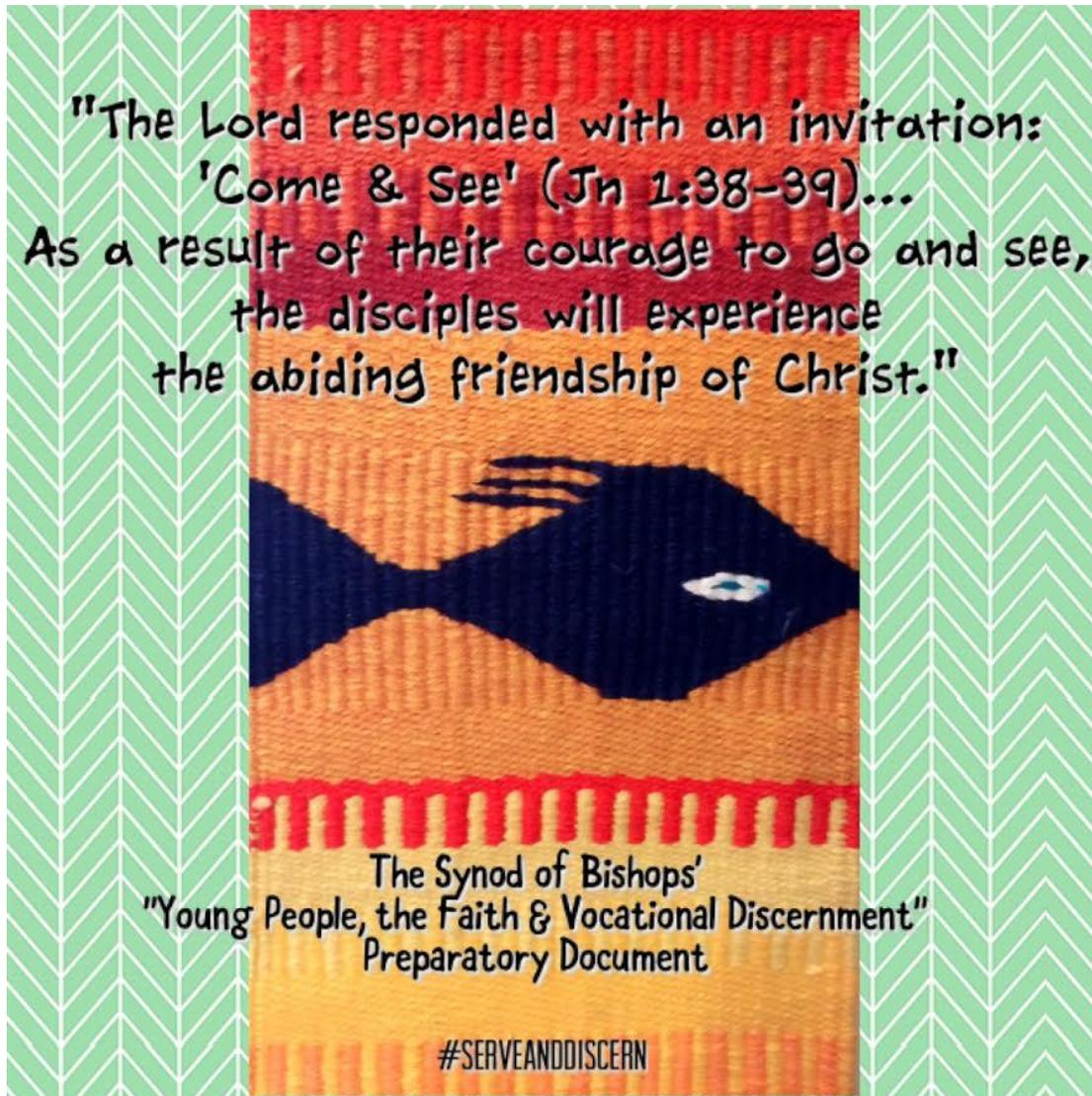
might expect calling 'should' appear in our lives. Then, we can begin to engage authentically and freely with the mystery of how God speaks to each of us uniquely. We can then be like the sheep that choose to be led by a shepherd whose love and care is wider and deeper than the whole flock could ever know.

### *Questions for Reflection:*

- Spend some time prayerfully with the parable of the rich young man in Matthew 19:16-22 and also, Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 18:18-30. What feelings do you sense in the young man? In Jesus? What correlations do you observe in your own life?
- Recall some of the roadblocks or resistances (i.e. personal, familial, cultural, and societal) you identified in Week 2. How have these frameworks shaped you and influenced your journey? How have these frameworks helped and/or hindered you?
- What in your life are you being asked to 'let go' of in order to receive? What has been challenging in this letting go?

-Week 5-

*Come & See: Discipleship as Friendship*



## -Week 5-

### *Come & See: Discipleship as Friendship*

Last week we explored “Allowing the Soul to be Shepherded: Setting Aside Our own Mental Framework,” which invited each of us to ponder the Scriptural image of shepherd and flock as a mutually leading and following relationship. We were also invited to reflect on personal attachments that affect our receiving of call and to reflect on how Jesus invites us to let go of these attachments. Continuing into this fifth week, we explore “Come & See: Discipleship as Friendship.” What does friendship with Jesus look like? How can the disciples’ friendship with Jesus model for us one way to engage more intimately with calling?

John 1:35-51 illustrates the beginnings of a beautiful friendship between Jesus and the first disciples. The disciples observe Jesus walk by and hear John refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God. They are curious, intrigued, and follow Jesus, who notices their presence and asks, “What are you looking for?” The disciples aren’t really sure what exactly they are looking for, but they continue to ponder and ask questions. Jesus responds, “Come and see.” These simple and open words welcome the disciples to peer into something deeper about their lives. And thus, the disciples choose to follow and continue a much longer journey of accompanying and passing each day side-by-side with Jesus.

When we chose to ‘come and see’ with Jesus, as the disciples did, we choose to enter into a relationship very much like a friendship. As the disciples come to understand Jesus more and more, He grows to become their teacher, their leader, and their Lord. Jesus is also their travelling companion, community gatherer, and friend. They walk together, they eat together, they work together, and they pray together. They talk and get to know one another through stories and parables. They also ask hard questions of one another and sometimes deal with conflict, doubt, and betrayal. Like friends, Jesus and the disciples are ‘there’ for one other—present, listening, giving, and receiving through the happenings of all of life. This friendship of mutual care, support, and love modeled for us by Jesus and the disciples is one way to engage from the heart with calling.

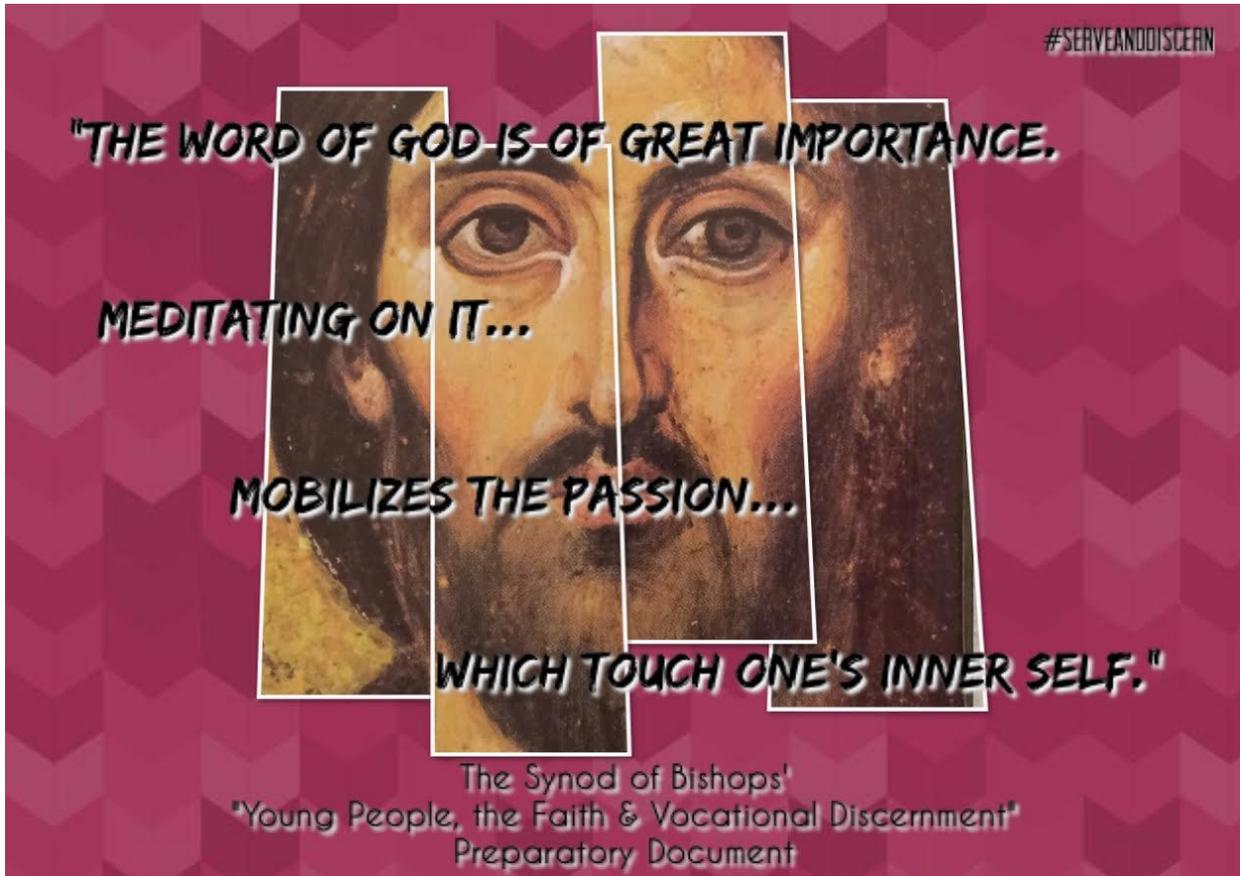
Discipleship begins with friendship. To follow, we must first have a relationship with the person or thing we seek to learn and understand. As with most healthy friendships, both persons are bonded by reciprocal giving and receiving. When we love a friend, our hearts naturally open up and stretch to provide our friend with what s/he needs. Similarly, when we are loved by a close friend, s/he reaches out to us to share in our joys and our struggles. True friendship is a beautiful dance of relational solidarity and reciprocity. We accompany and walk together through all of life’s unfolding. Such is the intimate invitation of friendship that Jesus calls us into when he says, “Come and see.”

## *Questions for Reflection:*

- How do you define and understand friendship? Who are the persons in your life you consider close friends? How have these friendships shaped who you are?
- When you ponder your relationship with Jesus as an opportunity for friendship, how is this similar and/or different to other friendships in your life?
- Friendship comprises both giving and receiving. In what ways have you been friend and gift to others?

-Week 6-

*Living the Good News of the Gospel: Scripture as a Guide*



## Week 6~

### *Living the Good News of the Gospel: Scripture as a Guide*

Last week we explored “Come & See: Discipleship as Friendship,” which invited us to explore personal relationship with Jesus as friendship. We were also invited to recall the disciples’ friendship with Jesus as a model for responding to call. Continuing into this sixth week of our Vocational Discernment Series, we explore “Living the Good News of the Gospel: Scripture as a Guide.” How can Scripture be a guide for discernment? What are some ways to pray and meditate with Scripture?

The *Preparatory Document* emphasizes the importance of meditating on the Word of God because meditation touches our hearts, which helps us make personal connections with Scripture’s meanings. What does it look like to meditate with Scripture? One way to meditate with Scripture is to tap into our feelings and imagination as we read the Word. It is helpful to keep in mind that for words to resonate with our hearts, it is more effective to approach words metaphorically rather than literally. Metaphors, or symbols, take literal images and transform them into personal meaning and interpretations. When we tap into our feelings and imagination while imaging metaphors, the Word of God can come to have personal insight and implications for our lives. Approaching Scripture in this way helps us to understand God’s words not only as history and information, but as a holy guide for our journey.

One wonderful way to pray with Scripture is through the practice of *lectio divina*. Latin for ‘divine reading,’ *lectio divina* is a way of sacred, prayerful reading of Scripture and other spiritual texts. Rather than approaching Scripture as a text to be studied or analyzed, *lectio divina* invites the reader to enter into Scripture as Living Word and to be transformed by it through prayer, meditation, contemplation, and reflection. *Lectio divina* can be done alone in personal prayer. It can also be facilitated one-on-one for you by a spiritual director or done with others in a small group. Most often, it is done in a quiet and comfortable space. A posture of openness and alertness is helpful in the practice of *lectio divina*.

The creativity of meditating with Scripture is that God meets us through the Word exactly where we are. We may revisit a particular Scripture passage twice, thrice, 10 times, 100 times; and each time, it is likely that the meaning we receive from God will be different. This is because when our hearts enter fully into Scripture, we take with us who we are—our feelings and emotional state, our memories and experiences, our questions and desires. Scripture is a timeless guide for our journey because it speaks to each of us uniquely. Scripture is one way we can receive God’s messages for our lives and experience His desire to reach out personally to us through the Living Word.

## Questions for Reflection:

- Apply the practice of *lectio divina* to one or more of the following suggested Scripture passages: Psalm 139: 1-24, Psalm 118: 1-28, Psalm 27: 1-14.
- What words and images stand out for you from these? What touches your heart?
- What is the personal message you take away from these? What is new to you that you might not have seen or experienced before?

-Week 7-

*Interculturation of the Gospels: Listening for the Signs of the Times*



"TO BELIEVE IS TO LISTEN TO THE SPIRIT AND, WITH ALL ONE'S POWERS OF MIND AND EMOTION, TO DIALOGUE WITH THE WORD, WHO IS THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE (CF JN 14:6) AND TO LEARN TO TRUST IN THE WORD, 'EMBODYING IT' IN THE CONCRETE INSTANCES OF EVERYDAY LIFE."

The Synod of Bishops'  
"Young People, the Faith & Vocational Discernment"  
Preparatory Document

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## -Week 7-

### *Interculturation of the Gospels: Listening for the Signs of the Times*

Last week we explored “Living the Good News of the Gospel: Scripture as a Guide,” which invited us to view Scripture as a guide for our faith journeys. We were also invited to meditate with some suggested Scripture passages utilizing the ancient art of *lectio divina*. Continuing into this seventh week, we explore “Interculturation of the Gospels: Listening for the Signs of the Times.” How can we relate Scripture to our modern, everyday lives? What does it mean to listen for the signs of our times in different cultures?

The *Preparatory Document* describes listening and responding to call not only as a personal and private act, but also as a public action of ‘embodying’ the values of the Gospels in everyday life. Scripture can guide us by speaking to and informing our family, community, cultural, social, political, and economic spheres. When we ‘interculturalize’ the Gospel, we integrate personal response with socio-cultural response in a way that vitalizes our communities. In doing so, there are two important things to be mindful of—the thing we seek to understand and the culture in which we seek to appropriate this understanding. For many of us, the values of the Gospels that we seek to understand are very similar: compassion, justice, patience, mercy, humility, love. These values are universal and generally understood by many. However, how different cultures each choose to act compassionately, advocate for justice, or model humility may look very different.

For Jesus, there were many different cultures to navigate and negotiate in his own time. Two cultures presented to us in the Gospels are Jesus’ family culture and his Jewish culture. We see a young 12-year old Jesus challenge his parents when he chooses to leave their side and spend time at the temple listening and asking questions of teachers. We also see Jesus in his adult life challenge and question the Pharisees when he observes them failing to lead others with integrity and compassion. Jesus models for us what it looks like to move beyond personal response towards socio-cultural response. At a young age, Jesus recognizes his sense of personal mission and responds to it by standing up for what he believes. He verbalizes his understanding of the Word and extends these values into action in his everyday life. He is also very mindful of the culture to which he is speaking. So often, we hear Jesus speak in metaphor and parable within the Gospels. This is one way Jesus culturally appropriates his understanding of the Word in a way that relates to and reaches others where they are. One of the most powerful messages of Jesus’ mission and ministry is his recognizing that understanding of the Word means embodying God’s love for others in tangible ways.

While reading Scripture, it is helpful to remember that the Gospels are very ancient texts. Jesus lived in a different time, culture, and society from ours. However, we can learn from Jesus how to listen to the signs of the times. In other words, we can ask ourselves,

“How does this relate to the culture and society that I live in? What does this call me to do in my own community?” Doing so can help us identify important messages for our modern world. Like Jesus, we can transform our personal understanding of Scripture into social action and community engagement so that others, too, may experience Christ’s love extended through us.

### Questions for Reflection:

- Name 2-3 communities you belong to or contribute to. These communities may be family, professional, or institutional relationships. What are the unique cultures and dynamics of each of these groups?
- What are your roles in these communities? In what ways have your and others’ contributions supported these communities?
- Call to heart an intention you have for a community you love as you pray:

Loving God,  
You speak to us through your living Word.  
Your Word tells us your story.  
Your Word comforts our lives.  
Your Word challenges the way we live.  
Help us to live your Word each day.

Loving God,  
You are present to us whenever we gather to worship you.  
You call us to be a community of prayer in our church.  
You remind us that we gather as a community of faith.  
You tell us that whenever we gather in your name, you are with us.  
Help us to celebrate your presence in our community worship.

Loving God,  
We are signs of your presence in our world whenever we witness  
To your love and compassion,  
To your kindness and care,  
To your justice and peace.  
Strengthen us for the work of witnessing.

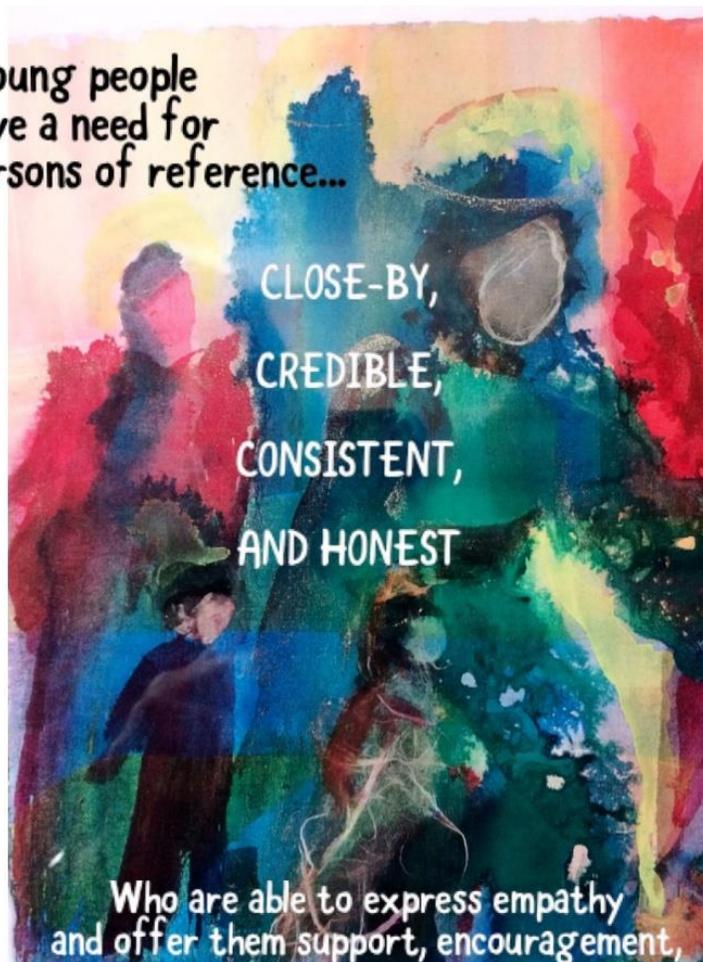
Amen.

*\*The above is a revised version of “A Prayer for Nurturing Our Catholic Community” by  
The Toronto Catholic District School Board Catholic Teachers’ Center, 2009.*

-Week 8-

*Persons of Reference: Faith Role Models in the Church*

"Young people  
have a need for  
persons of reference..."



CLOSE-BY,  
CREDIBLE,  
CONSISTENT,  
AND HONEST

Who are able to express empathy  
and offer them support, encouragement,  
and help in recognizing their limits,  
but without making them feel they are being judged."

The Synod of Bishops'  
"Young People, the Faith  
& Vocational Discernment"  
Preparatory Document



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## -Week 8-

### *Persons of Reference: Faith Role Models in the Church*

Last week we explored “Interculturation of the Gospel: Listening for the Signs of the Times,” which invited each us to ponder how Gospel values inform decision making in our modern family, community, cultural, social, political, and economic spheres. It also invited us to reflect on the communities we belong to and how our contributions to them are ways of integrating personal and socio-cultural responses to call. Continuing into this eighth week we explore “Points of References: Faith Role Models in the Church.” Who are ‘persons of reference’ and why are they important? Who are the persons of reference in our own lives and how do they serve as examples of faith role models in the Church today?

The *Preparatory Document* describes persons of references as those around us who are “close-by, credible, consistent and honest,” who are able to empathize, support, and encourage us in our journeys, and who give us constructive feedback without judging. Persons of references may be role models, mentors, and/or peers. In our Catholic history and tradition, we are blessed with many modern examples of role models and mentors. Through the lives of the saints, we find institutional role models who embody and live out values and virtues of the Gospels in their service to others. In our own families our closest role models and mentors are parents and grandparents who model faith for their children through family relationships. In Jesus’ own life, we see examples of parents as role models. His foster father, Joseph, modeled for Jesus courage, loyalty, and hard work; his mother, Mary, modeled for Jesus trust, listening, and humility. These are all qualities Jesus absorbed through observing and living with Joseph and Mary. Similarly in our own lives, we can look within our own families, communities, and Church for persons of reference who are role models and mentors to us to help guide and inspire our journeys.

In addition to role models and mentors, our peers are important in walking with us. We see peer communities explained in the Gospels in a variety of ways. In Luke 24:13-35, two disciples travelling down the road to Emmaus encounter Jesus, whom they do not initially recognize. Like these travelling disciples, our peers walk side-by-side with us in the daily rhythms of everyday life. Sometimes, like Cleopas and his friend, our peers can share in our blindness and confusion; other times, they help us to see things we had not seen before about ourselves or about situations around us. We see in Luke 24:1-12 very intimate scenes of peer community at Jesus’ tomb. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James visit Jesus’ tomb. These women share a very powerful experience of transformation as they bear witness to the resurrection. Like these women, our peer communities share common life experiences and dialogue with us about them to discern meaning. In our times of grief and sadness, our peers empathize and cry with us. In our times of shock and wonder, our peers comfort us. Sometimes, our peers are instructed by God to share important

information with us like Mary Magdalene who is instructed by Jesus to share the news of his resurrection with the apostles.

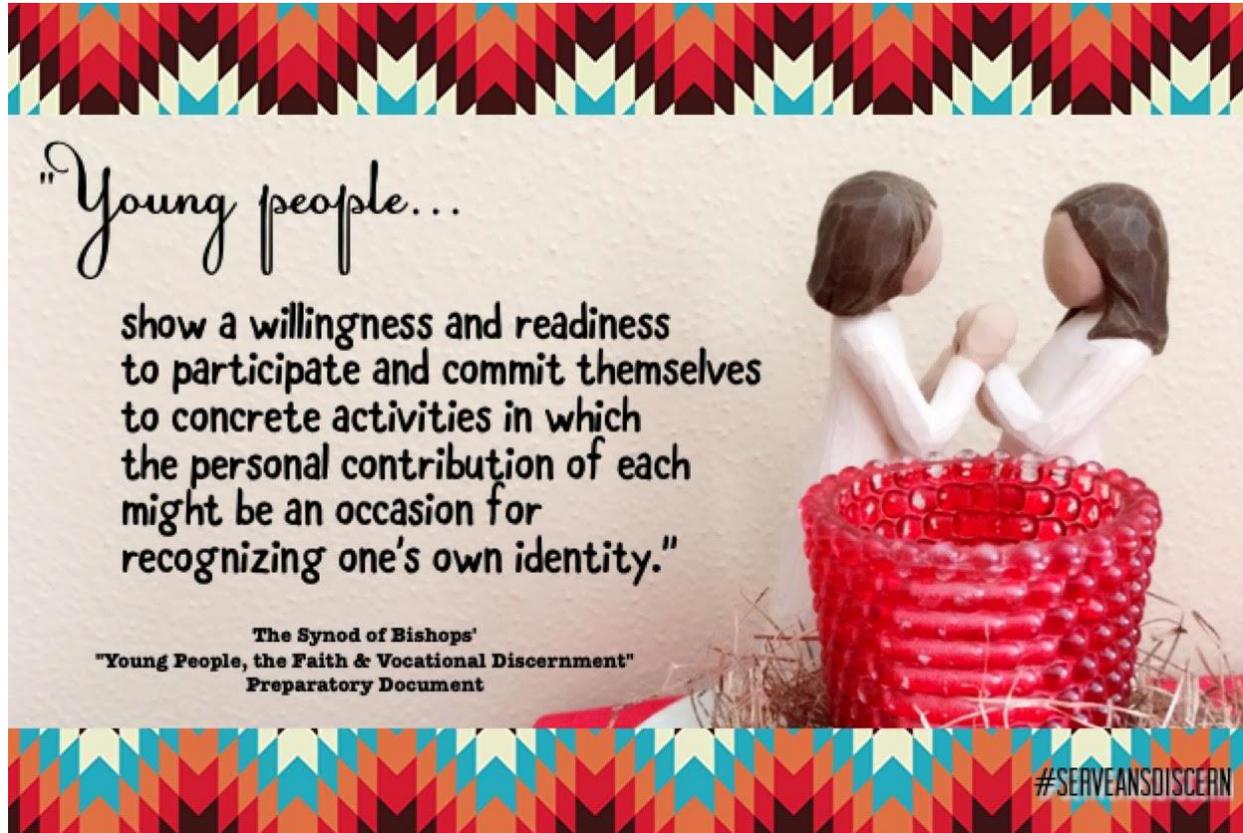
The value of having persons of references—role models, mentors, and peers—is having people close to us inspire, guide, and walk with us on our journeys. Like Jesus, we each have our own unique life path and calling to respond to. However, we are not alone in doing so. The people around us can share with us their feedback and support in helping us understand all the unique ways God reaches out to us. Persons of reference are special people sent to us from God to help reflect back to us His tender love, wisdom, compassion, and friendship.

### *Questions for Reflection:*

- When you ponder the life of Jesus, who do you imagine were his ‘persons of reference’?
- Who in your life has been a role model or mentor to you? What qualities does this person carry? What knowledge and wisdom have you gleaned from this person?
- Who is your peer community? How has your peer community supported and encouraged you? How is your peer community different and/or similar to role models and mentors in your life?

-Week 9-

*The Call of our Talents: Sharing My Personal Gifts with Others*



## -Week 9-

### *The Call of our Talents: Sharing My Personal Gifts with Others*

Last week we explored “Persons of Reference: Faith Role Models in the Church,” which invited us to reflect on persons in our lives—role models, mentors, and peers—who inspire, guide, and support of faith journeys. Continuing into this ninth week we explore “The Call of our Talents: Sharing my Personal Gifts with Others.” What are we called to do with the talents God gives us? How can sharing our gifts with others further our sense of calling and help us grow in our relationship with God?

Matthew 25: 14-30 illustrates a beautiful metaphor of talents as gifts and abilities we have been given in service to others. Matthew paints a picture of a wealthy master who gives three of his servants talents—5, 2, and 1 talent respectively. The first and second servants given 5 and 2 talents double what they have been given and the third servant, given 1 talent, buries what he has been given in the ground. With the servants who utilize their talents, the master is pleased and with the third servant who is too fearful to utilize his talents, the master admonishes him. The relationship between master and servant can be a metaphor for our relationship with God, who gifts each of us with unique talents, and asks that we utilize them in the concreteness of our daily lives.

We can see through the parable of the talents that God does not discriminate among talents. Regardless the number of talents each servant is given, God does not ask for a specific amount back in return. God simply asks that they use their talents. Like the three servants, each of us is given different talents—both in quantity and quality. God does not ask that we multiply our talents out of pride or arrogance, but rather, that we utilize the gifts He has given us out of love and authentic desire. When we give to others out of love and authentic desire, we act from a space of abundance and openness. In doing so, we are not personally attached to our gifts, but rather, choose to live in generous service by using that which has been gifted to us. Conversely, when we choose fear, like the third servant who buried his talent, we can become so bound to fear of failure that it paralyzes us, and we do not act at all.

To share our talents with others means being a good steward of the gifts God has given to us. We have a personal responsibility to cultivate our gifts by sharing them with others. In return, these talents ‘multiply’ as we further develop and refine them. The contribution of our talents reflects back to us important information about who we are, who we are called to be, and where the world needs our abilities. By sharing our personal gifts with others through the unique gifts and abilities God has given us, we receive His intimate invitation to, “Come, share your master’s joy” (Mt 25: 21).

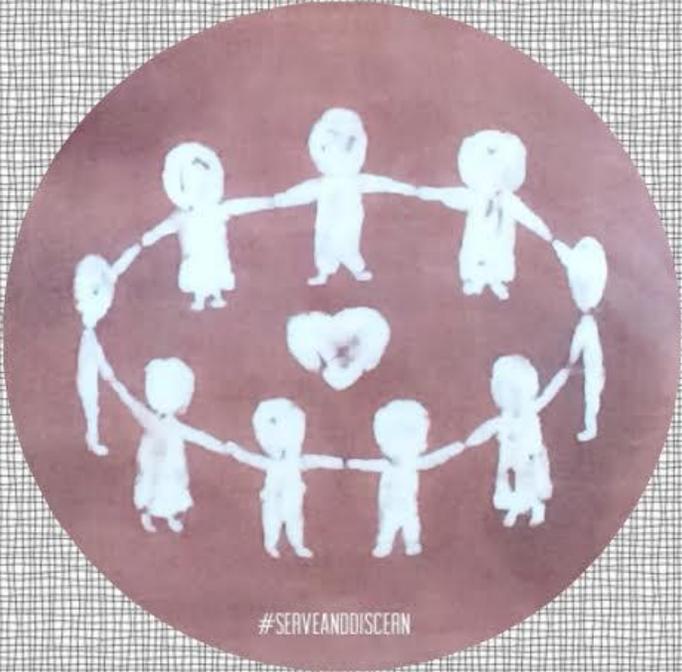
## *Questions for Reflection:*

- Spend some time prayerfully with Matthew 25: 14-30. It may also be helpful to visit with Luke 19: 11-27. When in your life have you chosen to ‘multiply’ your talents like the first and second servants and when have you chosen to ‘hide’ your talent like the third servant?
- What are the talents (i.e. possessions, gifts, abilities) God has given you? In what ways have these talents contributed to the greater good?
- Through these contributions, how has sharing your gifts with others helped you recognize/affirm/discover your identity in God?

-Week 10-

*A Community of Service: Working Together Towards a Common Purpose*

*"Young people appreciate the choice of working together..."*



*exercising leadership directed to improving the environment in which they love and of seeking opportunities to acquire and refine, in a practical way, useful skills for life and work."*

**THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS'  
"YOUNG PEOPLE, THE FAITH & VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT"  
PREPARATORY DOCUMENT**

## -Week 10-

# *A Community of Service: Working Together Towards a Common Purpose*

Last week we explored “The Call of Our Talents: Sharing my Personal Gifts with Others,” which invited us to reflect on the parable of the talents as a metaphor for utilizing our gifts and talents in service to others. We were also invited to reflect on how sharing our gifts helps to further develop our sense of personal calling. Continuing into this tenth week of our 20-week Vocational Discernment Series inspired by the Synod of Bishops’ “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment” Preparatory Document, we explore “A Community of Service: Working Together Towards a Common Purpose.” How can our individual gifts and talents come together as community to contribute to a shared mission? How does community offer us opportunities for service and invite us into solidarity with our brothers and sisters?

1 Corinthians 12: 12-26 paints a beautiful image of the body of Christ as a metaphor of different gifts and talents working together collaboratively within a community. When all our individual gifts come together towards a common purpose like different body parts working together to help the body be healthy and functioning, our communities become vibrant and stronger. When firmly rooted in its common purpose, a community is enriched and inspired by all the unique parts that make up the whole. We need each other’s gifts because alone we are not as effective. Just like the eye needs the hand and the head needs the feet, we are called to work together. When we work together, we learn from one another, fill each other’s gaps, and strengthen the whole. This transformative merging of talents and collaborative sharing is reflected in Jesus’ own communal life. Along his journey, Jesus constantly travels with a community of disciples who each carry their own unique personalities and gifts. Peter brings denial, which is transformed into leadership. Thomas brings doubt, which is transformed into faith. Simon brings zealotry, which is transformed into compassion. By working side-by-side with Jesus and one another in community, the disciples experience transformation by contributing to the whole and allowing the whole to transform them.

We form community by giving away our gifts, and conversely, the community forms us by helping us refine our personal skills and acquire new skills through our observing and learning from those around us. Communities are spaces of opportunity for service, inviting us to exercise our individual gifts and talents. Communities are also spaces of living and sharing in solidarity with others, offering us friends, companions, and teachers along the journey. By respecting and honoring the variety of talents others bring into community, we can work together, as did Jesus and the disciples, sharing God’s message of love.

## Questions for Reflection:

- Spend some time prayerfully with 1 Corinthians 12: 12-26. What body part/function most resonates with who you are? How are your gifts and talents similar to this part of the whole?
- Which body part/function least resonates with you? Is there anyone in your life who seems to fill this part better? How do you see your role and theirs working together?
- Recall a time you were transformed by community. How did that feel? What insights did you learn about yourself and others?

-Week 11-

## *Social Innovation & Creativity: Making the World a Better Place*

### "SOCIAL INNOVATION

*expresses a positive involvement  
which turns upside-down  
the condition  
of new generations,  
transforming losers  
seeking protection  
from the risks of change  
to agents of change  
who create  
new opportunities."*



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## -Week 11-

### *Social Innovation & Creativity: Making the World a Better Place*

Last week we explored “A Community of Service & Solidarity: Working Together Towards a Common Purpose,” which invited us to reflect on the body of Christ as a metaphor for different talents working together in community. We were also invited to reflect on how community helps refine and extend our personal calling. Continuing into this eleventh week we explore “Social Innovation & Creativity: Making the World a Better Place.” How do we discover creativity and opportunities for innovation in our local environments? When we combine our personal talents with creativity, innovation, and community, how do these interactions help make the world a better place?

Creativity and innovation are gifts of the Holy Spirit. We can discover these gifts all around us. The people we encounter can inspire us. A conversation can stimulate new thoughts and ideas. Nature can stir the soul through its colors, movements, and textures. New cultures and life experiences can broaden our understanding. Every day our local environments and communities are full of opportunities for seeking out new ways of interacting with one another. In Matthew 14:13-21, we see how the Spirit creatively engages with Jesus’ environment to help him and the disciples feed 5,000 people. With five loaves, two fishes, and five thousand people to feed, the disciples are concerned there is not enough food to go around. Being in a deserted place, the disciples ask Jesus to dismiss the 5,000 so that they might go to villages to purchase their own food. But Jesus is able to see beyond this doubt and utilizes the opportunity to challenge the disciples and reveal to them God’s creative abundance. The five loaves and two fishes multiply to fill twelve baskets. All are fed with surplus left over. Through faith, God transforms our ‘not enough’ to ‘more than enough.’ When we tap into the creativity of the Spirit, we can learn like the disciples did that God’s gifts to the world are abundant. By tapping into this abundance and by working together, our vision of reaching out to others can stretch well beyond our perceived abilities.

When we combine our personal talents with the Spirit’s inspiration and the hands and feet of our community, we are empowered to serve others in ways beyond our imagination. We can practice creativity by listening and looking for inspiration all around us in the things God presents in our daily lives. Like Jesus, we are called to observe the situation and feelings around us. These can give us important information about the needs of others and prompt us to respond to these needs. We can practice innovation by combining our observations with our personal talents and utilizing our gifts to help make the world better. Like Jesus, we are called to action by applying our abilities to the situations that need our gifts. In doing so, we allow the Spirit to work through us and begin to move beyond our individual limitations, working together in ways larger, deeper, and more mysterious than we can imagine.

## Questions for Reflection:

- Spend some time prayerfully with Matthew 14: 13-21. It may also be helpful to visit with Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-15. Where do you observe Jesus' listening? Talents? Creativity? Where do you observe the disciples doubt? Trust? What did working together enable them to do?
- When in your life have you experienced a 'burst of creativity' that enabled you to do more than you thought possible? How did this become gift to others?
- What/where/who do you draw inspiration from? What does this energy feel like for you personally?

-Week 12-

*A New Generation: Globalization & Multiculturalism*

**"MANY SOCIETIES  
ARE INCREASINGLY  
MULTI-CULTURAL &  
MULTI-RELIGIOUS...  
THE PRESENCE OF  
DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS  
TRADITIONS IS A  
CHALLENGE AND  
AN OPPORTUNITY...  
[IT] CAN PROVIDE  
FOR INCREASED  
POSSIBILITY  
FOR FRUITFUL  
DIALOGUE AND  
MUTUAL ENRICHMENT."**

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## -Week 12-

### *A New Generation: Globalization & Multiculturalism*

Last week we explored “Social Innovation & Creativity: Making the World a Better Place,” which invited us to explore different ways of drawing inspiration and discovering creativity from our local environments. It also challenged us to consider new ways to merge our personal talents with creative innovation in service to others. Continuing into this twelfth week, we explore “A New Generation: Globalization & Multiculturalism.” How does globalization and multiculturalism present new challenges and opportunities related to and learning about difference in our world today? What does Jesus say about difference and relating to the ‘other’ in our midst?

Today new cultures, information, and ideas are moving with complexity and rapidity across transnational borders. This modern movement gifts us with both new opportunities for learning and also, new challenges. One of the challenges/opportunities of a globalizing multicultural world is learning different ways to engage meaningfully with the ‘other.’ Though Jesus’ time is different from our modern world, Jesus’ life was full of encounters with the ‘other.’ John 4:4-42 describes Jesus’ passing through a town in Samaria called Sychar and his intimate encounter with a woman at the well. The woman is startled that Jesus approaches her and asks for a drink because she is a Samaritan. Jesus’ ability to peer into her heart’s concerns and engage her in conversation moves the woman. Their authentic encounter with one another encourages other Samaritans to approach Jesus. They even invite him to stay with them. And so what began as mere passing transformed into a two days’ visit of hospitality in Sychar between Jews and Samaritans.

In Luke 10:29-37, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan who helps a neighbor robbed along his journey. Others see the injured man, but no one chooses to help. It is the Samaritan who is moved with compassion, tends to the man’s wounds, takes him into an inn, and even gives the innkeeper additional money to care for the man. In Jesus’ time, Samaritans were considered ‘other’ because of their differing religious beliefs. Historically, there was a lot of political, religious, and social tension between Jews and Samaritans. Many Jews during Jesus’ time perceived the stereotype of a Samaritan to be hostile and barbarian. Jesus breaks this stereotype by choosing to get to know the Samaritans personally. In doing so, Jesus transforms a culturally perceived difference into an opportunity for gleaning insight about the other’s kindness, courage, vulnerability, generosity, hospitality, and love.

To be perceived as an ‘other’ simply means to be different in some way, be it appearance, ability, belief, or culture. Rather than dismiss difference, shy away in fear, or react with misunderstanding, Jesus chooses to reach out to the ‘other’. He shares with us how encounters with the ‘other’ can be mutually fruitful, loving, and a learning experience.

Jesus models for us one way to position ourselves towards the 'other' with openness, curiosity, and desire to engage with love.

### *Questions for Reflection:*

- Spend some time prayerfully with John 4:4-42. Image yourself as the Samaritan woman. What is this experience like for you? When in your life have you experienced Jesus reaching out to you personally as an 'other'?
- Spend some time prayerfully with Luke 10:25-37. Image yourself as the Good Samaritan. When in your life have you reached out to someone different from you? What did you learn from the experience?
- In our world today, who do you observe as 'others'? What are some challenges/opportunities you experience in relating to/understanding/reaching out to these 'others'?

-Week 13-

## *The Gift of Faith: Seeing Things as Jesus Does*

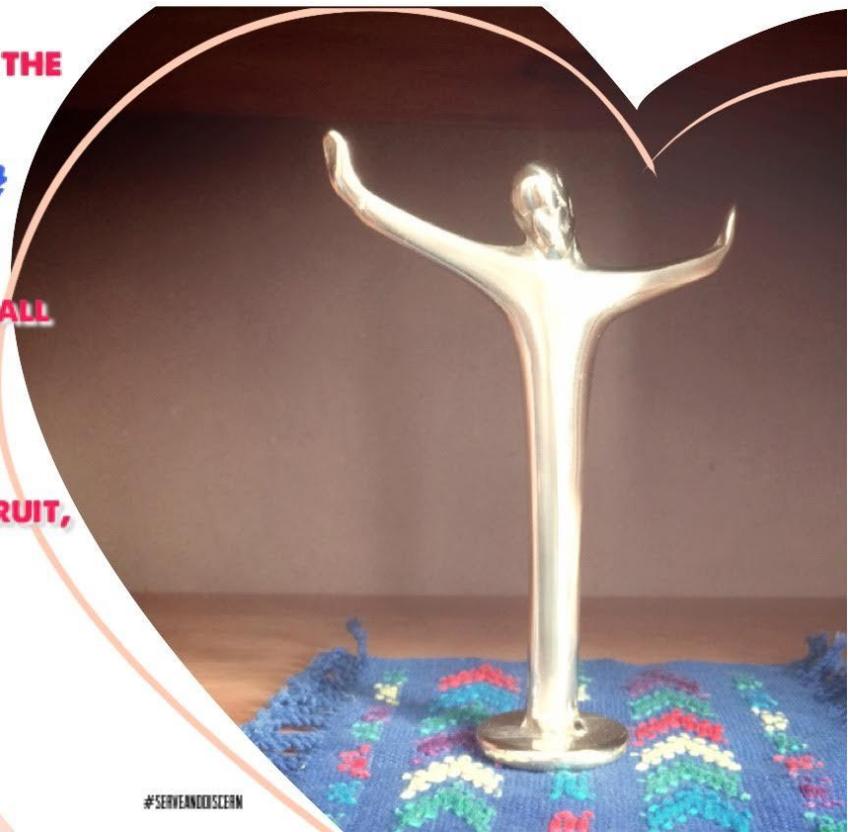
**"IF THE VOCATION TO THE**

*joy of love*

**IS THE FUNDAMENTAL CALL  
THAT GOD HAS PLACED  
IN THE HEART OF  
EVERY YOUNG PERSON  
SO THAT EACH ONE'S  
EXISTENCE WILL BEAR FRUIT,  
FAITH IS BOTH A GIFT  
FROM ON HIGH  
AND A RESPONSE  
TO FEELING ONESELF  
CHOSEN AND LOVED."**

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## -Week 13-

### *The Gift of Faith: Seeing Things as Jesus Does*

Last week we explored “A New Generation: Globalization & Multiculturalism,” which invited us to reflect on both the challenges and opportunities of our globalizing and multicultural world. We were also invited to think about the ‘other’ we encounter outside and inside of ourselves. Continuing into this thirteenth week we explore “The Gift of Faith: Seeing Things as Jesus Does.” What does it mean to see things as Jesus does? When we choose love, what are the outcomes of this choice?

To see things as Jesus does means to see one’s whole life through a lens of love. Because Jesus chooses love, he is able to see the world and perceive others in unique ways. In Luke 19:1-10, Jesus vision of love pierces through Zacchaeus’ tax collector persona to see a nervous heart that deeply desires to give back. In Mark 14:3-9, Jesus’ vision of love pierces through the negative judgment of others to see the sincere heart of a woman’s desire to thank him by way of an intimate anointing with oil. In Matthew 26: 20-25 and Matthew 26:47-56, Jesus vision of love pierces through deep betrayal to see the insecure heart of a lying Judas. In Matthew 26: 31-41, Jesus’ vision of love pierces through Peter’s denial to see a heart full of fear and anxiety. Seeing his whole life through a lens of love enables Jesus to see through to the true intention of others and have compassion for their vulnerabilities.

At the core of all discernment is seeing and experiencing ourselves as deeply loved by God. Jesus’ knowing of God’s deep love for him helped him to love others in this same way. God’s love empowered him to fulfill his call, even when the circumstances and situations around him were difficult. Throughout the pain and agony of Jesus’ passion, Jesus’ trust in God’s plan buttressed all these difficult experiences in the ocean of God’s love. Jesus is able to have mercy for others midst his personal pain, betrayal, and impending death because Jesus roots himself in God’s love through all of these experiences. Seeing like Jesus means to experience ourselves as deeply loved, deserving of, and specially chosen by God just like Jesus did. When we can see ourselves through God’s eyes—deeply loved—we can then begin to open our hearts to his call and find our own unique ways to share this love with others.

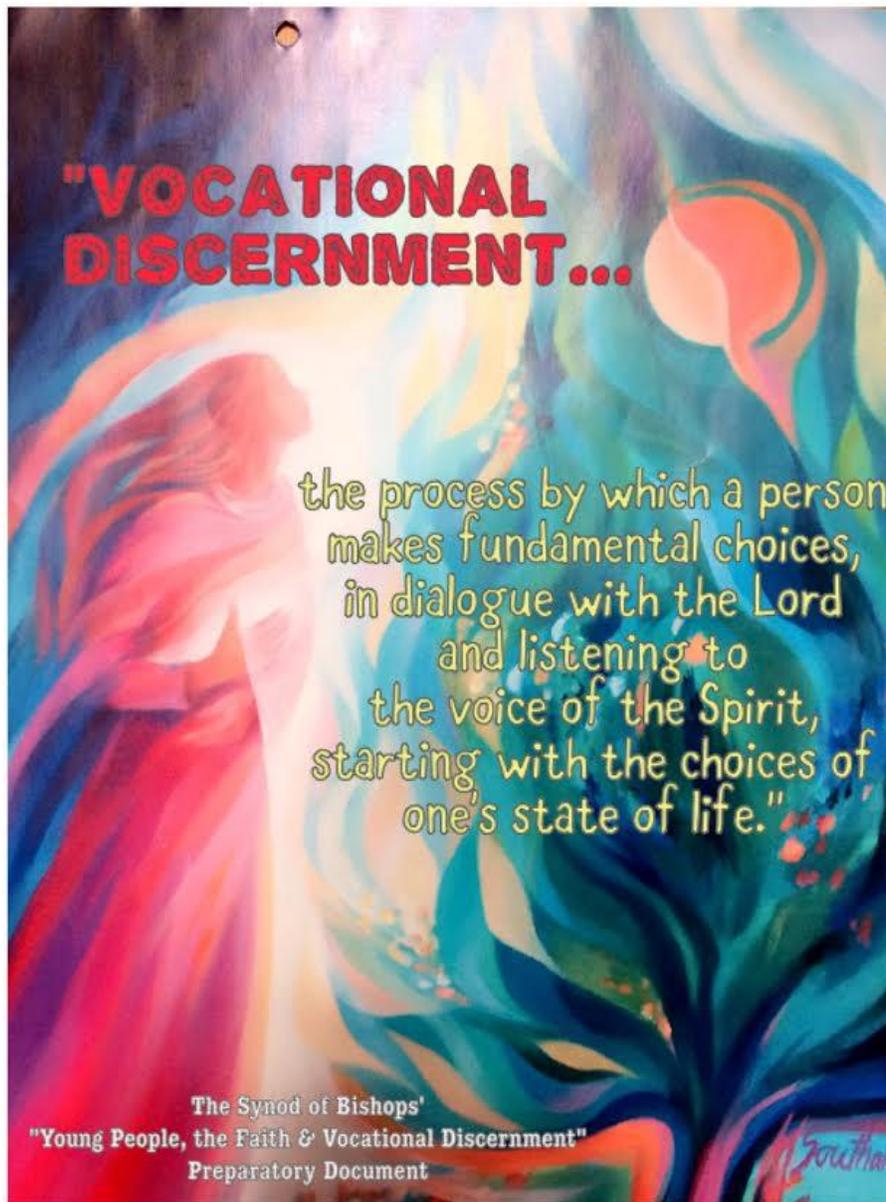
## Questions for Reflection:

- Spend some time praying with the events of Jesus' passion. It may be helpful to visit with Matthew 21:1-11, Matthew 26: 1-75, Matthew 27: 1-66; or, Mark 11: 1-11 and Mark 14: 1-72, and Mark 15: 1-47; or, Luke 19: 28-40, Luke 22: 1-71, Luke 23: 1-56, and Luke 24: 1-12. Where do you see Jesus struggle? Where do you see Jesus choosing love? How does this love help him to fulfill his calling?
- When in your life did choosing love help you to see things differently? Recall these events. What effects did this have on your life? On others?

-Week 14-

*The Gift of Discernment: A Path Towards Fullness of Life*

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## -Week 14-

### *The Gift of Discernment: A Path Towards Fullness of Life*

Last week we explored “The Gift of Faith: Seeing Things as Jesus Does,” which invited us to reflect on our experiences of knowing ourselves to be personally loved by God. We were also invited to pray with the events of Jesus’ passion and reflect on how Jesus’ choice to see his whole life through the lens of love helped Jesus fulfill his calling. Continuing into this fourteenth week we explore “The Gift of Discernment: A Path Towards Fullness of Life.” How does choosing love lead us onto a pathway towards fullness of life? What evidence does Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection offer us about God’s gift of new life?

The path of discernment, the Synod’s *Preparatory Document* says, starts with one’s current state of life. In other words, discernment begins with where we are, right now. There is no perfect, best, or better moment to begin the journey. We begin as we are, knowing that God accepts and loves us as we are. In our current state, we may not yet know how this plan may unfold, but by choosing to love like Jesus, we can trust that all will unfold into goodness, fullness, and love. Through Jesus’ resurrection, we can know God’s plan for us holds this same promise and mystery of new life. In John 20:1-31, we see Jesus offering hints and glimpses of God’s gift of fullness of life that is extended to us through Jesus’ rising. Jesus appears to Mary of Magdala, asking her to stop mourning so that she can rejoice with him in new life. Jesus appears to the disciples, showing them his hands and side and asking them not to be afraid, but to share in his peace and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus appears to the doubtful Thomas, asking him to have faith in what cannot be seen by the eyes, but rather, experienced by the heart. Midst the disciples’ uncertainty and conflicting feelings, Jesus appears to remind them that the path of love is full of mystery, but it is not something to be sad about or fearful of. Rather, the pathway of mystery is preparation for the joy of new life.

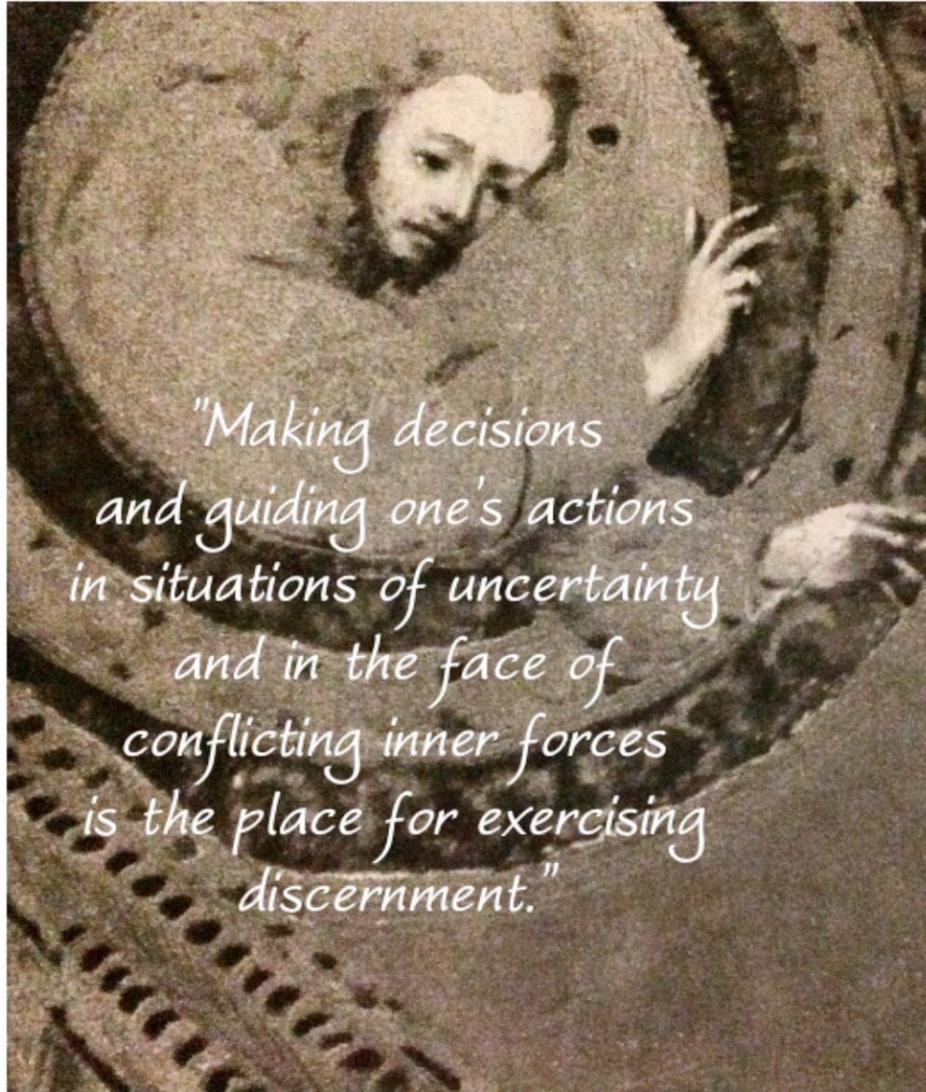
To choose to love like Jesus means trusting that love leads to a new way of seeing, a new way of relating to others, and a new way of living life. Like Jesus, there may be many struggles and challenges to overcome along this path. However, like Jesus’ dying and rising, our dying to an old way of life will also lead to a rising towards a new way of life rooted in God’s love.

## *Questions for Reflection:*

- Spend some time reflecting on your life in its current state. What are the events and circumstances you are in, right now? Who and what is around you? What are your feelings towards these?
- What in your life feels to be called towards change/transformation/new life?
- Spend some time prayerfully with John 20:11-18. Image yourself as Mary of Magdala. What is Mary looking for? What does she learn? What in your own life are you looking for?

-Week 15-

*Choices: Making Decisions Midst a Variety of Options*



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## ~Week 15~

### *Choices: Making Decisions Midst a Variety of Options*

Last week we explored “The Gift of Discernment: A Path Towards Fullness of Life,” which invited us to reflect on the gift of new life extended to us through Jesus’ resurrection. We were also invited to recall how Jesus reveals hints and glimpses of this new life to the disciples. Continuing into this fifteenth week we explore “Choices: Making Decisions Midst a Variety of Options.” How does one go about discerning and making good decisions where there are so many options to choose from? What does Jesus say about how God views our decision making?

One of the beautiful intricacies of our modern landscape is how information and ideas are constantly being exchanged and transformed. With the emergence of technologies that allow our lives to be more informed, more varied, and more mobile—and perhaps also busier, faster, and more cluttered than ever before—we face new opportunities and challenges. We have the opportunity to engage with others cross-platform and garner different perspectives about the world. We also face the challenge of sorting through all this information, making sense of it, selecting the information that is helpful to us, and ultimately coming to some sort of decision about the information we have. How does one effectively and intentionally sort through all of this to make discerned decisions? The parable of the prodigal son offers us wonderful insight into how God walks with us as we make decisions midst a variety of options.

In Luke 15:11-32, we see three different journeys of discernment. The first journey is that of a lost son who leaves home, squanders all his resources, and returns home apologetically to his father. In the lost son, we can see how some decisions are externally challenged by the attractions and distractions of life around us. The second journey is that of an older son who has chosen to stay by his father’s side all his life and who resents his younger brother for returning home. In the older son, we can see how some decisions are internally challenged by our personal expectations and judgments. The third journey is that of a father who loves both his sons even though the pathways they each have chosen have been different. In the father, we can see how God looks down up the difficult decisions we have to make with love, gentleness, and compassion.

The father allows both his son to make their own decisions. The father does not reprimand or accuse his lost son for having made poor decisions. Rather, he welcomes his lost son home with open arms, joy, and gratitude. The father does not rebuke or silence his older son for having conflicting feelings. Rather, he listens to his older son and responds gently to him. Both sons are given choice, just as we are given free will by God. Perhaps in

our own lives, there have been times we chose to act as the lost son and at other times we chose to act as the older son. God does not force or coerce us into making 'right' or 'wrong' decisions. Life presents different options and God simply desires that we make decisions out of love, like the father who chooses a loving response to each of his sons. It is love that enables the father to welcome his lost son home and comfort his misunderstanding older son. Both are loved equally and understood for the differing decisions they have made.

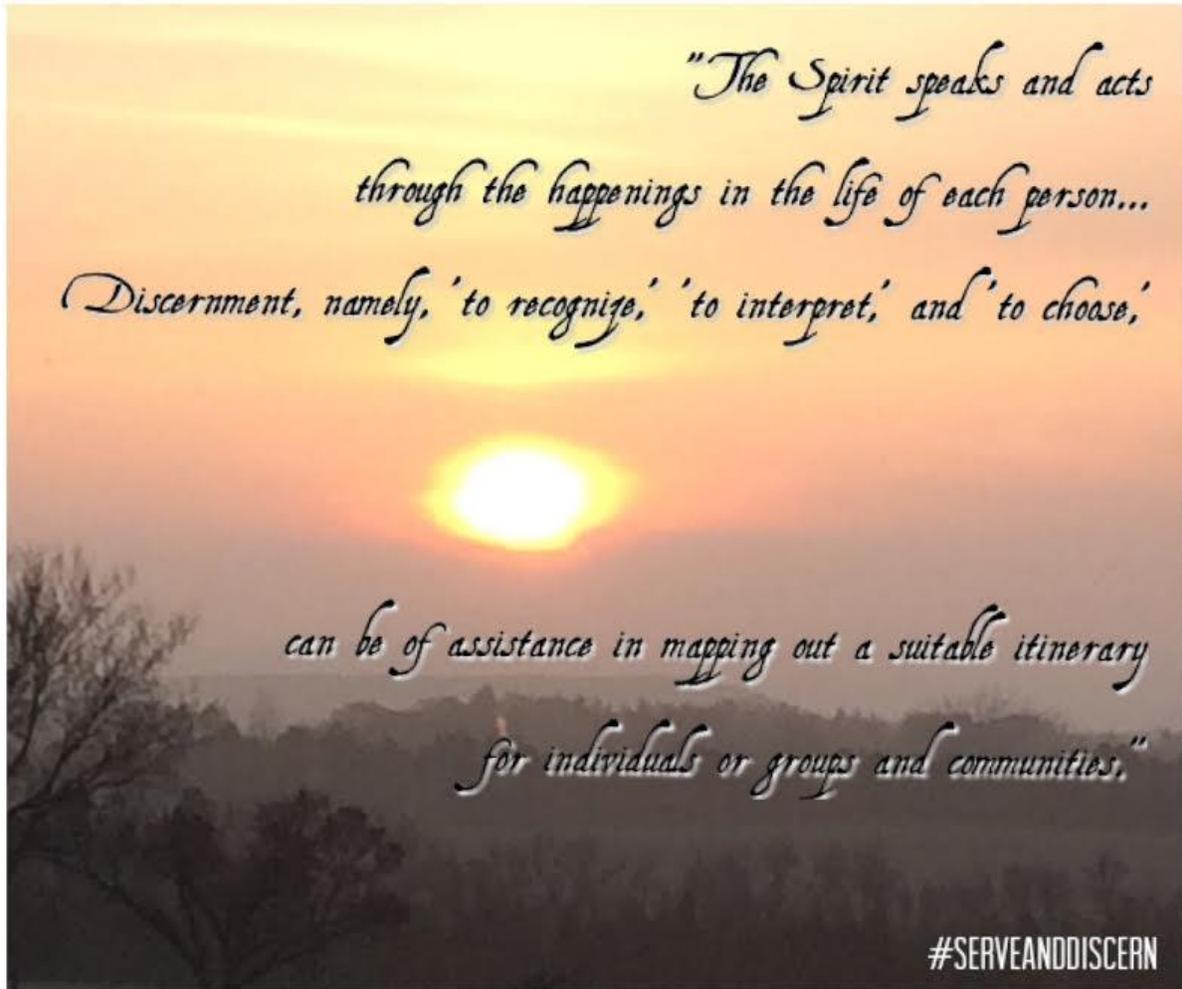
Places of unknowing, uncertainty, and perhaps even chaos, are opportunities to exercise discernment. Like the son who leaves home, there are times the external movements of life jerk us around, causing restlessness. Like the older son who stays at home, there are times the internal movements of our thinking and feeling can overwhelm us, causing confusion. Making a discerned choice doesn't mean that we know anything for certain. Discerned choices mean we trust God to move with us lovingly as we come to know His love for us more clearly.

### *Questions for Reflection:*

- Spend some time prayerfully with Luke 15:11-32. First, image yourself as the lost son. What is this experience like for you? Next, image yourself as the older son. What is this experience like for you? When in your life did you make choices similar to the lost son or older son?
- Recall a time in your life when saying 'yes' to something led you to say 'no' to other things. What was that experience like for you? What enabled you to say 'yes'? What did that 'yes' lead to?
- When you look at your current life situation/circumstances, what options do you see presented before you? What information do you have about these options? What emotions do these options stir in you?

-Week 16-

*A Process of Discernment: Recognize, Interpret, Choose*



*"The Spirit speaks and acts*

*through the happenings in the life of each person...*

*(Discernment, namely, 'to recognize,' 'to interpret,' and 'to choose,'*

*can be of assistance in mapping out a suitable itinerary*

*for individuals or groups and communities."*

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## -Week 16-

### *A Process of Discernment: Recognize, Interpret, Choose*

Last week, we explored “Choices: Making Decisions Midst a Variety of Options,” which invited us to reflect on how decisions are made when the world presents us with many different and attractive options. We were also invited to pray with the parable of the prodigal son and reflect on how God responds to the choices we make. Continuing into this sixteenth week we explore “A Process of Discernment: Recognize, Interpret, Choose.” As we seek to make good decisions, informed and inspired by the Spirit, what model for discernment does the *Preparatory Document* offer us? How can this model help guide our journeying?

The *Preparatory Document* sites three simple verbs in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 51— “to recognize,” “to interpret” and “to choose”—as a suggested model for a discernment process. Firstly, to recognize means to be mindful of the current happenings in our lives. These happenings serve as the information and facts about which we need to make decisions. Recognizing also means awareness of the internal feelings that surface for us in relationship to these external happenings. Secondly, to interpret means to seek understanding of these happenings and feelings through conversation with the Word and the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, to choose means exercising our knowledge and understanding to respond freely and responsibly to what is being asked of us. Choosing translates our knowledge and understanding into action. Together, these three steps offer us a simple, but comprehensive guide for entering into one way of intentionally engaging with discernment.

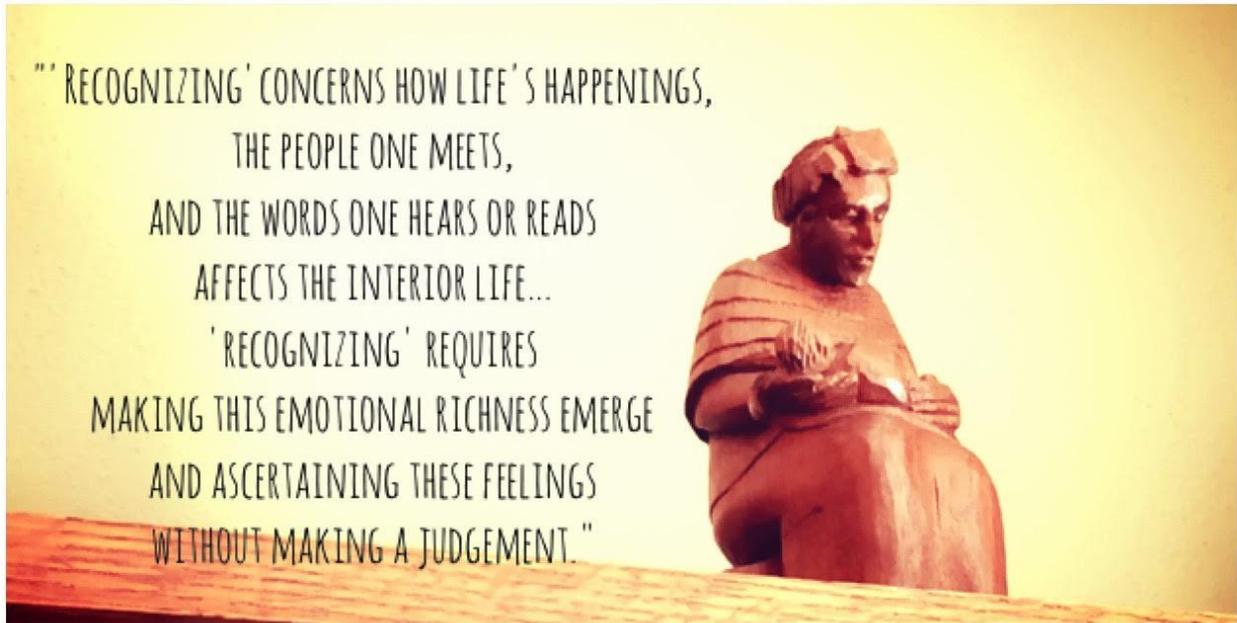
In the following weeks, we will break down each discernment step—recognize, interpret, and choose—into more detail. As we reflect on these, let us remember that these 3 steps are a guide (not a prescription) for one way of walking intentionally in a process of discernment. For each person, the way each step will look, feel, and manifest itself will be very different. It is also important to keep in mind that a guide may not lead us to concrete answers, but rather, increased clarity and wisdom. Therefore, let us pray for listening hearts that seek wisdom: “Spirit of Wisdom, be with us as we seek to know God’s will in our lives. Open our eyes to see what you place in front of us without judgment. Open our hearts to understand the mysteries of your loving intention. Open our hands to receive your gifts, and prepare us to act responsibly to that which this journey will reveal. Amen.”

## *Questions for Reflection:*

- Spend some time prayerfully with John 2: 1-12, the Wedding at Cana. Image yourself as Jesus. What does Jesus 'recognize' in the happenings around him? What feelings do you imagine Jesus experienced?
- What does Mary say to Jesus? How does Jesus seem to 'interpret' the situation? What understanding does he garner from this?
- What does Jesus choose to do? What are the effects of his actions?

-Week 17-

*Recognize: Becoming an Observer of Life's Happenings*



The Synod of Bishops'  
"Young People, the Faith + Vocational Discernment"  
Preparatory Document

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## -Week 17-

### *Recognize: Becoming an Observer of Life's Happenings*

Last week, we explored “A Process of Vocational Discernment: Recognize, Interpret, Choose,” which invited us to consider three verbs in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 51— “to recognize,” “to interpret” and “to choose”—as a suggested model for a discernment process. We were also invited to reflect on John 2:1-12, the Wedding at Cana, and imagine how Jesus might have applied this model of discernment in his own life. Continuing into this seventeenth week of our Vocational Discernment Series we explore “Recognize: Becoming an Observer of Life’s Happenings.” Let us recall back to last week’s reflection on the Wedding at Cana, and probe more deeply into the first discernment step, ‘to recognize’. When we image ourselves as Jesus, what are we able to recognize through his eyes and heart?

To recognize means to become an observer of the natural unfolding of life’s happenings all around us. By ‘recognizing’ the people, events, words, and feelings around Jesus at the wedding in Cana, we are able to observe a variety of things unfolding at once. The Wedding at Cana is commonly recognized as Jesus’ first miracle. In the events leading up to the wedding, we can see that Jesus is on a several days’ journey after his baptism in Bethany by John the Baptist, who recognizes Jesus as the Son of God. Through baptism, Jesus has been sent forth by God on a special journey. This is the beginning of his public ministry. Soon after his baptism, Jesus meets his first disciples, Simon and Peter, who join him on his journey. Then they journey to Galilee together where they meet Philip and Nathaniel, who also join them. Jesus gains companions along his journey. Jesus and his followers arrive in Cana, where a wedding takes place. We see that Jesus’ mother, Mary, is also in attendance at the wedding. There is no indication of whose wedding it is, but we know that Jesus and the disciples were invited guests. As the festivities of the wedding unfold, the wine starts to run short. Mary comments about this to Jesus and he responds, “Woman, how does this concern affect me? My hour has not yet come.”

It is in Cana that Jesus is presented with a unique opportunity—to discern the appropriate time to begin exercising the gifts God has given him. In the step of recognizing, we can try imagining what Jesus might have been feeling internally. Perhaps Jesus was cautious about using his gifts so soon after being sent forth by God at the occasion of his baptism. Perhaps Jesus was also afraid to use his gifts and wondered what others might think of him. It also seems that Mary’s words strike something within Jesus, for he responds quite strongly. Perhaps Jesus was upset at Mary for suggesting that he do something he is not yet comfortable doing. However, Mary doesn’t seem to be startled by Jesus’ response and asks the servants to listen to Jesus and do what he commands. One can read between the lines and sense Jesus experiencing an interior struggle.

It is in these spaces of interior struggle that the first step of discernment—to recognize— can be very helpful. Recognizing helps us to be mindful of what is going on around us and also, mindful of how we feel about these events. In this step, it may also be helpful to observe what the people around us are feeling and saying. For example, Jesus hears in Mary a desire to help others. At this stage, we simply observe what is happening both outside and inside of us. It is helpful to refrain or pause from judgment, as judgment distorts reality. For example, Mary helps Jesus refrain from judgment by giving him space and silence to process what he is experiencing. In the step of recognizing, it is most important to allow room for all emotions to emerge and to feel and listen to each of them gently.

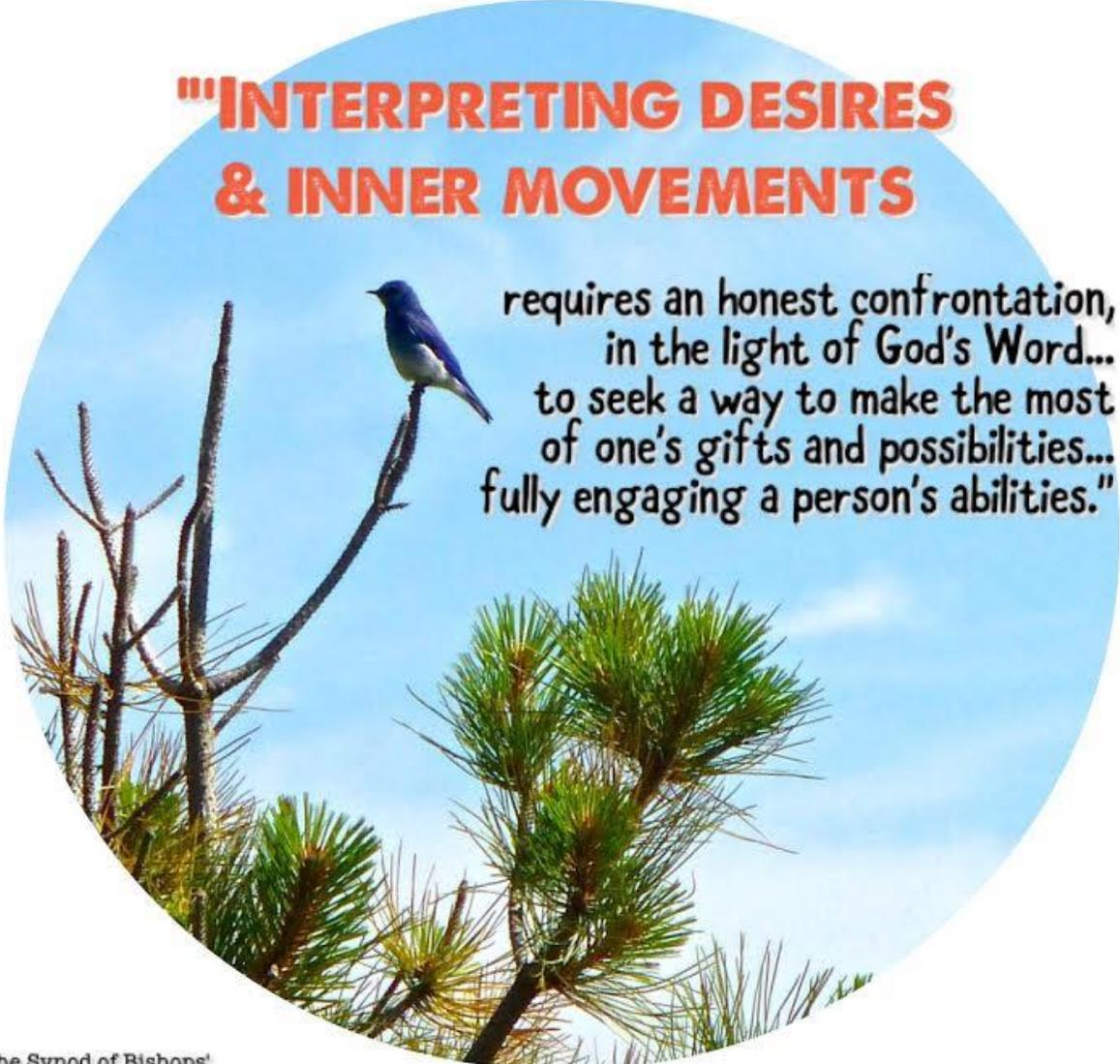
### *Questions for Reflection:*

- Recall a situation in your life when you had to make an important decision. It is helpful if this situation is one not currently facing you. What was happening around you? Consider events, people, and words you heard or read.
- What feelings surfaced for you in relationship to these? Did you experience an interior struggle like Jesus did? Did judgments surface for you?
- Looking back on this situation today, is there any new or different information you have about what happened?

-Week 18-

*Interpret: Understanding Where the Spirit is Calling Me*

## **"INTERPRETING DESIRES & INNER MOVEMENTS**



requires an honest confrontation,  
in the light of God's Word...  
to seek a way to make the most  
of one's gifts and possibilities...  
fully engaging a person's abilities."

The Synod of Bishops'  
"Young People, the Faith & Vocational Discernment"  
Preparatory Document

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## -Week 18-

### *Interpret: Understanding Where the Spirit is Calling Me*

Last week, we explored “Recognize: Becoming an Observer of Life’s Happenings,” which invited us to consider the verb “to recognize” in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 51 as a first step in an intentional discernment process. We were also invited to reflect on how Jesus practiced ‘recognizing’ the events and people around him at the wedding in Cana. Continuing into this eighteenth week we explore “Interpret: Understanding Where the Spirit is Calling Me.” Let us further explore John 2:1-12, the Wedding at Cana, and probe more deeply into to second discernment step, to interpret. When we image ourselves in Jesus’ situation, what are we able to interpret through his heart and mind?

After we have identified what is happening both inside and outside of us, the step of interpreting requires that we discover the meaning behind these happenings. Having recognized the reality of the situation (having been baptized and sent forth by God, a shortage of wine at the wedding and, his mother’s desire for him to do something about it) and the range of emotions (perhaps a combination of caution, fear, confusion, and frustration) that causes Jesus to struggle interiorly, Jesus beings to interpret what these all mean. In the step of interpreting, we seek to understand what the Spirit is asking us to do. This step requires both ability and patience in sorting through one’s desires and emotions, then understanding where they are coming from. It also requires openness and honesty in dialoguing with God to know if our desires are similar or different to His desires for us. In the case of Jesus, it is Mary who offers him a moment of pause and reflection when she says to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

If we image ourselves as Jesus or, with Jesus, as he thinks and prays about what the Spirit is asking him to do, we might see a variety of possibilities. Perhaps as Jesus sorts through his feelings of caution, fear, confusion, and frustration, he understands that feeling this way midst an important decision is quite normal. Perhaps through prayer, Jesus also understands that being afraid is ok and that God is with him in this fear. Perhaps through listening to Mary’s words, Jesus recognizes gentleness and encouragement to do what is right and good. Perhaps too, Jesus comes to understand that God has given him special gifts and abilities not to hide, but to share with others.

In our own lives, it is important that we have people and resources to help us through this step of interpreting, which is likely to take time and patience. Like Jesus, who has the help of his mother and also, perhaps, his disciples, it is helpful to invite others into this step of interpreting. We can recruit the help of a spiritual director, our faith community, and spiritual companions. A spiritual director helps us sort through and identify which interior voices are voices of the self and which are voices of the Spirit. A faith community offers us support, encouragement, and people to pray with through this process. Spiritual

companions walk with us, listen to us, and share in our struggles and learnings on this journey. Each is important in helping us interpret through different viewpoints and perspectives as we seek to know what the Spirit is asking us to do.

### *Questions for Reflection:*

- Recall back to that situation in your life when you had to make an important decision. Given the information you had about the situation and how you listened to the feelings that emerged, what helped you to interpret their meanings?
- Who were the persons and/or what were the resources that helped you sort through all of this? What was that process like for you?
- What did it seem like the Spirit was asking you to do? What did it seem like the Spirit was not asking you to do?

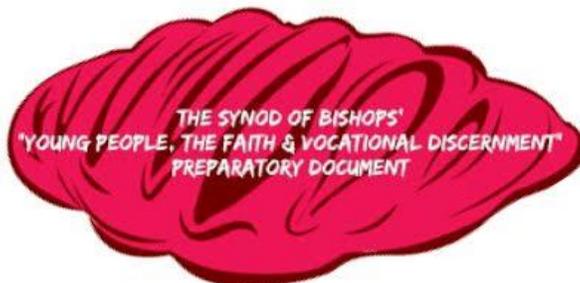
-Week 19-

## *Choose: Exercising My Authentic Human Freedom & Personal Responsibility*

"A choice cannot remain imprisoned in an interiority which is likely to remain virtual or unrealistic... but is called to be translated into action, to take flesh, to embark on a path, accepting the risk of a confrontation with the reality which caused the desires and emotions."



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## -Week 19-

# *Choose: Exercising My Authentic Human Freedom & Personal Responsibility*

Last week, we explored “Interpret: Understanding Where the Spirit is Calling Me,” which invited us to consider the verb “to interpret” in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 51 as a second step in an intentional discernment process. We were also invited to reflect on how Jesus practiced interpreting the happenings at the wedding in Cana and how the Spirit was calling him to respond to these events. Continuing into this nineteenth week we explore “Choose: Exercising My Authentic Human Freedom and Personal Responsibility.” Let us further explore John 2:1-12, the Wedding at Cana, and probe more deeply into the third and final discernment step, ‘to choose’. When we image ourselves as Jesus, what are we able to learn through his choice and actions? What implications do these have on our own lives?

In the third and final step of discernment, we are asked to make a choice. Jesus, having reflected on the possible sources of his feelings of cautiousness, fear, confusion, and frustration; also having listened and prayed for the Spirit’s guidance, now needs to make a choice. There are six stone water jars at the wedding. Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars to the brim, draw some out, and take it to the headwaiter. The headwaiter tastes the water, which has become wine, and comments that the new wine tastes even better than the wine they had previously served. Jesus made a concrete choice—to utilize the gifts God gave him in service of a need. He transformed the water into wine.

In making a choice that responds to both the needs of the community and the gifts God has uniquely given Him, Jesus exercises human freedom and personal responsibility. No one forced Jesus to transform the water into wine. It is something he chose freely, recognizing that He had a personal responsibility to share what God had gifted to Him. Like the concreteness of changing water into wine, the step of choosing requires concrete actions. If our choices simply sit in the quiet confines of our interiority, they are held captive by unrealistic chains and virtual ideas. Real choices require us to ‘go out’ on a pathway that responds to the reality of our lives. Jesus’ choice to transform the water into wine is significant because it is his first concrete response to his calling as baptized and sent forth by God to transform the world.

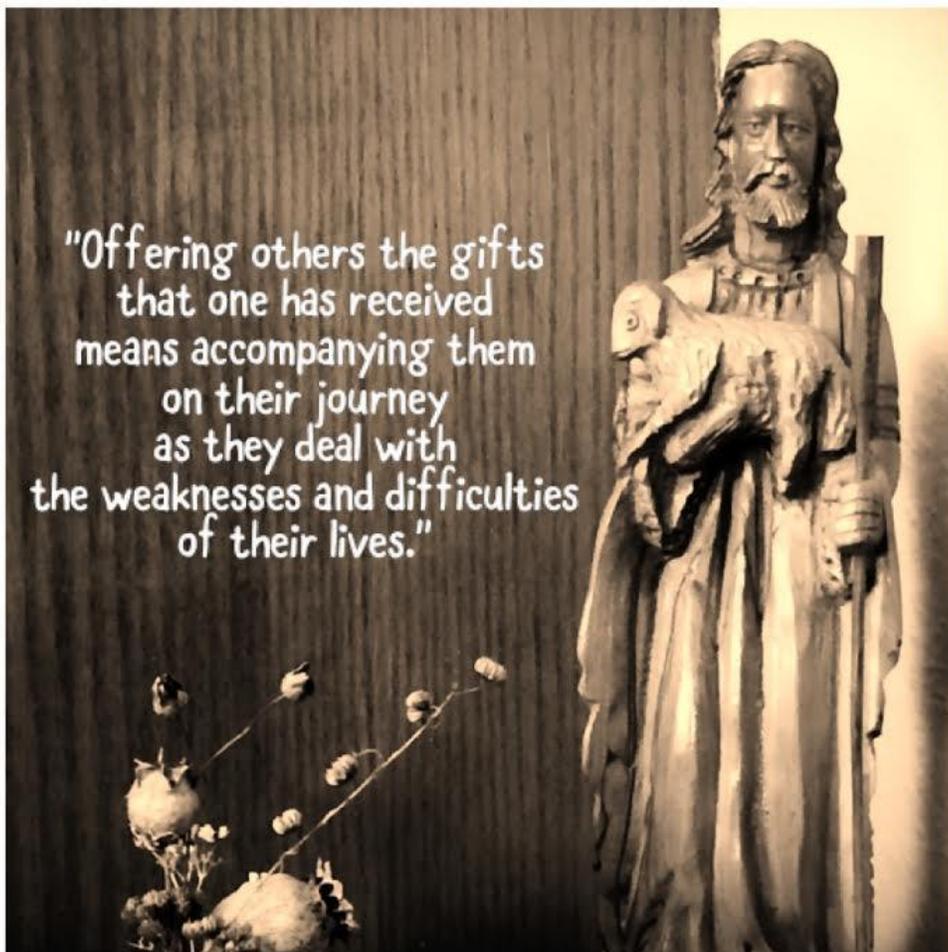
Jesus’ first miracle at the wedding in Cana suggests a variety of implications for our own lives. Jesus’ choice to share his gifts publicly, in spite of caution and fear, models for us how God works with us to transform our fears into courage. Mary’s gentle probing of Jesus’ gifts models for us the importance of recruiting the help and wisdom of others in our discernment process. The good quality of the new wine models how faith in God’s abundance results in a plan greater than we may have ever imagined.

## *Questions for Reflection:*

- Recall back to that situation in your life when you had to make an important decision. What did you choose to do? What were the effects/consequences of this decision both for you and others?
- Looking back on the decision you made, how was God a part (or not a part) of your choice? How did that choice lead you to where you are now?

-Week 20-

*Accompaniment: Walking in the Joy of a Collaborative Journey*



"Offering others the gifts  
that one has received  
means accompanying them  
on their journey  
as they deal with  
the weaknesses and difficulties  
of their lives."

THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS  
"YOUNG PEOPLE, THE FAITH & VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT"  
PREPARATORY DOCUMENTS

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## -Week 20-

### *Accompaniment: Walking in the Joy of a Collaborative Journey*

Last week, we explored “Choose: Exercising My Authentic Human Freedom & Personal Responsibility,” which invited us to consider the verb “to choose” in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 51 as a third and final step in an intentional discernment process. We were also invited to reflect on how Jesus responded to the happenings of the wedding in Cana by making a concrete choice, guided by the Spirit, to transform water into wine in his first public miracle. Continuing into this twentieth and final week of our Benedictine Volunteers 20-week Vocational Discernment Series inspired by the Synod of Bishops’ “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment” Preparatory Document, we conclude with “Accompaniment: Walking in the Joy of a Collaborative Journey.” In these past 19 weeks, we have accompanied each other on a collaborative journey. Our journey began with asking, “What is calling?” and moved through a variety of reflections on Jesus and how he listened and responded to calling in his own life. We also explored models and tools for practicing discernment in daily life. In this final week of the series, let us remember the ways we have walked together on this journey and recall the importance of friends, community, and guides along the way.

A journey of discernment is never walked alone. When we look at Jesus’ life, ministry, passion, death, and resurrection, we can see that he was accompanied by so many people along the way. The journey was a difficult one, but it was also enriched with joy and learning because of the faithful encounters Jesus had. Sprouting from the epicenter of Jesus’ journey are many other journeys—Mary’s journey as Jesus’ mother; Joseph’s journey as Jesus’ foster father; the disciples’ journey as Jesus’ companions; the sick, the blind, the foreigner, the forgotten, and the marginalized as they experienced Jesus’ gentle love and compassion. Each journey is different in its own unique expression. All journeys are one journey, leading towards God, guided by the Spirit, and modeled by Jesus.

As we come to know, understand, and respond to calling in our own lives, the hope is that we too can offer support, encouragement, and love to others along their journeys. The baptismal call is not just a call to begin new life, but a life-long, daily call to turn towards Christ in both our joys and our struggles. This one precious life is God’s gift to us to discover all the small and large, deep and wide, interior and exterior places His love is waiting for us as an encounter inviting our response.

## *Questions for Reflection:*

- Looking back on these past 19 weeks, what stands out for you? What were the highlights? The lowlights?
- What have you learned about an intentional process of discernment that is new to you? What implications may this have for your life?
- Having read and personally engaged with “Young People: The Faith & Vocational Discernment,” the Preparatory Document for the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, who could you see yourself sharing this preparatory document with? How might you be able to walk with others in their own journeying?

## ~Afterward~

The *Preparatory Document* says, “The purpose of vocational discernment is to find out how to transform them [our choices], in the light of faith, into steps towards the fullness of joy to which everyone is called.” We hope that these past 20 weeks have invited you into a personal journey of discernment to transform your life. We also hope that these 20 weeks have inspired you to want to share this series with someone in your life whom you feel might benefit from this. Perhaps this person may be a friend, a family member, a community member, a prayer group, or a faith-based organization to which you belong. Please help us share this collaborative wisdom with others! Looking back with gratitude on the gifts God has given us along the way, let us pray:

### *For Longing*

Blessed be the longing that brought you here  
And quickens your soul with wonder.  
May you have the courage to listen to the  
voice of desire  
That disturbs you when you have settled  
for something safe.  
May you have the wisdom to enter generously  
into your own unease  
To discover the new direction your longing  
wants you to take.  
May the forms of your belonging—in love,  
creativity and friendship  
Be equal to the grandeur and the call of your soul.  
May the one you long for long for you.  
May your dreams gradually reveal the destination  
of your desire.  
May a secret Providence guide your thought and nurture  
your feeling.  
May your mind inhabit your life with the sureness  
with which your body inhabits the world.  
May your heart never be haunted by ghost-structures  
of old damages.  
May you come to accept your longing as divine urgency.  
May you know the urgency with which God longs for you.

*~John O'Donohue*

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*Preparatory Document for the  
15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,  
13.01.2017*

## INTRODUCTION

“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (Jn 15:11). This is God’s plan for all men and women in every age, including all the young men and women of the Third Millennium, without exception.

Proclaiming the joy of the Gospel is the mission entrusted by the Lord to His Church. The Synod on the New Evangelization and the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* treated how to accomplish this mission in today’s world. The two synods on the family and the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* were, instead, dedicated to helping families find this joy.

In keeping with this mission and introducing a new approach through a Synod with the topic, “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment”, the Church has decided to examine herself on how she can lead young people to recognize and accept the call to the fullness of life and love, and to ask young people to help her in identifying the most effective ways to announce the Good News today. By listening to young people, the Church will once again hear the Lord speaking in today’s world. As in the days of Samuel (cf. 1 Sam 3:1-21) and Jeremiah (cf. Jer 1:4-10), young people know how to discern the signs of our times, indicated by the Spirit. Listening to their aspirations, the Church can glimpse the world which lies ahead and the paths the Church is called to follow.

For each person, the vocation to love takes concrete form in everyday life through a series of choices, which find expression in the states of life (marriage, ordained ministry, consecrated life, etc.), professions, forms of social and civil commitment, lifestyle, the management of time and money, etc. Whether these choices are wilfully made or simply accepted, either consciously or unconsciously, no one is excluded from making these choices. The purpose of vocational discernment is to find out how to transform them, in the light of faith, into steps towards the fullness of joy to which everyone is called.

The Church knows the basis of “the strength and beauty of young people, [namely] the ability to rejoice at the beginning of undertakings, to give oneself totally without going back, to pick oneself up and begin again in search of new conquests” (*Message of Vatican II to*

*Young People*, 8 December 1965). The riches of the Church's spiritual tradition provide many resources in guiding the formation of conscience and an authentic freedom.

With this in mind, the present *Preparatory Document* begins the Synod's phase of consultation of the entire People of God. This document — addressed to the synods and councils of patriarchs of the Eastern Catholic Churches *sui iuris*, the Episcopal Conferences, the dicasteries of the Roman Curia and the Union of Superiors General — concludes with a series of questions. The consultation will also include all young people through a website with questions on their expectations and their lives. The answers to both series of questions will be the basis for drafting the “work-document” or *Instrumentum laboris*, which will be the reference point in the discussion of the synod fathers.

This *Preparatory Document* suggests a reflection in three steps, beginning with summarily outlining some of the social and cultural dynamics of the world in which young people grow and make their decisions and proposing that these be read in the light of faith. The document then retraces the fundamental steps of the process of discernment, which the Church feels is the basic means she can offer young people so they can discover, in the light of faith, their vocation. Finally, the document treats key points in a pastoral vocational programme for youth. The document, therefore, is not exhaustive, but serves as a kind of guide to encourage further discussion, whose fruits will be available only at the conclusion of the Synod.

## **IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BELOVED DISCIPLE**

The Gospel-image of John the Apostle can serve as an inspiration at the beginning of this process. In the traditional reading of the Fourth Gospel, he is both an example of a young person who chooses to follow Jesus and “the disciple Jesus loved” (*Jn* 13:23; 19:26; 21:7).

“...and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?” And they said to Him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon, and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, “So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter) (*Jn* 1:36-39).”

In the search for meaning in their lives, the two disciples of John the Baptist hear Jesus make the penetrating question: “What do you seek?” To their reply, “Rabbi (which means Teacher), where do you live?”, the Lord responds with an invitation: “Come and see” (*Jn* 1:38-39). At the same time, Jesus calls them to embark on an inner journey and to be prepared to move forward in a practical way, without really knowing where this will lead

them. It will be a memorable encounter, so much so that they even remember the exact time of day (cf. *Jn 1:39*).

As a result of their courage to go and see, the disciples will experience the abiding friendship of Christ and will be able to pass each day with Him. They will ponder His words and be inspired by them; and will be deeply affected and moved by His actions. John, in particular, will be called to be a witness of the Passion and Resurrection of his Master. At the Last Supper (cf. *Jn 13:21 to 29*), the intimate nature of their relationship will lead him to rest his head on Jesus' chest and to trust His every word. In following Simon Peter to the house of the high priest, John will face the night of suffering and loneliness (cf. *Jn 18:13-27*). At the foot of the Cross, he will endure the profound grief of his Mother, entrusted to him, while accepting the responsibility of taking care of her (cf. *Jn 19:25-27*). On Easter morning, he will share with Peter the frenzied yet hope-filled race towards the empty tomb (cf. *Jn 20:1-10*). Finally, during the miraculous draught of fish at the Sea of Galilee (cf. *Jn 21:1-14*), he will recognize the Risen Lord and will give testimony to the entire community. John's example can be of assistance in understanding that the vocational experience is a gradual process of inner discernment and growth in the faith, which leads to discovering the fullness of the joy of life and love, making a gift of oneself and participating in the proclamation of the Good News.

I.

## **YOUNG PEOPLE IN TODAY'S WORLD**

This chapter is not a comprehensive analysis of society or the young people's world, but the results of research in the social sphere which is useful in addressing the issue of vocational discernment, so that [by] "letting them touch us deeply [they can] provide a concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual journey" (*Laudato si*, 15).

On the global level, approaching the subject will require adaptation to the specific circumstances of each region. Judging from global trends, the differences among the various areas of the planet are important. In many ways, it is fair to say that there is a multiplicity of worlds, when speaking of young people, not a single one. Among these, some are particularly noteworthy. The first results from demographics which divides countries with high birth-rates, where young people make up a significant and growing proportion of the population, from those countries where the population is diminishing. A second difference is based on history which separates countries and continents of ancient Christian tradition and culture — which should not be lost — from countries and continents whose culture is marked, instead, by other religious traditions in which Christianity is in the minority and oftentimes only recently present. Finally, not to be forgotten are the differences arising according to gender, masculine and feminine. On the one hand, gender determines different perceptions of reality, on the other, gender is the basis of various forms of domination, exclusion and discrimination, which all societies need to overcome.

In the following pages, 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.

## 1. A Rapidly-Changing World

A rapid process of change and transformation is the main characteristic of contemporary societies and cultures (cf. *Laudato si*, 18). The highly complex nature and pace of this process is creating a situation of fluidity and uncertainty never before experienced. Without judging *a priori* whether this state of affairs is a problem or an opportunity, the situation demands complete attention and an ability for long-term planning, while bearing in mind its endurance and the consequences of today’s choices for the future.

The growth of uncertainty results in a state of vulnerability, that is, a combination of social unease and economic difficulties as well as insecurity in the lives of a large part of the population. With regards to work, this situation brings to mind unemployment, an increase in flexibility in the labour market and exploitation, especially of minors, or the overall series of civil, economic and social causes, including those of the environment, which explain the overwhelming increase in the number of refugees and migrants. Compared to a privileged few, who can take advantage of the opportunities offered by the processes of economic globalization, many people live in a precarious and insecure situation, which has an impact on the course and choices taken in life.

Globally, the contemporary world is marked by a culture based on “science”, oftentimes dominated by technology and the endless possibilities science promises, within which “sadness and loneliness appear to be on the rise, not least among young people” (*Misericordia et misera*, 3). As taught in the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si*, the intertwining of a technocratic standard and a frantic search for short-term profits is the basis of the “throw-away” culture which excludes millions of people, including many young people, and leads to the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources and environmental degradation, threatening the future of upcoming generations (cf. 20-22).

It should not be overlooked that many societies are increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious. In particular, the presence of different religious traditions is a challenge and an opportunity. The situation can lead to uncertainty and the temptation of relativism, but, at the same time, can provide for increased possibilities for fruitful dialogue and mutual enrichment. From the vantage point of faith, the situation is seen as a sign of our times, requiring greater listening, respect and dialogue.

## 2. New Generations

Today’s generation of young people live in a world which is different from that of their parents and educators. Economic and social changes have affected the gamut of obligations

and opportunities. Young people's aspirations, needs, feelings and manner of relating to others have changed as well. Furthermore, from a certain point of view, young people, because of globalization, tend to be more homogeneous in all parts of the world. Nevertheless, they remain in their local surroundings and their unique cultural and institutional settings, which have repercussions in the process of socializing and forming a personal identity.

The challenge of multi-culturalism is present in a special way in the world of young people; for example, with the special features of "second generations" (that is, those young people who grow up in a society and a culture different from those of their parents, as a result of migration) or, in a certain sense, the children of "mixed" parents (from the vantage point of ethnicity, culture and / or religion).

In many parts of the world, young people are experiencing particular hardships which pose difficulties for them in making real choices in life, because they have not even the minimal possibility to exercise freedom. This situation includes young people experiencing poverty and exclusion; those who grow up without parents or family, or are unable to go to school; children and young boys and girls who live on the street in many suburbs; the young who are unemployed, displaced persons and migrants; those who are victims of exploitation, trafficking and slavery; children and young people forcefully recruited in criminal gangs or as guerrilla fighters; and child brides or girls forced to marry against their will. Too many in the world pass directly from childhood to adulthood and a burden of responsibility they were unable to choose. Oftentimes female children, little girls and young women face even greater difficulties than their peers.

Studies conducted at the international level can help identify some characteristic features of young people in our times.

### *Belonging and Participation*

Young people do not see themselves as a disadvantaged class or a social group to be protected or, consequently, as passive recipients of pastoral programmes or policies. Many wish to be an active part in the process of change taking place at this present time, as confirmed by the experiences of involvement and innovation at the grass-root level, which see young people as major, leading characters together with other people.

Young people, on the one hand, show a willingness and readiness to participate and commit themselves to concrete activities in which the personal contribution of each might be an occasion for recognizing one's identity. On the other hand, they show an intolerance in places where they feel, rightly or wrongly, that they lack opportunities to participate or receive encouragement. This can lead to resignation or fatigue in their will to desire, to dream and to plan, as seen in the diffusion of the phenomenon of NEET ("not in education, employment or training", namely, young people are not engaged in an activity of study or work or vocational training). The discrepancy between young people who are passive and

discouraged and those enterprising and energetic comes from the concrete opportunities offered to each one in society and the family in which one develops, in addition to the experiences of a sense of meaning, relationships and values which are formed even before the onset of youth. Besides passivity, a lack of confidence in themselves and their abilities can manifest itself in an excessive concern for their self-image and in a submissive conformity to passing fads.

### *Personal and Institutional Points of Reference*

Various research studies show that young people have a need for persons of reference, who are close-by, credible, consistent and honest, in addition to places and occasions for testing their ability to relate to others (both adults and peers) and dealing with their feelings and emotions. Young people look for persons of reference who are able to express empathy and offer them support, encouragement and help in recognizing their limits, but without making them feel they are being judged.

From this vantage point, the role of parents and families is crucial yet sometimes problematic. The older generations often tend to underestimate young people's potential. They emphasize their weaknesses and have trouble understanding the needs of those who are very young. Parents and adult educators can also be aware of their own mistakes and know what they would not want young people to do. However, oftentimes they do not have a clear idea of how to help young people focus on the future. In this regard, the two most common reactions are preferring not to say anything and imposing their own choices. Absent or overprotective parents make their children more unprepared to face life and tend to underestimate the risks involved or are obsessed by a fear of making mistakes.

Young people, however, are not seeking reference persons among adults only; they have a strong desire for reference persons among their peers. Consequently, they need opportunities for free interaction with them, to be able to express their feelings and emotions, to learn in an informal manner and to experiment with roles and abilities without stress and anxiety.

Young people, cautious by nature of those who are outside their circle of personal relationships, oftentimes nourish mistrust, indifference or anger towards institutions. This is not just about society but increasingly affects educational institutions and the Church as an institution. They would like the Church to be closer to people and more attentive to social issues, but realize that this will not happen immediately.

All this takes place in a context where sectarian membership and religious practice more and more characterize young people. Though young people are not in open "opposition", they learn to live "without" the God presented by the Gospel and "without" the Church and to rely on alternative and minimally-institutionalized forms of religion and spirituality or to take refuge in sects or religious experiences with a strong affiliation. In many places, the presence of the Church is becoming less widespread and, consequently, more difficult to

encounter, while the dominant culture is the bearer of needs oftentimes at odds with Gospel values, whether it be elements of their tradition or the local reality of globalization, which is characterized by consumerism and an overemphasis on the individual.

### *Towards a Hyper-Connected Generation*

Today, the younger generation is characterized by its relationship with the modern technologies of communication and what is normally called the “virtual world”, which has very real effects. This “virtual world” provides potential access to a range of opportunities which previous generations did not enjoy, but not without its risks. Nevertheless, it is very important to focus on how the experience of technologically mediated relations might structure the conception of the world, reality and interpersonal relationships. On this basis, the Church is called upon to evaluate her pastoral activity, which needs to develop an appropriate culture.

### **3. Young People and Choices**

Within the fluidity and insecurity previously outlined, the transition to adult life and the building of a personal identity increasingly require a “reflective course of action.” People are forced to reorient their life’s journeys and continually take possession of their choices. Moreover, together with the spread of western culture, a conception of freedom as the possibility of having access to ever-new opportunities is emerging. Young people refuse to continue on a personal journey of life, if it means giving up taking different paths in the future: “Today I choose this, tomorrow we’ll see.” In affective relationships as in the world of work, the horizon consists of options which can always be reversed rather than definitive choices.

In this context, the old approaches no longer work and the experience passed on by previous generations quickly becomes obsolete. Valuable opportunities and enticing risks are intertwined in an entanglement which is not easily extricable, thus requiring suitable cultural, social and spiritual means, so that the process of decision-making does not stall and end up, perhaps for fear of making mistakes, undergoing change rather than guiding it. To use Pope Francis words: “How can we reawaken the greatness and the courage of comprehensive choices, of the impulses of the heart in order to face academic and emotional challenges?”. The phrase I use very often is: take a risk! Take a risk. Whoever does not risk does not walk. ‘But what if I make a mistake?’. Blessed be the Lord! You will make more mistakes if you remain still” (*Discourse at Villa Nazareth, 18 June 2016*).

The search for ways to reawaken courage and the impulses of the heart must necessarily take into account that the person of Jesus and the Good News proclaimed by Him continue to fascinate many young people.

Young people’s ability to choose is hampered by difficulties related to precarious conditions, namely, their struggle to find work or the dramatic absence of opportunities to work;

obstacles in their achieving economic independence; and their inability to continue in one career. Generally speaking, these obstacles are even more difficult for young women to overcome.

The economic and social hardship of families, the way in which young people adopt certain characteristics of contemporary culture and the impact of new technologies require a major capacity in responding, in its broadest sense, to the challenge in educating the young. This is the educational emergency highlighted by Pope Benedict XVI in his *Letter to the City and the Diocese of Rome on the Urgency of Educating Young People* (21 January 2008). On the global level, inequalities between countries need to be taken into account as well as their effect on the opportunities offered to young people in fostering inclusion in different societies. Furthermore, cultural and religious factors can lead to exclusion by, for example, gender inequality or discrimination against ethnic or religious minorities, which drive the most enterprising among the young to revert to emigration.

This situation makes particularly urgent the promotion of personal skills by putting them at the service of a solid plan for common growth. Young people appreciate the choice of working together in real projects which measure their ability to get results, of exercising leadership directed to improving the environment in which they live and of seeking opportunities to acquire and refine, in a practical way, useful skills for life and work.

Social innovation expresses a positive involvement which turns upside-down the condition of new generations, transforming losers seeking protection from the risks of change to agents of change who create new opportunities. It is significant that young people — often withdrawn into a stereotype of passivity and inexperience — propose and practise alternatives which show how the world or the Church could be. If society or the Christian community want to make something new happen again, they have to leave room for new people to take action. In other words, devising change according to the principles of sustainability requires enabling new generations to experience a new model of development. This is particularly problematic in those countries and institutions where the age of those who occupy positions of responsibility is high and slows down the pace of generational change.

## II.

### **FAITH, DISCERNMENT, VOCATION**

Through every phase of this Synod, the Church wants again to state her desire to encounter, accompany and care for every young person, without exception. The Church cannot, nor does she wish to, abandon them to the isolation and exclusion to which the world exposes them. That young people's lives might be a good experience; that they do not lose themselves in violence or death; and that disappointment does not imprison and alienate them, all of this has to be of great concern to one who has received life, been baptized in the faith and is aware that these are great gifts.

Because of these gifts, being born opens a person to the promise of a full life and being accepted and cared for is the basic experience which places in the heart of each person not only the confidence of not being abandoned to a lack of a sense of meaning or to the darkness of death but the hope of being able to express one's individuality in a journey towards the fullness of life.

The wisdom of the Eastern Church is helpful in seeing how this confidence might be based in an analogy of "three births": natural birth, that is, one is born female and male in a world which can accommodate and support life; birth in baptism "when someone becomes a child of God through grace"; and then a third birth, that is, the passage "from bodily life in this world to the spiritual life in the next", which opens a person to the full exercise of freedom (cf. *Discourse of Philoxenus of Mabbug*, a fifth century Syrian bishop, 9).

Offering others the gifts that one has received means accompanying them and walking beside them on this journey as they deal with the weaknesses and difficulties in their lives, and especially supporting them in the exercise of freedom which is still being formed. Consequently, the Church, beginning with her Pastors, is called to make a self-examination and to rediscover her vocation of caring for others in the manner recommended by Pope Francis at the beginning of his pontificate: "...caring [and] protecting demand goodness; [they] call for a certain tenderness. In the Gospels, Saint Joseph appears as a strong and courageous man, a working man, yet in his heart we see great tenderness, which is not the virtue of the weak but rather a sign of strength of spirit and a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love." (*Homily at the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome*, 19 March 2013).

From this perspective, some ideas will now be presented regarding accompanying young people, beginning with the faith and listening to the tradition of the Church, with the clear objective of supporting them in their vocational discernment and their making fundamental choices in life, starting from an awareness that some of these choices are permanent.

## **1. Faith and Vocation**

Faith is seeing things as Jesus does (cf. *Lumen fidei*, 18). Faith is the source of vocational discernment, because faith provides vocational discernment with its fundamental contents, specific development, personal style and pedagogy. Joyously and willingly accepting this gift of grace requires making it fruitful through concrete and consistent choices in life.

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, He may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another" (*Jn 15:16-17*). If the vocation to the joy of love is the fundamental call that God has placed in the heart of every young person so that each one's existence will bear fruit, faith is both a gift from on high and a response to feeling oneself chosen and loved.

Faith “is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God’s faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness” (*Lumen fidei*, 53). This faith “becomes a light capable of illumining all our relationships in society”, contributing to building “a universal brotherhood” among the men and women of our time (*ibid.*, 54).

The Bible has numerous accounts of young people receiving a vocational call and their making a response. In the light of faith, they gradually become aware of the God’s plan of profound love for each person. This is God’s intention in every one of His actions, from the time of creating the world as a place that is “good”, a place capable of accepting life and a place offered as a gift in a network of relations to be trusted.

To believe is to listen to the Spirit and, with all one’s powers of mind and emotion, to dialogue with the Word, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (cf. *Jn 14:6*) and to learn to trust in the Word, “embodying It” in the concrete instances of everyday life, in moments when the cross is encountered and when one experiences the joy in seeing the signs of resurrection, just as the “beloved disciple” did. This challenge must be faced by each Christian community and the individual believer.

The place for this dialogue is the conscience. As taught by the Second Vatican Council, conscience “is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths” (*Gaudium et spes*, 16). Conscience is therefore an inviolable place where a promising invitation is present. To discern the voice of the Spirit from other calls and decide how to respond is the task of each person. Others may accompany and affirm a person, but they can never take another person’s place in this regard.

Life and history teach that human beings cannot easily recognize the concrete form of that joy to which God calls each one and to which each one aspires, let alone at the present time of change and widespread uncertainty. At other times, persons have to deal with discouragement or the pressure of other emotional attachments that stalls a person on the path to the fulfilment. Many people experience this; for example, the young man who had too many riches which kept him from accepting the call of Jesus, and because of this, went away sad, rather than full of joy (cf. *Mk 10:17-22*). Human freedom, despite the fact that it always needs to be purified and perfected, never loses the fundamental capacity to recognize the good and carrying it out. “Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning” (*Laudato si’*, 205).

## **2. The Gift of Discernment**

Making decisions and guiding one’s actions in situations of uncertainty and in the face of conflicting inner forces is the place for exercising discernment, a classic term in the tradition

of the Church which applies to a variety of situations. Indeed, one form of discernment is exercised in reading the signs of the times which leads to recognizing the presence and action of the Spirit in history. Moral discernment, instead, distinguishes what is good from what is bad. Still another form, spiritual discernment, aims to recognize temptation so as to reject it and proceed on the path to fullness of life. The connection of the various meanings of these forms is evident, a connection which can never be completely separated one from the other.

With this in mind, the focus in the case of the synod is on vocational discernment, that is, the process by which a person makes fundamental choices, in dialogue with the Lord and listening to the voice of the Spirit, starting with the choice of one's state in life. The question of how a person is not to waste the opportunities for self-realization is part and parcel of every man and woman. For the believer, the question becomes even more intense and profound, namely, how does a person live the good news of the Gospel and respond to the call which the Lord addresses to all those He encounters, whether through marriage, the ordained ministry or the consecrated life? Where can a person's talents be put to good use: a professional life, volunteer work, service to the needy or involvement in civil and political life?

The Spirit speaks and acts through the happenings in the life of each person, which in themselves are inexplicit or ambiguous, insofar as they are open to different interpretations. Discernment is required to reveal their meaning and to make a decision. The three verbs in *Evangelii Gaudium*, 51, used to describe discernment, namely, "to recognize," "to interpret" and "to choose", can be of assistance in mapping out a suitable itinerary for individuals or groups and communities, fully aware that, in practice, the boundaries in the different phases are never clearly delineated.

### *Recognizing*

Above all, "recognizing" concerns how life's happenings, the people one meets, and the words one hears or reads affect the interior life, namely, the various "desires, feelings and emotions" (*Amoris laetitia*, 143) and their diverse expressions: sadness, gloom, fulfilment, fear, joy, peace, a feeling of emptiness, tenderness, anger, hope, apathy, etc. A person feels attracted or pushed in a variety of directions, without enough clarity to take action, a time of ups and downs and, in some cases, a real internal struggle. "Recognizing" requires making this emotional richness emerge and ascertaining these feelings without making a judgment. It also requires capturing the "flavour" that remains, that is, the consonance or dissonance between what is experienced and what is in the depths of the heart.

At this stage the Word of God is of great importance. Meditating on it, in fact, mobilizes the passions as in all experiences which touch one's inner self, but, at the same time, offers the possibility of making them emerge and identifying with them in the events it narrates. The stage of "recognizing" focuses on the ability to listen and on one's feelings and emotions, without avoiding the arduous effort of silence, a critical step in personal growth, particularly for young people who are experiencing with greater pressure the intensity of various desires

and cannot remain frightened by them, and thereby, renouncing even the great advances to which they are drawn.

### *Interpreting*

“Recognizing” what has been tried is not enough. The next step is “interpreting”, in other words, to understand what the Spirit is calling the person to do through what the Spirit stirs up in each one. Oftentimes, a person stops to recount an experience, noting that the experience made a “deep impression.” Greater difficulty is encountered in understanding the origin and meaning of the desires and emotions one experiences and verifying whether they lead in a constructive direction or whether they lead to withdrawing into oneself.

This interpretative stage is very sensitive, requiring patience, vigilance and even a certain knowledge. A person needs to be capable of taking into consideration the effects of social and psychological conditioning, which even requires the involvement of one’s intellectual faculties, without falling into the trap of constructing abstract theories about what would be good or nice to do. Even in discernment, “realities are greater than ideas” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 231). Likewise, “interpreting” cannot fail to confront reality and to consider the possibilities that realistically are available.

“Interpreting” desires and inner movements requires an honest confrontation, in light of God’s Word, with the moral demands of the Christian life, always seeking to apply them in the concrete situation that is being experienced. This effort leads the one who does it, not to settle for the legalistic logic of the bare minimum, but instead to seek a way to make the most of one’s gifts and possibilities, which results in an attractive and inspiring message for young people.

The work of interpretation is carried out in an internal dialogue with the Lord, fully engaging a person’s abilities. The assistance of an experienced person in listening to the Spirit, however, is a valuable support that the Church offers, a support which would be unwise to disregard.

### *Choosing*

Once all the desires and emotions are recognized and interpreted, the next step in making a decision is an exercise of authentic human freedom and personal responsibility, which, of course, is always connected to a concrete situation and therefore limited. The choice is subjected, then, to the blind force of impulse, to which a certain contemporary relativism ends up by assigning as ultimate criterion, norms imprisoning a person in continual change. At the same time, a person is freed from subjection to forces outside oneself, namely heteronomy. All of this requires coherency with one’s life.

For a long time throughout history, basic decisions in life have not been made by the individuals concerned, a situation which still endures in some parts of the world, as

previously mentioned in the first chapter. Promoting truly free and responsible choices, fully removed from practices of the past, remains the goal of every serious pastoral vocational programme. Discernment is the main tool which permits safeguarding the inviolable place of conscience, without pretending to replace it (cf. *Amoris laetitia*, 37).

A decision needs to be proven by facts to see whether it is a right decision. A choice cannot remain imprisoned in an interiority which is likely to remain virtual or unrealistic — a real danger accentuated in contemporary culture — but is called to be translated into action, to take flesh, to embark on a path, accepting the risk of a confrontation with the reality which caused the desires and emotions. Other desires and emotions will arise in this stage; “recognizing” and “interpreting” them will allow the possibility of seeing whether the decision is good or whether it is advisable to re-evaluate it. Consequently, “going out” is important, even with the fear of making a mistake, which, as previously seen, can be crippling.

### **3. Paths Towards Vocation and Mission**

Vocational discernment is not accomplished in a single act, even if, in recounting the development of a vocation, identifying specific moments or decisive encounters is possible. As for all important things in life, vocational discernment is a long process unfolding over time, during which one continues to monitor the signs used by the Lord to indicate and specify a vocation that is very personal and unique. The Lord asked Abraham and Sarah to leave their country, but only in a gradual process — not without mistaken steps — which clarified what was initially a mysterious “land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Mary herself makes progress in the awareness of her vocation through meditating on the words she hears and the events which took place, even those she did not understand (cf. *Lk* 2:50-51).

Time is fundamental in verifying the effectiveness of a decision made. As taught in every page of the Bible, every vocation is directed towards a mission undertaken with reluctance or enthusiasm.

Accepting the mission implies the willingness to risk one’s life and to travel the way of the cross, in the footsteps of Jesus, Who firmly set out on his journey to Jerusalem (cf. *Lk* 9:51) to offer His life for humanity. Only by giving up being selfishly occupied with one’s needs does a person become open to accommodate God’s plan in family life, the ordained ministry or consecrated life and seriously to carry out one’s profession as well as sincerely to seek the common good. Particularly in places where the culture is more deeply marked by individualism, choices need to be examined to see whether the pursuit of self-fulfilment might be the result of narcissism or instead includes a willingness to live one’s life logically in compliance with the generosity of the gift of self. Consequently, contact with poverty, vulnerability and need are of great importance on the road to vocational discernment. Above all, members of the formation staff in seminaries should confirm and foster in seminarians a willingness to become imbued with the “smell of the sheep.”

#### 4. Accompaniment

Three basic beliefs underlie the process of discernment, beliefs which are ingrained in every human being's experience understood in the light of the faith and Christian tradition. The first is that the Spirit of God works in the heart of every man and woman through feelings and desires that are bound to ideas, images and plans. Listening carefully, the human being has the possibility to interpret these signals. The second belief is that the human heart, because of its weakness and sin, is normally divided because it is attracted to different and even contrary feelings. The third belief is that every way of life imposes a choice, because a person cannot remain indefinitely in an undetermined state. A person needs to adopt the instruments needed to recognize the Lord's call to the joy of love and choose to respond to it.

Among these instruments, the Church's spiritual tradition emphasizes the importance of personal accompaniment. In accompanying another person, the study of the teachings on discernment is not enough; one needs the hard, personal experience of interpreting the movements of the heart to recognize the action of the Spirit, Whose voice can speak to the uniqueness of each individual. Personal accompaniment demands the constant refinement of one's sensitivity to the voice of the Spirit and leads to discovering a resource and richness in a person's individual character.

It is a question of fostering a person's relationship with God and helping to remove what might hinder it. Herein lies the difference between accompaniment in discerning and psychological support, which, when open to transcendence, oftentimes has a basic importance. The psychologist supports those in difficulties and helps them become aware of their weaknesses and potential. Spiritual guidance re-orientates a person towards the Lord and prepares the ground for an encounter with him (cf. *Jn 3:29-30*).

Jesus' encounter with the people of His time, as recorded in the Gospels, highlight certain elements which are part of the ideal profile of the person accompanying a young person in vocational discernment, namely, a loving look (the calling of the first disciples, cf. *Jn 1:35-51*); an authoritative word (teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, cf. *Lk 4:32*); an ability to "become the neighbour" (the parable of the Good Samaritan, cf. *Lk 10:25-37*); a choice to "walk beside" (the disciples of Emmaus, cf. *Lk 24:13-35*); and an authentic witness, fearlessly going against preconceived ideas (the washing of the feet at the Last Supper, cf. *Jn 13:1-20*).

In the task of accompanying the younger generation, the Church accepts her call to collaborate in the joy of young people rather than be tempted to take control of their faith (cf. *2 Cor 1:24*). Such service is ultimately founded in prayer and in asking for the gift of the Spirit, Who guides and enlightens each and every one.

### III.

#### PASTORAL ACTIVITY

How does the Church help young people accept their call to the joy of the Gospel, especially in these times of uncertainty, volatility and insecurity?

The purpose of this chapter is to focus on how earnestly to respond to the challenge of pastoral care and vocational discernment, taking into consideration those involved in this task, the places where this guidance takes place and the resources which are available. In this sense, the pastoral and vocational care of young people, though overlapping, have distinct differences. The following overview is not intended to treat the subject fully, but to provide indications which are to be elaborated further, based on the experience of each local Church.

#### 1. Walking with Young People

Accompanying young people requires going beyond a preconceived framework, encountering young people where they are, adapting to their times and pace of life and taking them seriously. This is to be done as young people seek to make sense of the reality in which they live and to utilize the message which they have received in words and deeds in their daily attempts to create a personal history and in the more-or-less conscious search for meaning in their lives.

Every Sunday, Christians keep alive the memory of the crucified and risen Lord in their encounter with Him in the celebration of the Eucharist. Many children are baptized in the faith of the Church and are engaged in the journey of Christian initiation. Nonetheless, this is not the same as making a mature choice for a life of faith. Arriving at this point requires a journey which sometimes includes unpredictable paths and uncustomary places which are far removed from ecclesial communities. In this regard, Pope Francis said: “Vocational pastoral ministry is learning the style of Jesus, who passes through the places of daily life, stops without being hurried and, by looking at our brothers with mercy, leads them to encounter God the Father (*Address to Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocations*, 21 October 2016). Walking with young people builds up the entire Christian community.

Precisely because the proposed message involves the freedom of young people, every community needs to give importance to creative ways of addressing young people in a personal way and supporting personal development. In many cases, the task involves learning to allow for something new and not stifling what is new by attempting to apply a preconceived framework. No seed for vocations can be fruitful if approached with a closed and “complacent pastoral attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way’” and without people being “bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 33). Three

verbs from the Gospel, which describe the way Jesus encountered the people of his time, can be of assistance in adopting this pastoral style: “going out”, “ seeing” and “calling.”

### *Going Out*

Pastoral vocational care, in this sense, means to accept the invitation of Pope Francis: “going out”, primarily, by abandoning the rigid attitudes which make the proclamation of the joy of the Gospel less credible; “going out”, leaving behind a framework which makes people feel hemmed-in; and “going out”, by giving up a way of acting as Church which at times is out-dated. “Going out” is also a sign of inner freedom from routine activities and concerns, so that young people can be leading characters in their own lives. The young will find the Church more attractive, when they see that their unique contribution is welcomed by the Christian community.

### *Seeing*

To “go out” into the world of young people requires a willingness to spend time with them, to listen to the story of their lives and to be attentive to their joys, hopes, sadness and anxieties; all in an effort to share them. This leads to the inculturation of the Gospel and for the Gospel to enter every culture, even among young people. In the accounts of Jesus’ encounters with the men and women of his time, the Gospel precisely highlights his ability to spend time with them and his appeal to those with whom he exchanged glances. The same is the case with every true shepherd of souls, who is able to peer into the depths of the heart without being intrusive or threatening. This is the true look of discernment, which does not want to take possession of another’s conscience nor pre-determine the path of God’s grace, but begins by setting aside one’s own mental framework.

### *Calling*

In the Gospel accounts, Jesus’ look of love is transformed into a word, that is, a call to newness of life which is to be accepted, explored and built up. Above all, calling means awakening a desire and jarring people from what blocks them or from the complacency which slows them down. Calling means asking questions which have no ready-made answers. In this way, and not by passively respecting norms, people are impelled to embark on a journey and to encounter the joy of the Gospel.

## **2. Agents**

### *All Young People, Without Exception*

In pastoral activity, young people are not objects but agents. Oftentimes, society sees them as non-essential or inconvenient. The Church cannot reflect such an attitude, because all young people, without exception, have the right to be guided in life’s journey.

Consequently, each community is called to be attentive to young people, especially those who are experiencing poverty, marginalization or exclusion and lead them to become involved in life. Being close to young people, who are living amidst great poverty and hardship, violence, war, disease, disability and suffering, is a special gift of the Spirit, which can truly manifest a proper manner of acting by a Church which is “going out”. The Church herself is called to learn from young people. Many saints among youth give shining testimony to this fact and continue to be an inspiration for everyone.

### *A Responsible Community*

The entire Christian community should feel the responsibility of educating new generations. In fact, many Christians involved in this work deserve recognition, beginning with those who have assumed this responsibility within ecclesial life. The efforts of those who bear testimony everyday to the goodness of the Gospel life and the joy that flows from it should equally be admired. Finally, the Church needs to give major importance to young people’s involvement in the structures of participation in diocesan and parish communities, starting with pastoral councils, inviting young people to make their creative contribution and accepting their ideas, even when they appear challenging.

Everywhere in the world, parishes, religious congregations, associations, movements and ecclesial realities exist which can devise and offer young people significant experiences of growth and discernment. Sometimes, the aspect of planning shows signs of unpreparedness and a lack of skill, a situation which needs to be avoided by more earnestly undertaking the task of thinking, realizing, coordinating and implementing the pastoral programme for young people in a correct, consistent and effective manner. Such a task will also require a specific and continual preparation of those responsible for formation.

### *People of Reference*

The role of credible adults and their cooperation is basic in the course of human development and vocational discernment. This requires authoritative believers, with a clear human identity, a strong sense of belonging to the Church, a visible spiritual character, a strong passion for education and a great capacity for discernment. Sometimes, however, unprepared and immature adults tend to act in a possessive and manipulative manner, creating negative dependencies, severe disadvantage and serious counter-witness, which can even intensify to the level of abuse.

Having credible people of reference requires training and supporting them and even providing them with major pedagogical skills. In a particular way, this applies to those who have the task of accompanying persons in their vocational discernment to accept a call to the ordained ministry and the consecrated life.

*Parents and Family:* the irreplaceable educational role played by parents and other family members needs to be acknowledged in every Christian community. In the first place, parents

in families express each day God's care for every human being through a love which binds them to each other and to their children. In this regard, Pope Francis has offered valuable information in a specific chapter on the subject in *Amoris laetitia* (cf. 259-290).

*Shepherds of Souls:* meetings with clergy, who have the ability of a genuine involvement with youth by dedicating their time and resources, and consecrated women and men through their unselfish witness, are decisive in the growth of new generations. In this regard, Pope Francis said: "I ask this especially of the Pastors of the Church, the Bishops and the Priests: you are the ones principally responsible for Christian and priestly vocations, and this task cannot be relegated to a bureaucratic office. You too have experienced an encounter that changed your life, when another priest — a parish priest, a confessor, a spiritual director — helped you experience the beauty of God's love. Thus, you too: going out, listening to young people — it takes patience! — you can help them understand the movements of their heart and guide their steps" (*Address to Participants in the International Conference on Pastoral Work for Vocations*, 21 October 2016).

*Teachers and other Persons in Education:* many Catholic teachers are involved as witnesses in universities and schools in every grade and level. Many are also ardently and competently involved in the workplace. Still other believers are engaged in civil life, attempting to be the leaven for a more just society. Many engaged in volunteer work in society devote their time for the common good and the care of creation. A great many are enthusiastically and generously involved in free-time activities and sports. All of these people bear witness to the human and Christian vocation which is accepted and lived with faithfulness and dedication, arousing in those who see them a desire to do likewise. Consequently, responding generously to one's proper vocation is the primary way of performing pastoral vocational work.

### **3. Places**

#### *Daily Life and Social Commitment*

Becoming an adult means learning to manage independently the aspects of life which are, at one and the same time, fundamental and part-and-parcel of everyday life, namely, the use of time and money, a life-style and a sound way of using goods and services, study and leisure, clothing and food, the affective life and sexuality. For young people, learning these things, inevitably a struggle, is also an opportunity to put some order in their lives and priorities, experimenting in choosing courses of action which can become an exercise in discernment and a reinforcement in life's orientation in making very important decisions. The more authentic the faith, the more the faith challenges everyday life and allows itself to be challenged. Experiences in the world of work, oftentimes difficult or problematic, as well as lack of employment deserve special mention. These too are opportunities to accept or ponder in-depth one's vocation.

The poor cry out, and with them, the earth. The commitment to listen to both can be a real opportunity to encounter the Lord and the Church and to discover one's vocation. Pope Francis teaches that the actions of a community in the care of the common home and the quality of the life of the poor, “when they express self-giving love, can also become intense spiritual experiences” (*Laudato si'*, 232) and, consequently, also an opportunity in life's journey and vocational discernment.

### *Specific Places in Pastoral Activity*

The Church offers young people specific places for meeting, cultural formation, education, evangelization, celebration and service, putting herself first and foremost in openly receiving each and everyone. The challenge of these places and the pastoral workers involved in them is increasingly to proceed in developing an integrated network of messages to young people, and to adopt a suitable operating style of “going out”, “seeing” and “calling”.

— World Youth Days stand out on the world level. Episcopal conferences and dioceses are increasingly feeling the responsibility of offering specific events and experiences for young people.

— Parishes offer events, activities, times and itineraries for younger generations. The sacramental life offers fundamental opportunities to grow in an ability to accept the gift of God in their lives and is an invitation to become actively involved in the Church's mission. Youth centres and oratories are an indication of the Church's concern for young people.

— Universities and Catholic schools, with their valuable cultural and educational services, are still another indication of the Church's presence among the young.

— Social activities and volunteer work provide opportunities for unselfish service. In this regard, meeting with those who are poor and on the margins of society can be a propitious opportunity for spiritual growth and vocational discernment, because, from this vantage point, the poor can teach a lesson, indeed they, in themselves, are bearers of the good news that salvation is experienced in weakness.

— Associations and ecclesial movements, as well as many centres of spirituality, offer young people specific programmes for discernment. Missionary experiences become an altruistic service and a fruitful exchange. The rediscovery of pilgrimages as a form and manner of proceeding on life's journey has value and is very promising. In many places, popular piety sustains and nourishes the faith of young people.

— Seminaries and houses of formation have a strategic importance, because, they have the task of providing young people who respond to God's call, with experiences, including an intense community life, which will make them, in turn, able to accompany others.

## *The Digital World*

Because of all that has been previously mentioned, the world of the *new media* deserves special attention, since, especially in the case of younger generations, it really occupies a major place in their lives. The *new media* offer many new opportunities, especially with regard to access to information and creating relations with those in distant places. However, they also pose risks (such as cyber-bullying, gambling, pornography, hidden dangers in *chat rooms*, ideological manipulation, etc.). Despite the differences in this field among various regions, the Christian community is still developing her presence in this new *Areopagus*, where young people certainly have something to teach her.

## **4. Resources**

### *The Means of Expression in Pastoral Work*

Although many fruitful encounters take place in the Church's activity and the expectations of young people in areas of the Bible, liturgy, art, catechesis and the media, the Church sometimes has a difficult time finding the proper language and expressions to speak to young people. Many dream of a Church capable of significantly involving young people in her activity through her use, among others, of young people's means of expression and by showing appreciation and the importance of young people's creativity and talents. In a particular sense, sports are an educational resource, because they offer opportunities in many ways. Music and other artistic expressions are in themselves a privileged means with which young people can manifest their individuality.

### *Educative Care and the Path of Evangelization*

Pastoral activity with young people, which is called upon to start processes more than to dominate spaces, shows, above all, the importance of service to the human growth of each individual and the educational and formative resources that can support it. A productive genetic connection exists between evangelization and education, a connection which, in these times, must take into account the gradual maturation of freedom.

As opposed to situations in the past, the Church needs to get accustomed to the fact that the ways of approaching the faith are less standardized, and therefore she must become more attentive to the individuality of each person. Together with those who continue to follow the traditional stages of Christian initiation, many come to encounter the Lord and the community of believers in other ways and later in life, for example, coming from a commitment to justice, or from contacts outside the Church with someone who is a credible witness. The challenge for communities is to receive everyone, following the example of Jesus Who could speak with Jews and Samaritans and with pagans in Greek culture and Roman occupiers, seizing upon the deep desires of each one of them.

## *Silence, Contemplation and Prayer*

Finally and most importantly, no discernment is possible without cultivating a familiarity with the Lord and a dialogue with his Word. In particular, *Lectio divina* is a valuable method, which Church tradition has always followed.

In an increasingly noisy society, which offers a plethora of stimuli, one fundamental objective in the pastoral care of young people is to provide the young with opportunities to enjoy the value of silence and contemplation and to receive formation in understanding one's experiences and to listen to one's conscience.

### **5. Mary of Nazareth**

The synodal process is entrusted to Mary. In the course of this process, the Church is self-examining herself on how to accompany young people to accept God's call to the joy of love and the fullness of life. Mary, the young woman of Nazareth, who in every stage of her existence accepted the Word, and preserve it, pondering it in her heart (cf. *Lk 2:19*) was the first to fulfill this journey.

Each young person can discover in Mary's life the way to listen, the courage that faith generates, the depths of discernment and dedication to service (cf. *Lk 1:39-45*). In her "lowliness," the Virgin betrothed to Joseph, experienced human weakness and difficulty in understanding the mysterious will of God (cf. *Lk 1:34*). She also was called to live by an exodus from herself and her plans by learning to trust and to confide.

Recalling the "great things" which the Almighty accomplished in her (cf. *Lk 1:49*), the Virgin did not feel alone, but fully loved and supported by the "Fear not" of the Angel (cf. *Lk 1:30*). Knowing that God is with her, Mary opened her heart to "Here I am", and thus began the Gospel journey (cf. *Lk 1:38*). Woman of Intercession (cf. *Jn 2:3*), at the foot of the cross of her Son, united to the "beloved disciple", again accepted the call to be fruitful and generate life in human history. In her eyes every young person can rediscover the beauty of discernment; in her heart every young person can experience the tenderness of intimacy and the courage of witness and mission.

### **QUESTIONS**

The aim of the questions is to assist the customary ecclesial bodies "by right" to express their understanding of the world of young people and assess their experience of vocational accompaniment, in order to gather information for drafting the work- document or *Instrumentum laboris*.

So as to take into account the various situations on the different continents and regions, three specific questions for each geographic area have been inserted after question 15, to generate response from the interested ecclesial bodies.

To facilitate and make tenable this work, the respective bodies are requested to limit their response to approximately one page for the question on statistics, one page each for the questions assessing the situation and one page for the three experiences for the continents and regions. If necessary or desired, other texts can be attached to support or supplement the contents of the responses.

## 1. Gathering Statistics

Please indicate, where possible, the source of the statistics and make reference to the year. Other pertinent information can be attached to better understand the situation in various countries.

- Number of inhabitants in the country / countries and the birth rate.
- Number and percentage of young people (ages 16-29) in the country / countries.
- Number and percentage of Catholics in the country / countries.
- Average age (for the last 5 years) for marrying (distinguishing between men and women), for entering the seminary and the consecrated life (distinguishing between men and women).
- In the 16-29 age group, the percentage of students, workers (if possible specify the type of work), unemployed, *NEET*.

## 2. Evaluating the Situation

### a) *Young People, the Church and Society*

*These questions refer both to young people who take part in Church programmes, as well as those who do not take part or have no interest to participate.*

1. In what manner does the Church listen to the lived situations of young people?
2. What are the main challenges and most significant opportunities for young people in your country / countries today?
3. What kinds and places of group gatherings of youth, institutionalized or otherwise, have a major success *within* the Church, and why?
4. What kinds and places of group gatherings of youth, institutionalized or otherwise, have a major success *outside* the Church, and why?
5. What do young people really ask of the Church in your country / countries today?
6. What possibilities for participation exist in your country / countries for young people to take part in the life of the ecclesial community?
7. How and in what manner is contact made with young people who do not frequent Church surroundings?

b) *Pastoral Vocational Programmes for Young People*

8. How are families and communities involved in the vocational discernment of young people?
9. How do schools and universities or other educational institutions (civil or ecclesial) contribute to young people's formation in vocational discernment?
10. In what manner are you taking into account the cultural changes resulting from the development of the digital world?
11. How can World Youth Days or other national or international events become a part of ordinary pastoral practice?
12. In what manner is your diocese planning experiences for the pastoral vocational programme for young people?

c) *Pastoral Care Workers with Young People*

13. How much time and in what manner do clergy and other formators provide for personal spiritual guidance?
14. What initiatives and opportunities for formation are in place for those who provide pastoral vocational guidance?
15. What personal guidance is offered in seminaries?

d) *Specific Questions According to Geographic Areas*

AFRICA

- a. What plans and structures in pastoral vocational care for young people best respond to the needs of your continent?
- b. What does "spiritual fatherhood" mean in places where a person grows without a father figure? What formation is offered?
- c. How do you communicate to young people that they are needed to build the future of the Church?

AMERICA

- a. How does your community care for young people who experience extreme violence (guerrilla warfare, gangs, prison, drug addiction, forced marriages) and accompany them in various ways in their life?
- b. What formation is offered to support the engagement of young people in society and civil life, for the common good?
- c. In a world which is greatly secularized, what pastoral activities are most effective for continuing the journey of faith after the Sacraments of Christian Initiation?

ASIA AND OCEANIA

- a. Why and how do religious gatherings by those who are non-Catholic exercise an attraction on young people?

- b. In what way can the values of a local culture be combined with Christian teaching, while also giving importance to popular piety?
- c. How is the language used in a young people's world incorporated in the pastoral care of young people, especially in the media, sports and music?

#### EUROPE

- a. What assistance is offered to young people to look to the future with confidence and hope, beginning with the richness of Christian roots of Europe?
- b. Young people often feel sidelined and excluded in the political, economic and social surroundings in which they live. In what way do you take into consideration the feeling to protest so that it can be transformed into participation and collaboration?
- c. At what levels do relations between generations still work? If they do not function, how can they be renewed?

### 3. Sharing Activities

1. List the main types of pastoral activity in accompaniment and vocational discernment in your present situation.
2. Choose three activities you consider the most interesting and relevant to share with the universal Church, and present it according to the following format (*no more than one page for each experience*).
  - a) *Description*: In a few sentences, roughly describe the activity. Who are the leading characters? How does the activity take place? Where? Etc.
  - b) *Analysis*: Evaluate the activity, even in layman's terms, for a better understanding of the important elements: what are the goals? What is the theoretical basis? What are the most interesting insights? How have they developed? Etc.
  - c) *Evaluation*: What are the goals? If not achieved, why? Strengths and weaknesses? What are the consequences on the social, cultural and ecclesial levels? Why and in what way is the activity important / formative? etc.

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