

# *Not Slaves but Children*

Christian Formation for the Third Millennium in the context of a multicultural, multilingual and multi-rite Church of the migrants in the Arabian Gulf



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Apostolic Vicar of Southern Arabia



APOSTOLIC VICARIATE  
OF SOUTHERN ARABIA



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Pastoral Letter 2024



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## Introduction

*“When the fullness of time came, God sent his Son. He came born of a woman, and subject to the law, in order to redeem the subjects of the law, that we might receive adoption as children of God. And because you are children, God has sent into your hearts the Spirit of his Son, which cries out: ‘Abba! Father!’ You yourself are no longer a slave, but a son or daughter, and yours is the inheritance by the grace of God” (Galatians 4: 4-7).*

I wanted to introduce my first pastoral letter on Christian Formation with this passage from Saint Paul which speaks of the incarnation of the Son of God as the fullness of time because there is a profound relationship between Christian formation and the conception of time. Chronological time is a time for "slaves". In the Kronos, we are not formed; time, without a direction, consumes us. On the contrary, time as a “favourable occasion” is marked by what happens. Kairos makes us free. The Kairos of the Son makes us free children of God.

The time of education is that of searching for a meaning in which to grow and train. The human person is always educated and formed<sup>1</sup>, discovering the meaning and destiny of all things. If life does not have a positive ultimate goal, maybe it is possible to inform but not form; it is possible to transmit notions but not educate. Forming is a human action with which we reach out towards the future, towards a goal worthy of achievement.

The first gesture of every new beginning is to educate and take care of the relationship between generations. Educating and caring for Christian formation in all its aspects is always a sign of hope. Dominican Father Timothy Radcliffe, former master general of the Order, recently stated: The desperation of this time is the feeling that history is going nowhere. The Christian duty is to share our hope!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term education and formation (training) here in a related way. By education we mainly mean the idea of helping the person to become more and more himself. By formation we mean assuming the Christian form as a form of one's existence. Therefore, the two terms are in this sense indivisible. The Christian becomes himself precisely to the extent that he assumes the form of Christ within himself.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Timothy Radcliffe, Homily at the Blackfriars Oxford mass on 17 December 2021

The Christian mystery reveals us that the meaning of time is to become children, to be wanted and loved. Christian formation at every stage means being children and not slaves, whatever condition we may live in. Christian formation is always formation within the freedom of the children of God.

## **I. The Legacy of “*Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*” on Christian Formation**

More than ten years have passed since the promulgation of the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*.<sup>3</sup> Many unimaginable things have happened in recent years that affect the Christian formation, practiced in our territories: many complex situations, unspeakable suffering, and endless conflicts in most of our nations. Natural events: the pandemic and the recent earthquake in Turkey and Syria. Ecclesial events: the resignation of Pope Benedict, the pontificate of Pope Francis, and his travels in the Middle East, from the Holy Land (Israel, Palestine, and Jordan) to Iraq, from Abu Dhabi where he signed the document on Human Fraternity together with the grand Imam of Al Azhar, up to Bahrain, passing through Egypt and Cyprus. The first reflection that I propose concerns the legacy of the post-synodal document concerning the theme of Christian formation in order to grasp then the elements that must be integrated into it.

### **a) Christian Formation between Communion and Witness**

At first reading the text *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* (EMO) does not seem to contain many references to the educational theme. However, at a closer look, the formative instance is dominant. First, think of the binomial that shapes the document: *communion and witness*. They contain, in a nutshell, the aim, the agent, and the method of Christian formation. Ecclesial communion is the actor of every formation process in the Church. The mystery of communion, rooted in the Eucharist and the action of the Holy Spirit, is the true agent of the transmission of faith.

Communion is also the purpose of educational paths. We are educated and formed in communion, understanding that our faith is always ecclesial, never private. For this reason, a divided Church does not educate. A fragmented Christian experience has no formative force. It can transmit religious contents but not effectively communicate that divine life which flows from the Most Holy

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness (14 September 2012).

Trinity and in which we can participate through the mystery of communion. Hence the document repeats the invitation to promote unity in the Catholic Church and between the different Churches in all areas of daily life.

The witness theme, the specific protagonist of Christian formation, in turn, reveals the method, and its outcome. What forms faith is not just the repetition of discourse. Initiation into faith is always through the testimony of saints and martyrs. For this reason, those who are responsible for formation must, above all, be witnesses<sup>4</sup>: people who risk their own lives for the proclamation of the Gospel, as the saints did.

The method for the Christian formation is ultimately the testimony, which differs from the mere neutral information of contents and the cogent demonstration. Testimony does not demonstrate but shows and offers the believed truth, provoking the freedom of the interlocutor to trust and follow Christ.

Finally, the outcome of the formation process is to make the Christian, a witness. Christian formation reaches its goal when believers become capable of bearing witness in word and deed. Therefore, *“Before all else, the Christian is a witness. To be a witness, however, calls not only for a Christian formation that imparts an understanding of the truths of faith but also for a life in harmony with that faith, a life capable of responding to the expectations and needs of our contemporaries”* (EMO 67). Therefore, formation is a cycle of witness from generation to generation.

Therefore, it is essential that the contribution of the Christians must not be limited within the Church but also in the society in the Middle East and in the world at large. Therefore, formation cannot be limited to the transmission of the contents of faith but must arrive at forming Christians capable of making a personal contribution to the society in which they live. Christian formation must show the connection between faith and life, between the Gospel, culture, and society. This includes our commitment to interreligious dialogue, the promotion of the common good (EMO 28) through various institutions like schools, hospitals, and other institutions of similar goals (EMO 46).

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<sup>4</sup> "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." EN 41, referring to Pope Paul VI, Address to the Members of the Consilium de Laicis (2 October 1974)

## **b) Family, School, and Catechesis**

1. Going more specifically into some passages of *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* explicitly concerning Christian formation, its agents, and contexts, we first come across the affirmations on the family. The document states:

*“The Christian family is the natural setting for children and young people to grow in faith, their first school of catechesis. Educating a child or a young person in these troubled times is not easy. This indispensable task is made all the more complex by the particular socio-political and religious situation of the region. That is why I want to assure parents of my support and my prayers. It is important that children grow up in a united family that lives its faith simply and with conviction. It is important for children and young people to see their parents pray. It is important that they go with them to Church, and that they see and understand that their parents love God and wish to know him better. And it is especially important that children and young people see their parents’ charity toward those in need. In this way, they will understand that it is good and beautiful to love God; they will enjoy going to church and be proud to do so, for they will have experienced personally that he is the solid rock on which they can build their lives (cf. Mt 7:24-27; Lk 6:48)”* (EMO 65).

In relation to these affirmations made in 2012, the subsequent path of the Church through two synodal assemblies on the family (2014 and 2015) and the post-synodal exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* should be considered. Precious are the affirmations of chapter VII, where it is recalled with realism:

*“Raising children calls for an orderly process of handing on the faith. This is made difficult by current lifestyles, work schedules and the complexity of today’s world, where many people keep up a frenetic pace just to survive. Even so, the home must continue to be the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the faith, to pray and to serve our neighbour”* (AL 287).

This reaffirms that the family is not only the object of pastoral attention but also the subject of evangelization, formation and transmission of the faith. Therefore, catechesis itself must begin within the family, and parents must be supported in this essential task.

2. Catholic schools have their invaluable contribution to social life among the fundamental educational agencies. We have some educational institutions which cater to the need of the education not just of our catholic Children but also children from other Christian denominations and other faiths as well.

*“The men and women religious and the lay people who work in them [Catholic Institutions] carry out impressive work, which I cannot fail to praise and encourage. Alien to every form of proselytism, these Catholic educational institutions open their doors to students of other Churches and other religions. As an invaluable means for ensuring the cultural and intellectual formation of young people, they show in an inspiring way that living together in respect and cooperation is possible in the Middle East if young people are trained in tolerance and the constant pursuit of human betterment. These institutions are also attentive to the local cultures, which they support by emphasizing the positive elements that they contain.” (EMO 91).*

As can be seen, the commitment to formation requires synergies between all ecclesial subjects and beyond. At the moment, we have very few educational institutions that serve a sizable number of students. The situation is extremely different compared with the rest of the world. The emigration and visa policies in this part of the world pose a strong challenge to our educational institutions. Christians attending in some of our schools is very small. We have only a few schools that too only in a couple of cities. The schools are not Catholic in the real sense except that the management board is of the Vicariate. Considering the challenges currently experienced, only very little can be expected from these institutions on the formation of Faith, nevertheless they can be the centres of encounter for children of different faiths. Great deal can be worked from these institutions on tolerance and respect for a healthy human society.

3. Finally, the most important aspect is to teach how to put into practice the faith we profess. This in our context demands a collaborative catechesis of different faith traditions.

*“The baptized have received the gift of faith. This inspires the whole of their lives and leads them to defend it with sensitivity and respect for persons, but also with frankness and courage (cf. Acts 4:29ff.). The faithful also need to receive an adequate formation in the celebration of the sacred mysteries, a basic knowledge of revealed doctrine, and encouragement in their efforts to*

*put their faith into practice in daily life and activity. This formation is ensured above all by a catechesis which, to the extent possible, should be carried out in a spirit of fraternal cooperation between the different Churches” (EMO 92).*

In this regard, the indication of a catechesis that provides for collaboration between the various ecclesial agents and between the different Churches present in our territories, is interesting. This point, as we will see, could open up new and interesting formative paths for our time, starting from Christian initiation.

## **II. Christian Formation in a Change of Epoch**

Let us now consider the elements that must be of value for our Church in the Gulf to be faithful to her mission of forming the faithful to an integral faith. Christian formation has characteristics of profound crisis. The “educational emergency” that Benedict XVI had already spoken of before the Synod on the Middle East, at the beginning of his pontificate, is in an even more critical phase. The idea of education seems to be in crisis today due to an erroneous anthropological conception, which contrasts the autonomy of the person (freedom) and educational processes and a reductive vision of Christianity to a generic and outdated morality.

This deeply troubled situation can be understood if we consider, as Pope Francis affirms, that today we do not find ourselves in an epoch of change but in a change of an epoch. The current historical moment is comparable to what happened with the end of the Roman Empire or the birth of the modern era, with the rise of secular culture, of rationalistic thought, up to the great ideologies that characterized the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now the modern epoch is over; some even call our time as the postmodern era (Deleuze): a way of saying that we don't really know where we are located.

As we know, Pope Francis recently launched a global educational pact (Global Compact on Education) to educate us about change (2020), with particular reference to interreligious dialogue. The world can only be changed through educational processes where generations work together, question each other, deepen their knowledge, and elaborate the paths to be implemented: “Every change”, says Holy Father, “needs an educational path that involves everyone. This is why it is necessary to build an ‘educational village’ where, in diversity,

the commitment to generate a network of human and open relationships is shared."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the Middle East has its own reception of this epochal change, no less radical. The faith, so tenaciously transmitted by the first generations of faithful, now inevitably finds itself undergoing a test since, in a change of an epoch, the very paradigm of the human being is put into question.

In the face of all this, Pope Francis states:

*"whether we like it or not, we are called to face reality as it is. Times change, and we need to realize that often we do not know how to find our place in new situations and scenarios: we keep dreaming about the "leeks of Egypt" (Num 11:5), forgetting that the promised land is before us, not behind us, and in our lament for times past, we are turning to stone, becoming "mummified". This is not good. A bishop, a priest, a sister, a catechist who is a mummy. Not good. Instead of proclaiming Good News, we announce a dreary message that attracts no one and sets no one's heart afire. This is the temptation"*<sup>6</sup>.

I would like to quote here another passage from Pope Francis; a sentence of profound balance and provocation to critically assume the change we have to go:

*"Let us ask the Lord to free the Church from those who would make her grow old, encase her in the past, hold her back or keep her at a standstill. But let us also ask him to free her from another temptation: that of thinking she is young because she accepts everything the world offers her, thinking that she is renewed because she sets her message aside and acts like everybody else. No! The Church is young when she is herself, when she receives ever anew the strength born of God's word, the Eucharist, and the daily presence of Christ and the power of his Spirit in our lives. The Church is young when she shows herself capable of constantly returning to her source" (Christus Vivit 35).*

The fundamental challenge for Christian formation could be summarized in these terms: one must pass from a Christianity transmitted by convention -

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, on the occasion of International Literacy Day, 8th September 2022,

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Address to bishops, priests, men and women religious, consecrated persons and seminarians, catechists and animators* (Maputo 5 September 2019).



through a social bond taken for granted - to a Christianity transmitted by conviction, capable of communicating the reasons for one's faith by intercepting the new anthropological questions that the new generations have in their hearts, aroused by the unprecedented situations they have to face to work, live and love.

In general, the Christian in the Gulf are known for their deep-rooted spiritual convictions, which persist despite the extreme difficult situations. Today this heritage must pass the test of the change of an era. How can this spiritual richness be transmitted vitally to the new generations, whose characteristics are often profoundly different from the past, even the recent one, as the Synod of Bishops on young people (2018) clearly highlighted?

### **III. A Look at Youth Reality**

Many Christian living in the Gulf feel that there is a disconnection between faith and the new generations, though it is not as evident as in Western countries. We often feel we have lost contact with most young people in Europe. Faith appears to be relegated to a private and ultimately irrelevant sphere. This is the outcome of the long process of secularization in the West. Nonetheless it is equally valid even in our lands. There are clear signs of disaffection with the ecclesial experience, especially among the new generations. Even where there is still a high attendance at the sacraments, one can ask how relevant faith is in the people's lives.

Pope Francis in *Christus vivit*, invites us to offer the young people an intense formative experience. *“Rather than being too concerned with communicating a great deal of doctrine, let us first try to awaken and consolidate the great experiences that sustain the Christian life. In the words of Romano Guardini, “when we experience a great love... everything else becomes part of it” (CV 212).* Christian formation today inevitably passes through the attraction of the experience of faith and the beauty of following Christ in daily life.

Pope Francis' vision on the condition of young people is very realistic as seen in chapter III of *Christus vivit*: there are many different young people! Serene and dramatic, committed and ideological, individualistic and focused on trends. Pope recalls the cultural colonization by many strong powers, who spread practices typical of the secularized West in exchange for money and social promotion. Furthermore, it is necessary to keep in mind some particularly urgent points (CV 68-80): the theme of the body and of affective relationships, the lost

sense of sexual difference; the risk of genetic manipulation, the idea that life is only the experiment of oneself, losing consciousness, says the Pope, that life is truly above all a gift and not a self-production (CV 82). Let's think of the very rapid development of artificial intelligence, so fascinating for the new generations, as unpredictable in its consequences, so much so that in recent times it has frightened the creators themselves. In young people there is also a new desire for God, not for an abstract God but one that has to do with life (CV 84).

From this situation emerges the need to develop a greater critical sense in Christian formation in the face of the proposed anthropological models. Christian formation must strengthen the ability to discern our times critically. Benedict XVI said that investing in training will refine *“their critical skills, dispel ignorance and prejudice, and assist in breaking the spell cast by ideologies old and new.”*<sup>7</sup>

#### **a. Some specific Training Challenges.**

Following the observations of Pope Francis on youth, we can consider some specific challenges concerning Christian formation.

1. ***The Digital Environment*** (CV 86-90). First, the digital environment, which has rewritten languages and concepts, has changed the perception of the body, relationships, affections, and sexuality: we are facing a new anthropology. Woe to thinking that the digital environment is just a tool: it's a way to rewrite the rules of relationships. In this regard, the observations of the document *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* are still relevant, which invite us to invest in training for the Christian use of these new realities. Therefore, *“to support the means of communication which presently exist and to work for the development of suitable new structures. The training of specialized personnel in this sector, so critical not only in the light of rapid technological advances but also because of its pedagogical and ethical implications, is an increasingly urgent task, especially in view of evangelization.”* (EMO 73)

2. ***The Interculturality of Training***. The second significant paradigmatic factor is migrations as a process (CV 91-94). There is no going back on the mixing of peoples and cultures since it indelibly marks body and soul of the society today. Consequently, it is necessary to promote a Christian formation that is structurally intercultural and inculturated. As a paradigm of our time, migration requires us

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<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, Speech at blessing the corner stone for the new Catholic University in Madaba, Amman, Jordan, 9 May 2009.

to be trained in interculturality. It is necessary to structure training courses in terms of fruitful conviviality of differences. We need a Christian formation capable of supporting the good of the different ecclesial traditions and making them interact. If we are called to live and work together, we also need to know each other and be trained in collaboration: this is true for the different ecclesial traditions, first linked to closed territorial relations but today, through the mixing of peoples, called to work side by side to support life of the faithful and contribute to the social good.

3. **Care of Creation:** Another fundamental challenge for Christian formation is the *care of creation, our common home*, as Pope Francis calls it in his encyclical *Laudato si'* (2015). It's not about pandering to environmental movements. The care of the common home as the theme of education is essential because it concerns the relationship between generations, not to forget that the custodian of life entrusted to man is a gift of God. Particularly interesting for Christian formation is the concept of integral ecology (nn. 137-162), which considers not only environmental ecology but also cultural and social ecology and, above all, human ecology, as already mentioned by Benedict XVI<sup>8</sup>. Education in an integral ecology is part of Christian formation. We know, however, that young people deeply feel this theme, which deserves to be valued in formation.

4. **The Question of Abuse: social responsibility of the Church** (CV 95-102). Furthermore, it is necessary to thematize the relationship between young people and abuses, especially those perpetrated in the ecclesial sphere. The interventions of Pope Francis, even the recent ones, have given the tools to walk on a path of purification and promotion of a culture against the abuse, in all its aspects: abuse of authority, both spiritual and emotional, to that of sexual misconduct. Promoting the culture of care against all abuse is a fundamental part of ecclesial education. Parents, priests, consecrated persons, catechists, pastoral workers, and young people themselves must undertake a path of formation suitable for safeguarding ecclesial environments and for the safety of our young people. There shouldn't be delays or hesitations on this aspect of Christian formation. One crucial thing should be added in this regard: this is a task that we must do

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<sup>8</sup> BENEDETTO XVI, *Discorso al Bundestag* (22 September 2011).

not only *ad intra* but also *ad extra*; it is a journey that we take to help all of society affected by this form of violence<sup>9</sup>.

5. ***Youth and "orphanage"***. Finally, it is necessary to note young people's strong sense of uprooting. Pope Francis calls it *the orphanage*:

*"If the young grow up in a world in ashes, it will be hard to keep alive the flame of great dreams and projects. If they grow up in a desert devoid of meaning, where will they develop a desire to devote their lives to sowing seeds? The experience of discontinuity, uprootedness, and the collapse of fundamental certainties, fostered by today's media culture, creates a deep sense of orphanhood to which we must respond by creating an attractive and fraternal environment where others can live with a sense of purpose"* (CV 216).

Pope calls this fundamental problem of education as the "orphanhood": lonely feeling of nobody's children, disorientation, not recognizing to be wanted. Precisely in this lies the origin of all fragility and easy juvenile addictions, of which we are dramatically warned by the clinical psychology. Christian formation in the Church must always educate to a vital sense of belonging, to a positive sentiment of existence, to Christian hope which makes one capable of facing even the most devastating contradictions that the Middle East and specifically the Gulf finds itself experiencing in this season of history.

#### **IV. Some Elements of Christian Formation**

In such a radical change, Christian formation is decisive and must involve all educational agencies, starting from the family. You can go through this unprecedented change of epoch only with a solid educational experience that prevents the breaking of the pact between generations, between parents and children, and between adults and young. Our time imposes on us an experience of education that involves us all.

##### **a. Retrieve the Roots**

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<sup>9</sup> FRANCESCO, *Discorso*, 24 February 2019: "The Church's aim will thus be to hear, watch over, protect and care for abused, exploited and forgotten children, wherever they are. To achieve that goal, the Church must rise above the ideological disputes and journalistic practices that often exploit, for various interests, the very tragedy experienced by the little ones. The time has come, then, to work together to eradicate this evil from the body of our humanity by adopting every necessary measure already in force on the international level and ecclesial levels".

First, I would like to refer to what is declared in chapter VI of *Christus vivit: Young people with roots*. That is the relationship between generations of young with the adults. This is symbolized by the metaphor “root”. It is necessary to flee from the seduction that makes youth a myth. Renegading the past, opens up to manipulation and fragility: *“If someone tells young people to ignore their history, to reject the experiences of their elders, to look down on the past and to look forward to a future that he holds out, doesn’t it then become easy to draw them along so that they only do what he tells them? He needs the young to be shallow, uprooted and distrustful so that they can trust only in his promises and act according to his plans”* (CV 181).

The link between the generations guarantees the educational path: *“The world has never benefited, nor will it ever benefit, from a rupture between generations. That is the siren song of a future without roots and origins. It is the lie that would have you believe that only what is new is good and beautiful. When intergenerational relationships exist, a collective memory is present in communities, as each generation takes up the teachings of its predecessors and in turn bequeaths a legacy to its successors”* (CV 191).

In Iraq, Pope Francis evocatively recalled,

*“When the old and the young come together, what happens? The old dream dreams, they dream of a future for the young. And the young can take those dreams and prophecies, make them a reality. When old and young come together, we preserve and pass on the gifts that God gives. We look upon our children, knowing that they will inherit not only a land, a culture and a tradition, but also the living fruits of faith that are God’s blessings upon this land. So I encourage you: do not forget who you are and where you come from! Do not forget the bonds that hold you together! Do not forget to preserve your roots!”<sup>10</sup>*

## **b. Christian Formation as a Global Process**

Indeed, there is the task for the priests, teachers, educators, trainers, and catechists, and first of all, for the parents to transmit faith to the new generations. On the other hand, we know that the educational experience concerns everyone. In the Gospel according to John, it is said that we are all continuously educated

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<sup>10</sup> Francis, Address of His Holiness, Visit to the Qaraqosh Community, Church of Immaculate Conception in Qaraqosh, Apostolic Journey of His Holiness Pope Francis to Iraq, Sunday, 7 March 2021

by God: “*et erunt semper docibiles Dei*” (Jn 6:45). We are never complete when it comes to growing and learning! In Christian formation, it is not always one gives while the other receives, but within the flow of vital communication that comes from the generations that preceded us, we are all called to walk, to grow, to change.

In summary, we can conceive Christian formation in its entirety as an introduction to the relationship with reality as a whole in the light of the living encounter with Christ. The word ‘reality’ means life, with its plots and relationships, conflicts and tensions, limits and innovations. The Christian faith must be communicated within this introduction to the global reality. This allows us to grasp the link between faith and life, between the Gospel and culture at its origins. All educational agencies, such as schools and catechesis, represent a fundamental node in this process of vital transmission.

For this reason, Christian formation could be defined as that process and web of relationships in which we try to make our own, the feelings and thoughts of Christ (cf. Phil 2:5; 1Cor 2:16). Jesus is not Christianly speaking only the content of faith, the object of faith; Jesus is also the one with whom we look at reality; we look at life, joy and pain, birth and death, time and space. So, Jesus is also the essence and meaning of Christian life.

### **c. Education between Freedom and Desire**

For education in the faith to be a process of conviction, it is necessary to focus on the fundamental question of freedom, which is particularly felt today by the new generations. Indeed, the word freedom is a great challenge for education. Perhaps it is the most used word in the contemporary youth vocabulary. Somehow it seems to be the quintessential human experience above all the experience of freedom as autonomy, as self-determination. And how important it is to discover that freedom is also this but not only this! Freedom is not only the possibility of choice but the need to choose for good; to build and not to destroy. Doing evil is certainly a possibility of freedom, but it is not its fulfilment. We must accompany the new generations to discover that freedom in its authenticity, a freedom for good, for happiness, and for fulfilment. Without the risk of freedom between generations, there is no educational experience. There is training when there is free involvement of people.

Therefore, if freedom is for what is good, it is necessary to address its structural relationship with the desire that dwells in the human heart, especially in young people. For this reason, it is crucial in the educational relationship to allow young people to connect with their questions, with their most beautiful and deepest desires, and with their dreams, as Pope Francis often invites us to do, thus overcoming a certain apathy and scepticism that characterizes contemporary culture! A true educator shows how the person of Christ can answer the ultimate questions about the meaning of life and how following Christ makes people capable of looking at life differently.

Jesus Christ appears in the Christian formation as a companion of one's desire in a great journey. The time of youth is that of desire and restlessness. It is that of radical questions about the meaning of one's life. It is the time to discover great ideals and the need to mature the choices that shape one's life. Much of the longing present in the hearts of young people can be summed up in the word 'restlessness'. As Saint Paul VI said, "*In the very discontent that you often feel... a ray of light is present.*"<sup>11</sup> This healthy restlessness typical of youth continues to dwell in every heart that remains young, open and generous. True inner peace coexists with that profound discontent. As St Augustine said: "You have created us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."<sup>12</sup> From this perspective, freedom and desire are the best allies of Christian formation since, by their nature, they point to the infinite, to the divine.

#### **d. Education, Vocation, and Discernment**

Since the ability to look at life differently is decisive in the formative path, the first modality to emerge is the vocational dimension of existence. It is necessary to form life as a vocation, that is, the discovery of oneself as wanted by another - by God. Christian education must lead young people and choose their future, knowing that their existence is within God's plan. Let's look at this through a few passages from *Christus Vivit*:

*"The word "vocation" can be understood in a broad sense as a calling from God, including the call to life, the call to friendship with him, the call to holiness, and so forth. This is helpful, since it situates our whole life in relation to the God who loves us. It makes us realize that nothing is the result*

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<sup>11</sup> Paul VI, Homily at Mass with Young People in Sydney, Australia, Apostolic Pilgrimage of His Holiness Pope Paul VI to west Asia, Oceania and Australia, (2 December 1970, 64.

<sup>12</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 1,1.5.



*of pure chance but that everything in our lives can become a way of responding to the Lord, who has a wonderful plan for us” (CV 248).*

*It becomes your vocation because you are called to it; it is something more than merely a pragmatic decision. In the end, it is a recognition of why I was made, why I am here on earth, and what the Lord’s plan is for my life. He will not show me every place, time and detail, since I will have to make my own prudent decisions about these. But he will show me a direction in life, for he is my Creator and I need to listen to his voice, so that, like clay in the hands of a potter, I can let myself be shaped and guided by him. Then I will become what I was meant to be, faithful to my own reality” (CV 256).*

This allows us to recover the meaning of Pope Francis' strong expression in *Evangelii Gaudium* on being a mission in this world and not just having a mission! The mission is the most proper thing that we are, it decides our face and our history in the Church and in the world.

*“My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an “extra” or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world” (EG 273).*

From this perspective, vocation is not an external reality that adds up to the other aspects of a young person's personal existence but a decisive word for understanding oneself and planning one's future. The person is invited to get to know themselves, their limits, and their resources, to the point of asking themselves very concrete questions.

*“Do I know myself, quite apart from my illusions and emotions? Do I know what brings joy or sorrow to my heart? What are my strengths and weaknesses? These questions immediately give rise to others: How can I serve people better and prove most helpful to our world and the Church? What is my real place in this world? What can I offer to society?” (CV 285).*

These questions posed by the Pope Francis to young people open up a relational horizon, one of belonging that is decisive for the formative path.

*“But the real question is: ‘For whom am I?’”. Of course, you are for God. But he has decided that you should also be for others, and he has given you*



*many qualities, inclinations, gifts and charisms that are not for you, but to share with those around you” (CV 286).*

The question “who are you?” can only be answered if you find out “who you are for”. Ultimately: there is no Christian formation if this is not vocational at every step. Even the present-day lack of specific vocations to the priesthood, consecrated life, and marriage is a sign of a lack of formation for life as a vocation.

## **V. Two decisive Areas: Catechesis and School**

The two fundamental educational agencies, which, in helping the family must express the closeness of the Church to Christian education, are catechesis and the school.

### **a. Catechesis as a stable expression of Formative Responsibility**

Catechesis must be considered, not only as a limited moment of formation but as the name expresses, the passion of the whole Church for vital transmission of faith that we received from those who have preceded us on the journey. The entire Church must educate the faithful and especially the new generations, as a communion of different forms of life (Clergy, Religious, family-laity), primarily through the daily life of families and the larger Christian community. This indicates, in particular, the fundamental value of the liturgy in formation, especially the Eucharistic celebration. Liturgical celebrations are the daily modalities with which the Church forms her children by conforming them to Christ in the liturgical action; *“The liturgy, and above all the celebration of the Eucharist, is a school of faith which leads to witness”* (EMO 93). Therefore, catechesis must always be done in a mystagogical view: introducing the meaning of the mysteries that we celebrate, so that we can understand the profound meaning of the signs, symbols, actions, and words that make up the divine liturgy.

Furthermore, the progress of the Church on the theme of catechesis in recent years must be kept in mind, in particular, the new *Directory for Catechesis*, published in 2020 by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. The text links the catechetical courses to the theme of evangelization. Therefore, the main content of the catechetical process appears to be Christian revelation and its vital transmission in the Church.<sup>13</sup> Evangelization

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Directory for Catechesis*, Nos. 11-54

is the interpretative key of catechesis in all its passages: the first proclamation of the good news, Christian initiation, and ongoing formation.<sup>14</sup> Sources for catechesis, in addition to the centrality of the word of God (written and transmitted), are also the Magisterium of the Church, the liturgy and the testimony of saints and martyrs, theology, including the theme of Christian culture and beauty.<sup>15</sup> Catechesis itself must be lived as a fundamental contribution to the inculturation of faith, the evangelization of culture, and the interculturality of formation.

Much space is given to *the figure and training of the catechist*. Pope Francis with the *motu proprio*, *Antiquum ministerium*, resumed the ancient tradition of the catechist as an established and stable ministry in the Church.<sup>16</sup> It is not a question of establishing all those who teach catechism as catechist ministry, but of identifying people mature in faith who can act as an authoritative reference for the ministry of the catechist in the Church. Regardless of how our Churches will be able to implement this indication, it is certain that this *motu proprio* affirms the centrality of catechesis and the importance of the catechist and their formation. If, on the one hand, all the faithful in the Church are co-responsible for formation, it is equally valid that priests, deacons, consecrated persons, families, and lay people are each called to specific responsibilities of formation by the very fact of their specific role in the Church. The stable figure of the catechist as an instituted ministry can help our Churches to stabilize this decisive form of Christian education.

From my pastoral visits, I have realized that we have lesser number of catechists than what we actually require in our parishes. The ecclesial movements, associations, and communities of various kinds generally offer catechetical programs only for adults, without paying much attention especially to Christian initiation. The letter from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* (2016), recommends the co-essentiality between hierarchical and charismatic gifts. Which means, ecclesial associations are called not only to carry forward initiatives concerning their charism but also to collaborate with the hierarchy for the needs of the Church, such as catechesis. Reciprocally, the

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Directory for Catechesis, Nos. 66-74

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Directory for Catechesis, Nos. 90-109

<sup>16</sup> Following *Antiquum ministerium* (2021), the dicastery for divine worship has edited the Rite of the institution which allows for an even better understanding of the figure and formation of these candidates.

hierarchy must value the contribution of these ecclesial realities within its pastoral program, adopting valuable suggestions for the formation of the people of God.

Finally, the new Directory places its attention on the concrete paths of catechesis in the local Churches, also referring the specific patrimony of the Eastern Churches,<sup>17</sup> and explicitly mentions the catechesis towards migrants and emigrants.<sup>18</sup> Considering the value of the different traditions and the phenomenon of the migration and mixing of peoples, one should ask whether there shouldn't be greater collaboration between the different traditions within the catechetical courses, especially where Catholics of different nations, languages, traditions, and rituals live in close contact and in fact, form a single Church in the area. We are one such Church of diversity celebrated in our unity. We should legitimately ask whether, in the perspective of the new Directory for Catechesis, should we not think of shared and differentiated paths for Christian initiation which allow young people:

- a) to see what they have in common that is essential among the different Churches, concerning the Christian faith,
- b) to learn the specific elements of one's own Church of origin,
- c) and to know the essential elements of the different ecclesial traditions with which one has to deal every day.

This would allow the diversities of ecclesial traditions and the unity of the one professed faith to be lived fruitfully. A Church like ours should have such an overview of the catechetical courses to have an inclusive catechetical program which truly is Catholic in nature.

## **b. The Contribution of the Catholic School in the Middle East**

Finally, Christian formation does not end with the transmission of the contents of the faith; it must generate a new mentality, a new way of reading history and society in all its articulations. Christian formation will not be such if it does not fully assume the cultural dimension of faith. Even a minimal knowledge of the history of the Church reveals its original vocation to culture: the search for God (*Quaerere Deum*) is the origin of every culture<sup>19</sup>. Catholic schools and universities play an important role in this direction. For this reason,

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Directory for Catechesis*, Nos. 290-292

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Directory for Catechesis*, Nos. 237-273

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Meeting with the representatives from the world of the culture. Address of His Holiness* (Collège des Bernardins, Paris 12 September 2008).

wherever a Church was established, educational enterprises spring up around these churches. Schools are constitutive part of the Church's mission. We cannot give up on schools.

Precisely because of the dialogical capacity that schools can offer, they can make enormous contribution not only to the transmission of the faith but also to the social good and coexistence between people of different faiths, promoting interreligious dialogue and a sense of universal human fraternity.

The Holy Spirit has given rise to innumerable educational charisms in the Church. Many religious congregations were born precisely to provide life to educational experiences, founding schools for all levels according to the needs of families and society in the various urban and suburban contexts. The decline in vocations from these congregations that have traditionally run schools is also a cause for concern. On one hand, this reminds us of the importance of promoting an explicit vocation ministry, on the other hand, it invites us to pay attention to the new charisms that the Spirit arouses in the Church and which reveal their great formative capacity, as new forms of consecrated life, which are more lay in nature, capable of mobilizing educational resources and dynamics.

What does it mean to carry on an educational experience in a Catholic school today? Even Pope Francis recommended commitment to the world of school as a great possibility of sharing life with the world of youth (CV 221-223). But he also suggested that Catholic schools avoid having an image of themselves as a closed place, where changes are feared, where one escapes from the challenges of the present time. The Catholic school is not a hiding place (a "bunker"). The Catholic school must be where one accompanies to encounter with reality, precisely by learning to read and understand the change. The Synod's final document on young people recalls that:

*“[Catholic schools] express the Church's concern for the integral formation of young people. These are precious spaces for the encounter of the Gospel with the culture of a people and for the development of research. They are called to propose a model of formation which is capable of making the faith dialogue with the questions of the contemporary world, with the different anthropological perspectives, with the challenges of science and*

*technology, with changes in social habits, and with the commitment for justice.*"<sup>20</sup>

To use a beautiful phrase from Saint Paul, the Catholic school can be imagined as that place where we learn to sift through everything to retain and learn and assimilate what is worthwhile (cf. 1Thess 5:21). What educates is ultimately a relationship, a relationship between subjects, between people who treat each other recognizing the freedom of each. The educational experience is always an encounter of freedoms that open up to each other by learning the experience of mutual acceptance and trust.

## **Conclusion**

Let us return to consider the "fullness of time", from which we started. Ultimately, formation is a question of transmitting and making us aware of being children of God. *Gaudium et spes* reminds us that, Jesus Christ, the new Adam, in revealing to us the mystery of the Father and his love, also revealed himself, making known his high calling (GS 22). Therefore "*Whoever follows Christ, the perfect man, also becomes more of a man*" (GS 41). Ultimately, this is the purpose of Christian formation: following Christ, and realizing an authentic humanity, since, as the great father of the Church, Irenaeus says, *the glory of God is living man and man's life is the vision of God*.

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<sup>20</sup> *Young People, The Faith and Vocational Discernment*, Final Document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Youth, 27 October 2018.



Cover Picture - Suffer little children to come unto me, 1854, by Juan Urruchi (1828-1892).



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