

#WITHOUTFILTERS



Speak courageously. Don't be ashamed. Here, shame should be left at the door. Speak courageously. I say what I feel and if anyone is offended by it, I ask their pardon and move on. You know how to speak like this. But one must also listen with humility. If someone I don't like is speaking, I must listen even more carefully, because everyone has a right to be heard, just as everyone has a right to speak.

This was the greeting of Pope Francis to the 15,340 young people “present” at the pre-synod gathering held in Rome from 19-24 March 2018. The Pope did not cite numbers but the participants in the event were not only the 305 people in the assembly hall but also the thousands of youth who spontaneously signed up weeks earlier on social networks specifically set up for this meeting, in response to the Pope’s hope that the number of participants in this “conversation” would be as great as possible “so as to bring to light what each of you and each of us have in our hearts!”

The purpose of this “world-wide web synod,” the Pope reminded everyone, was to manifest the Church’s desire to listen to young people—no one excluded—not for political reasons or because of an artificial “love of youth,” but because she needs to grasp more profoundly what God and history are asking of her.

The Pope urged the young participants in this pre-synod gathering to be courageous, to speak “without filters,” and he didn’t have to ask them twice. They took the invitation seriously and worked for five days as protagonists in an event which, if not unprecedented in the history of the Church, was unique because of the way in which it was organized and carried out. First of all, the Church manifested her readiness to embrace the “digital continent”: 15 Internet hashtags were set up to exchange ideas;¹ six groups were set up on Facebook to collect the input of the youth participating via

¹ The hashtags used to compare ideas and discuss issues were: #ChiSonoIo, #Diversità, #Futuro, #VitaDigitale, #Interiorità, #Gesù, #Credo, #Chiamata, #Scelte, #Guida, #Chiesa, #Protagonista, #Piazza, #Proposte, #Linguaggi. The work outlines used can be found on: <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/it/riunione-pre-sinodale/15-hastag-per-raccontarsi.html>.

the Internet; and six official languages were used in the assembly hall and online.

To this data can be added the 305 delegates of Episcopal Conferences, Eastern-rite Churches, various Church associations and movements, other Churches, Christian communities and other religions; the worlds of education, culture, work, sport, the arts, volunteer and youth groups; 40 “adult observers”—teachers and formators with experience in helping young people discern what to do with their lives; 20 “small circles” made up of young people present in Rome and subdivided by language and geographical provenance. For 5 days, this variegated assembly blended together the languages, forms, expressions, rhythms of life and active participation of the youth involved. Without rhetoric.

Sr. Karla Figueroa, fma, a professor of moral theology at the Auxilium University in Rome, participated in the pre-synod gathering as a representative of her university’s Faculty of Educational Sciences. Since she lived this event “in the first person,” I asked her a few questions so as to grasp what the work sessions were like, what were key moments in the event and what the participants did and said.

The objective proposed by Pope Francis for this global gathering of youth, Sr. Karla explained, was to prepare a final document to be presented to the bishops who will participate in the Synod in October. The document produced by the young people is divided into three parts, in which they express their doubts, expectations, hopes and life experiences. The invitation to “speak up and dream” was the golden thread running through their days, taking as a starting point the opening speech of Pope Francis.² The testimonies and questions of the young peo-



² The Pope’s talk can be found on: <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/it/attualita/incontro-pre-sinodale--parole-del-santo-padre-ai-giovani-parteci.html>



ple revealed the situation of youth on the different continents, as well as the challenges and opportunities confronting them. Some of the subjects touched on were: the victims of human trafficking, educational resources, the risk and beauty of different life choices, the formation of young seminarians and candidates to the religious life, etc.

“In the small circles” Sr. Karla said, “the young people expressed their positive experiences in the Church, and also their doubts and criticisms of it. The work outlines contained questions ranging from human formation to how to relate to diversity, from hopes for the future to relations with modern technology, from the search for meaning in life to accompaniment in the discernment process, from the experience of meeting Jesus to the Church’s way of staying close to young people and helping them become protagonists in her life. In short, the Church wanted to grasp the environments, languages, instruments, initiatives and experiences of young people so as to establish bonds with them and journey together with them.”

The pre-synod Final Document, together with the replies to the preparatory questionnaire sent to all the Episcopal Conferences and Eastern-rite Churches, the replies to the questionnaire directed to youth, and the conclusions of the International Seminar that will be celebrated in Rome in September 2018, will all flow together into the *Instrumentum Laboris* to be used by the bishops participating in the Synod.

“The young people, in particular the editorial team, worked day and night to produce their pre-synod Final Document,” Sr. Karla said.” They discussed the first and second

drafts of the text not only during their general assemblies but also during their meals and in their small work groups, pointing out what was lacking and what did not express their thought clearly. Each felt personally questioned: young Catholics, those from other Christian confessions, non-believers, those involved in pastoral work with youth or in different associations.... The basic plea was that the final document not be so generalized that it flattens the wealth and variety of the discussions and positions that emerged.”

The resulting Final Document³ reveals the desire for a young Church in dialogue with adults, not in opposition to them. It reveals that young people want to be inside the Church, “like leaven in dough,” as Cardinal Baldisseri put it. “The text sketches out, with openness and faith,” he continued, “the places where young people can be found today, how they see themselves in relation to others, and how we—as Church—can accompany our young members toward a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world.”

“Like the other adults who participated in this event,” concluded Sr. Karla, “my role was that of an observer. Faced with the protagonism of young people, I am more and more convinced that it is essential to listen to them from the standpoint of adults capable of returning to being ‘seekers.’ We need to keep quiet for a while, be ready to learn, and be willing to do this even when the teacher standing before us is a young person.”

Maria Antonia Chinello, fma

³ The text in English can be accessed on: <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/news/final-document-from-the-pre-synodal-meeting.html>.