

# **Theologico-Pastoral Understanding of Youth Ministry**

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## **Introduction**

I would like to divide this article into two major parts: one is theological, and the other is pastoral. In the first part I would bring the theology of youth ministry in view of *Christus Vivit* and also would present Jesus as the role model for the young people as well as youth ministry. And in the second, I would attempt to make recommendations for the better pastoral approach in the context of India and would insist the youth minister to evolve innovative ways of doing the ministry. I describe my view on youth ministry as a process 'for' the youth, 'with' the youth, 'to' the youth, and 'by' the youth. Finally, I suggest some practical tips for the successful youth ministry.

### **1.1. Theological Implications of Youth Ministry in View of *Christus Vivit***

Youth ministry is not new in the Church. However, there has been a consistent appeal from all quarters to give youth ministry a fresh outlook and bring it up to its full stature. Today, more than ever before, it is felt that without youth ministry the Church's mission to the world cannot be accomplished in its totality. Youth ministry is to be accepted as part and

parcel of the Church's ministry in the world.<sup>1</sup> Let me list out some of the key theological implications of youth ministry from *Christus Vivit*.

### **1.1.1. God Sees Differently**

When the young people were not highly regarded in the Old Testament God sees them differently which means positively. It is an invitation for us to think positively of the young people.<sup>2</sup>

### **1.1.2. Glory of Youth in the Heart**

The glory of youth is in the heart than physical experience.<sup>3</sup> Let us also consider the young people, the ones who don't have proper physical structure, and acknowledge their inner beauty.

### **1.1.3. Young Hearts are Ready for Change**

The young hearts are basically ready to change, to turn back, to get up and to learn from life. Jesus also praised the younger son (cf. Lk 15) who returned to the right path.<sup>4</sup> It is the right time to bring back the young people on right track. Therefore, Let us approach them in a friendly way as Jesus did and also pay attention to their needs.

### **1.1.4. Be Ever Young**

Jesus himself eternally young wants to give us hearts that are ever young. God's word asked us to cast out the old leaven that you may be fresh dough (cf. 1Cor 5:7). St. Paul invites the people to strip out "the old self" and to put on a "young self." Young people alone can make the Church as young.<sup>5</sup> Let us invest on the young environment in all possible ways to make the young people to realise that they are also young as Jesus.

### **1.1.5. Treat the Youth as Brothers and Sisters**

God says that young people should be treated "as brother/ sister" (cf. 1 Tim 5:1). Young people are meant to dream great things, to seek vast horizons, to aim higher, to take on the world, to accept challenges and to offer the best of them to the building of something better.<sup>6</sup> St. Paul instructs,

“Let no one despise your youth” (cf. 1 Tim 4: 12). Let us consider the young people as brothers and sisters and give hope and confidence to know their value.

#### **1.1.6. Youth are Important**

“In the time of your difficulties or crisis, remember you are important. You are non-insignificant, you are important to God, for you are the work of His hands.”<sup>7</sup> This will enkindle the positive vibration on young people and pave way to prove themselves as worthy instruments.

#### **1.1.7. Youth Ministry Needs to Become More Flexible**

Youth ministry must be the place for celebrating, singing, listening to read stories and experiencing a shared encounter with living God. The events or occasions should provide the place to share their methods, values, language, and aims. Only these can bring the youth to Christ and the Church.<sup>8</sup> The joy of the Gospel is effectively communicated by these things. Let us be open to the new realms. Youth ministry definitely may inherit the fruits in the Kingdom of God.

#### **1.1.8. Journeying Together**

Role of each Church member through a process of co-responsibility of everyone in the Church is motivated by the Spirit. Participatory and co-responsible Church includes young people and women, consecrated persons as well as groups, associations and movements.<sup>9</sup> The main scope is that no one should be excluded. Let us walk hand in hand with the young people to the new world that is Kingdom of God.

#### **1.1.9. Learning from One Another**

The Church cherishes the young as treasures of her heart consider their integral development as one of her prime tasks. In this regard, the Church asserts that every pastor, as the leader of the Christian community, has to be particularly concerned about the evangelization and spiritual development of young people.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, I wish to remind that the Church looks to you with confidence and with love. Rich with a long past ever living in her, and marching toward human perfection in time and the ultimate destinies of history and of life, the Church is the real youth of the world. Look upon the Church and you will find in her the face of Christ, the genuine, humble, and wise hero, the prophet of truth and love, the companion and friend of youth.<sup>11</sup>

## **1.2. Jesus as Model for Youth and for Youth Minister**

When young people apply the problems of life and the problems of their own personal experience with the principles of Christ, it means that they must see how Christ in his own case handled the problems. We must seriously apply the principles of Christ to modern problems and especially to the problems of youth. The counsellor or guide of young people should begin by giving intelligent talks on the man of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Our young people are shown that Christ is not a man who dealt with a simple primitive, almost nomadic people but a man who dealt with a highly civilised, cynical, sceptical, alarmingly modern world. The effect of Christ's blessings on His times, the effect of those teachings through the ages can be experienced against His historical background.

### **1.2.1. Jesus: Model for Youth**

A whole series of talks should be given over to the revolutionary aspects of Christ. How he threw into the world the most astounding new truths. He upset accepted standards and values, he made war on vested practices, he first alarmed those who held the power in politics and religion and then incurred their hatred, when a situation needed personal action he acted how he exemplified in his own life every principle that he laid down for others. As a result of what he taught the world's concepts were revolutionised concepts of poverty, slavery, marriage, sex relationships, women's position, labour, children, the power of the state, the rights of the individual and so on almost endlessly.<sup>13</sup>

Young people completely fail to see Jesus as youngster one who was like most of them. Sometimes we too have failed to project to the young the youthfulness of Jesus who becomes their role model. He roamed all through Jerusalem and Galilee with clear aim. He always wanted to be in-group. His life was filled with joy and optimism, without excessive worry about tomorrow.

He enjoyed festivity. He was against legitimate authorities, and unholy institutions. He agitated against the unjust social structures. He helped the poor and needy. He knew who he was. He stood for his conviction. He was a storyteller. He respected and moved with women, girls. In short, Jesus very much loved the young as he was with people.<sup>14</sup>

### **1.2.2. Jesus: Model for Youth Minister**

Here, after assessing the ministers of youth in India, I enumerate the basic elements that are need for a vibrant youth minister. These elements are inevitable to express oneself as a good youth minister along with the Church's perspectives. Jesus is the ideal to imitate and to strive for.

1. The person must have a lifestyle of commitment to ministry as Jesus had. Youth Ministry is a vocation and therefore should be the witness at authentic Christian life.

2. The person must be an integrated person like Jesus Christ. The person is God and other-centred. There is openness to growth (spiritual and psychological). The person has a working knowledge of limitations and strengths. There is an ability to plan and assess programmes. The person is flexible.

3. The youth minister must be a person of faith like Jesus. He must manifest a continuing relationship with God. He must have the ability to articulate personal religious experience. He must have a prayer life. He must be able to discern the role of faith and Christ in programmes and individuals. He must have the ability to recognize the need for a supportive community that shores and prays together.

4. The person must be an active member at the faithful community as Jesus performed. The faith community is ordinarily the parish in which the youth ministry takes place rather than simply a personal support group. There should be a total parish involvement facilitated by the support and respect of the clergy and other people in the parish team. This membership should be based on and must foster deepening trust.

5. The youth minister must be a relational person able to stimulate healthy relationships and be a witness to the resurrection mystery. Such ability includes the ability to challenge youth to spiritual growth.

6. The youth minister should be able to learn discernment of the actions of the Spirit to see events and people as vehicles for God's action like Jesus' powerful organisation of discipleship to continue the mission of him or in other words the will of His Father. The minister needs to be a 'team person' who can recognize the gifts of the group and affirm them. The minister needs the ability to perceive and identity needs. The minister needs a basic understanding of the total Church vision, not simply Youth Ministry.

### **1.3. Few Suggestions for the Youth Ministry in India**

Think, Evolve, Innovate – "As a country, we have to be bold and set a course for ourselves. When Gandhi adopted *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha* as methods of obtaining freedom, it was a great innovation. Today, we have to make great innovations and chart our own way to the India of our dreams. The most important task before the country's leaders is to bind together all the people who can change the country and make them work towards this goal together and with great urgency."<sup>15</sup>

According to the World Watch List 2019, India ranks 10<sup>th</sup> among the 50 countries where it is dangerous for Christians to live. In 2014, India ranked 28<sup>th</sup> on the list. The attacks on Christians have been on the rise since 2014. That year 147 cases were reported and number increased to 177 the following

year. In 2016, it went up to 208 and 240 in 2017. Over 290 cases were brought to ADF's (Alliance Defending Freedom) notice during 2018.<sup>16</sup> At this critical situation what are we going to do as a youth minister? For that any youth minister needs to follow that pattern of: 'think, evolve, and innovate.'

### **1.3.1. Youth Ministry as a Process**

Process is a dynamic movement towards some definite goal. Youth Ministry is considered a process that is systematic, methodical, and sequential. It is not something linear that starts and ends once-and-for-all. It aims at the development of a committed team that dedicates itself to the creation of a new temporal order, and which continues the process of forming other core groups. A chain reaction is triggered.<sup>17</sup> Accompanying young people in their growth is a long process that requires patience and perseverance without being discouraged by the difficulties of the relationship.<sup>18</sup>

### **1.3.2. Ministry 'For' the Youth**

Church does not want to abandon the young alone in the difficulties of our times. It wishes to accompany a child of God even in moments of sufferings and dark days. The Church needs young people in many places, above all, however in the priesthood and in religious orders. Young people are the future of the Church. Young people are responsible for keeping the Church young and for ensuring that she will always remain so.<sup>19</sup> In the Second Vatican Council, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, (*Gaudium et Spes*), it declares (in no. 2) that young people are the hope of the Church. The Church looks at young people as active members of society and precious members of the Church, to whom it responds with faith and hope.<sup>20</sup>

### **1.3.3. Ministry 'With' the Youth**

Pope Francis has written: "Youth ministry, as traditionally organised, has also suffered the impact of social changes. Young people often fail to

find responses to their concerns, needs, problems and hurts in the usual structures.<sup>21</sup> In the *Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis laments the failures of the Church's usual structures to respond to the needs of young adults and then praises the growth of youth moments as the work of the Holy Spirit.

In the midst of complexity and divisions of our global reality young adults are often disproportionately imputed as both beneficiaries and victims of the uneven social changes that have accompanied globalisation.<sup>22</sup> It has been observed that whenever we organise sports or social gatherings for our youth in our parishes, they turn out in large numbers. But when we invite them for a bible study session or for an hour of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, they are generally present in smaller numbers. God's salvation is available to all. Determine to accept His will and purpose for you in all things without expectations.<sup>23</sup>

#### **1.3.4. Ministry 'To' the Youth**

According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (this we may adopt to India as well), the goal of youth ministry in the Catholic Church is to empower the youngsters to live as disciples of Jesus in our world today draw them to responsible participation in the life, mission and work of the Catholic Church and to foster their holistic growth.<sup>24</sup> Dimensions of youth ministry are community building, evangelisation and catechesis, justice and service, pastoral care, prayer and moments of silence, presence, transparency, affirmation, celebration, legal and politic education and etc.

#### **1.3.5. Ministry 'By' the Youth**

Every person has something to share, something to give to others enriching their lives and the lives of those around them. 'By' is the recognition that the youth have lots of potentialities and talents which can be put at the service of the community. 'By' builds up convictions and encourages initiatives and creativity. Mistakes are to be accepted. They need timely guidance and assistance. The Church should offer first to young people 'a

place to belong' that is to say somewhere gave them a feeling of value and in which they could grow.<sup>25</sup>

Unless the youth participate in nation-building in their own locality, where they are, they are bound to become inward-bound, blind, prejudiced, unhappy and arrogant. Opportunities will have to be offered to the young for exercising their generosity, adventurous spirit and youthful vigour. Relationship-centred evangelisation, peer ministry, caring adults and catechesis, sports, creative liturgy, skill training. Christmas missionary dinner, clothes search, Easter carolling, senior citizens' day, servant week, children's day, city government day and etc, are to be undertaken by the youth.<sup>26</sup>

### **1.3.6. Needed Foundations in Youth Ministry in India**

We have already seen the process of youth ministry at different levels: 'for' the youth, 'to' the youth, 'with' the youth, and 'by' the youth. They give clear understanding of the youth as well as the main concern of youth ministry in India. Let me propose some requirements to build the youth ministry in the light of *Christus Vivit*. Youth ministry is built on certain principles and assumptions. They sustain and develop it in the Church. Joe Fernandez in his book *Basis in Youth Ministry* mentions about the foundations, which are needed for the better youth ministry. They are:

(i) Youth ministry is a ministry of relationships with everyone. It is a ministry of friendship. In youth ministry, what matters is not what one does but what one is. (ii) Youth ministry is a ministry of partnership always. It is mutuality. The youth are accepted as co-workers and collaborators. (iii) Youth ministry is self-generative and vibrant. Youth Ministry extends itself and gives birth to other forms of ministry. More and more groups are formed through the leadership of the members. Hence, it should be highlighted. (iv) Youth ministry is a mission of Jesus to be continued constantly. Youth Ministry ends in service. Its missionary nature stimulates its growth and challenges the young to go out of themselves and serve their own peers and the whole

society. Youth become missionaries. It should be focused clearly as Pope Francis indicates in *Christus Vivit*. (v) Youth ministry is a ministry of presence. The minister's physical presence is required. It is not the quantity (frequency and duration) that matters but the quality (intensity and warmth) of presence. (vi) Youth ministry belongs to the whole community.<sup>27</sup> Youth ministry cannot be left to a one-man-show. It should be taken as a community responsibility. This will ensure cooperation and above all continuity and progress. (vii) Youth ministry is an acceptance at the special gifts of the young. Youth ministry believes that the young are endowed with special gifts, certain qualities of mind and heart, and certain talents, which the rest of the community does not possess to as pre-eminent a degree as they possess. These qualities can enrich the society. (viii) In youth ministry persons are more important than programmes, rules, regulations and structure. Success, order, discipline, results etc. should not be achieved at the cost of relationships and personal hurts. (ix) Youth ministry is holistic. Youth ministry aims at the total person. It takes care of the intellectual, spiritual, psychological, social, cultural and physical aspects of the individual. Salvation is of the whole person. (x) Youth are the most precious portion of humanity.<sup>28</sup> Youth is a unique time of human development. The youth are going through a very crucial stage in their life. They need help, support, understanding, and encouragement. Henceforth, when we have these foundations in us, of course these will help us to make creative plan in youth ministry in India.

### **1.3.7. Creative Plans for the Youth Ministry in India**

Based on the foundations and the proposals from *Christus Vivit* let me propose a few creative plans for the youth ministry in India.

#### **1.3.7.1. Walking with the Young**

In the fluidity of the modern world young people look for points of reference and the Church is one such point of reference which has the duty to walk with the young. In the opening speech for the recently concluded

world youth day at Panama Pope Francis assured the youth that the Church is walking with them.<sup>29</sup>

### **1.3.7.2. Welcoming the Young**

The welcoming of an adult helps the growing person to understand his or her condition, the restless desires, and the sense of life and so on. It is about to tune with the young people, because they see and feel that someone cares for them.<sup>30</sup> Accompanying supposes something more; it means leading them to the meeting with themselves with their self-esteem and an emphasis on events and celebrations on the basis of family and relationships.<sup>31</sup>

### **1.3.7.3. Making Youth as Active Agents**

Pope Francis has frequently challenged young people to become active agents in the life of the Church.<sup>32</sup> The need is to find ways to make the broad current of Christian tradition fruitful at the present time in a creative and innovatory manner.<sup>33</sup> The youth must be encouraged to become useful members of the local church or temple so that they could develop a high spiritual and moral standard. It is the absence of this facility and also guidance, in the name of secular state, during the past few decades that have led most of the youth to float in mid air as it were without any proper moorings.<sup>34</sup>

Even though, the Church tries to do something for the youth, many ordained ministers keep them away and are not ready to give much of encouragement, recognition, or share their responsibilities with them. We, the Church have to take steps to keep the young people with lots of care and concern inside the Church with responsibility because they are the biggest and special treasure to the present and to the future church.<sup>35</sup> I believe that the following suggestions may change the mode of the young people as well the youth minister.

#### 1.3.7.4. Some Practical Tips or Suggestions

- i. Be there (*I am who I am*) when young people are in need of your presence.
- ii. Take initiative (*to liberate*) to free them from modern slavery.
- iii. Be familiar not aloof (*God of your ancestors*) as a shepherd.
- iv. Talk of things they are interested in (*liberation from slavery*) especially their needs and concerns in homily, seminar, retreat and so on.
- v. Help them to reflect (*wilderness experience*) their failures, mistakes, misunderstanding without humiliating and hurting them.
- vi. Give them a chance to serve (*calling of Moses*) cultivate variety and praise their talents to serve the people those who are in need.
- vii. Be prepared (*to pass over*) to be responsible, specific, positive and consistent in transforming in the person of Jesus to be a great leader of the society where they live as a young people.
- viii. Encourage and demand (*to be loyal*) to take care of the relationship with God, others, nature and oneself by giving more opportunities to exhibit their strength and God's call through baptism and confirmation.
- ix. Do something practical (*as fire pillar in night as clouds in day*) to develop more commitment and social services without expecting the reward.
- x. Do listen (*I heard the cry of the people*) to the voice of the young people.

#### 1.3.7.5. Create Suitable Environments

How to create a suitable environment for the youth ministry? The possible means are:

- i. To be more welcoming to young people
- ii. By offering possibilities for expressions openness and love affirmation and growth.
- iii. To respond by creating an affirmative and fraternal environment with a sense of purpose.<sup>36</sup>
- iv. To create a home is to create bonds.
- v. To create strong bonds by teaching patience and forgiveness.<sup>37</sup>
- vi. To feel God's caress through a more human world is of a world more divine.
- vii. To provide places to move freely where friendships can grow, young men women can meet one another, where they share music ... etc., but also reflection and prayer with each other.
- viii. Create atmosphere for person to person contact.
- ix. To exercise a genuine apostolate among their friends to guide the other young.
- x. Sharing the faith and bearing witness.
- xi. Youth will be better integrated into communities where they cultivate precious relationships.

#### ***1.3.7.6. Youth Ministry in Educational Institutions***

According to Pope Francis Christian community has always been concerned to train teachers and administrations. Schools are a platform for drawing close to children and young people. Yet schools are in need of criticism.<sup>38</sup>

Catholic schools remain essential places for evangelisation of the young. Renewal and revival of missionary outreach on the part of schools and universities are expected on the basis of cultural formation and spiritual formation.

### ***1.3.7.6. Areas that Need to Be Developed***

Pope Francis points out the areas to be renewed and developed:

- i. On Prayer:** Young Catholics are asking for prayer opportunities and sacramental celebration to experience the joy of faith.
- ii. On Christian Service:** Many young people grow weary of our programmes. They demand a chance to be active participants in activities that benefit others.
- iii. On Music:** The language of the music also represents a pastoral resource with a particular bearing on the Liturgy and its renewal.
- iv. On Sports:** Church should not underestimate the potential of sports for education and formation. The main reason is at the heart of the experience of sport is Joy. It indicates the rejoicing in the gifts the creator gives us each day.
- v. On Nature:** Nature holds a special attraction for many young people. They recognise their need to care for the environment.
- vi. Other Areas:** Word of God, nourishing presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Because we cannot fail to invite the young people to drink from these well springs of new life.<sup>39</sup>

These are the right areas and means to help the youth embark on precious experience. In order to make use of these areas Pope Francis introduces the new realm, i.e., “popular” youth ministry with a different style, schedule, pace, and method. It goes out to those places where the youth are active and the charisms sown by the Holy Spirit. Here, we accompany and encourage the youth and trust in the action which is by Holy Spirit.<sup>40</sup>

In the *popular* youth ministry all are included without neglecting the poor and who do not come from Christian families. All must be encouraged. Popular youth ministry opens the doors and make room for everyone with their doubts, frustration, their problems and difficulties. Popular youth ministry is a process that gradually happens.

It mainly focuses on how young people can become a missionary and give ideas to guide the young people to become a missionary. It assures that all can become a missionary in his or her own way. Pope Francis believes that seminarians and religious should have an even a greater ability to accompany young leaders.<sup>41</sup> In the end of the chapter he projects the expectation of the young for their mentor.

## **Conclusion**

We realise that the young lack experiences. They need activities and opportunities to test their metal, try their ideologies to experiment with faith, with life- style and above all with their convictions. Youth ministry has been doing it for long in most of the places, we believe. It is time to bring back or create wherever even they are absent, these reference points.

To provoke reflection so that the Church could come up with better solution and smart approaches to guide the young towards the goal, in this year of youth, there may be numerous ideas to attract the youth with innovative ways to strengthen the Church. I too realise that the power of youth is needed to establish the kingdom of God. Walking with the young people, welcoming the young people, and making them as active agents would be the best way to do successful youth ministry.

**Footnotes**

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