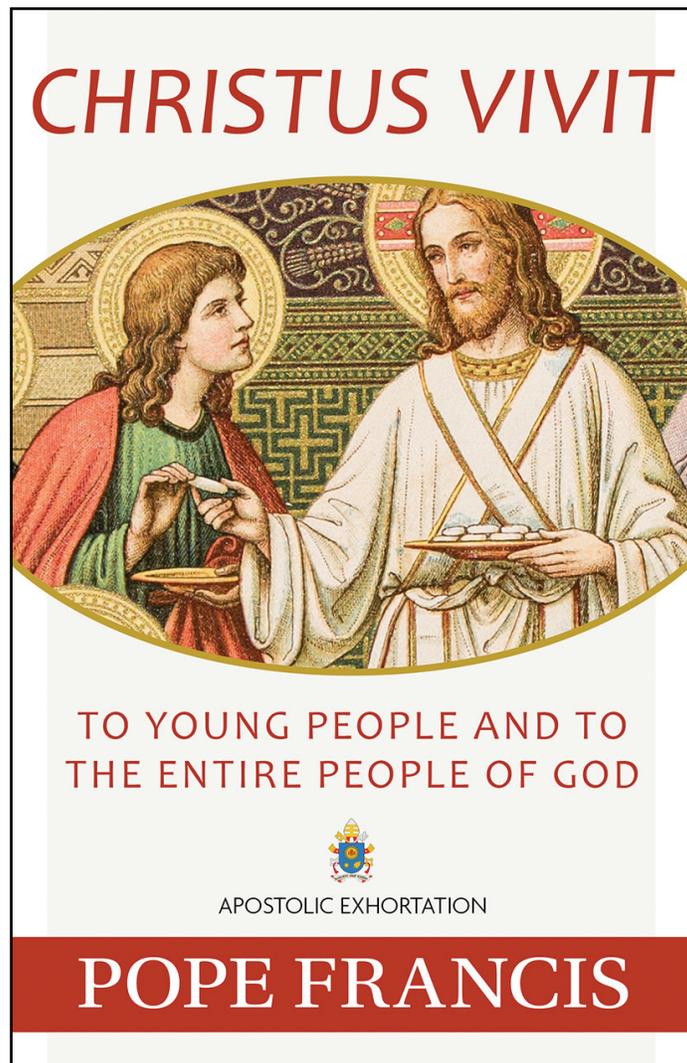


***CHRISTUS VIVIT* –
A Study Guide
for Catechists, Catholic Educators, and Youth Ministers
by Joseph D. White, Ph.D.**



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Pope Francis has had a special relationship with young people in the church since the beginning of his pontificate. He attended his first World Youth Day in Brazil in July 2013, just four months after his installation. Since then, Pope Francis has met with the youth of the Church at World Youth Day in Kraków, Poland in 2016 and in Panama City, Panama in 2019. In 2018, Pope Francis called a synod of bishops on “Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment.” The purpose of this worldwide meeting of Church leaders and youth was to help the Church examine “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” (from the Introduction of the *Preparatory Document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*).

An *apostolic exhortation* is a document from the pope. It is often written, as in this case, to communicate the conclusions the pope has reached following a synod of bishops. In this apostolic exhortation, Pope Francis offers his reflections on the work of the synod. It is divided into an introduction and nine chapters that cover different aspects of the message Pope Francis wishes to convey to the youth (typically defined in the Church as persons 16 to 29 years old) and to the larger Church, particularly those who serve the youth in ministry.

This study guide for the Apostolic Exhortation is written especially for catechists of youth and young adults, Catholic educators, such as high school teachers and administrators, and those working in parish and diocesan youth ministry. It is intended to be used alongside the document, and might be used for personal reflection and formation or in group reflection as catechists, youth ministers and educators gather for leadership formation and continuing education. We will walk through the Apostolic Exhortation chapter by chapter, with a brief overview of each chapter and questions for reflection tailored to the work of those who form young people.

Introduction

In the opening paragraphs of the Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Francis explains that he is writing especially to Christian young people, but also “to the entire People of God, pastors and faithful alike, since all of us are challenged and urged to reflect both on the young and for the young.” (*CV*, 3). To young people, he says, “Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and

everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life...Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive!" (CV, 1)

He explains in his introduction that he will be addressing some paragraphs directly to youth and offering other thoughts as reflections for the whole Church. While Pope Francis says he cannot adequately summarize all of the conclusions of the synod (and he refers the reader to the Final Document for this purpose), he states that he has tried to focus in this exhortation on the proposals of the synod that he found most significant, adding that his words "will echo the myriad voices of believers the world over who made their opinions known to the Synod. (CV, 4)," a reference not only to those who participated in the proceedings, but also those who gave via the extensive survey of youth conducted in the months leading up to the synod.

Chapter One – "What Does the Word of God Have to Say about Young People?"

In the first chapter, Pope Francis delves into "the richness of the Sacred Scriptures" (CV, 5), recounting passages from both the Old and New Testaments in which young people figure prominently. He reflects on the stories of Joseph, Gideon, Samuel, David, Solomon, Jeremiah and Ruth.

Francis then turns to the New Testament, where he uses several passages from the teachings of Jesus and from the epistles to discuss the difference between a "young heart" and "a heart grown old." He describes the importance of keeping a "young heart" – one that is ready to change, to turn back, get up and learn from life. (CV, 12). Here, Pope Francis contrasts the willingness of the Prodigal Son to repent and return to the father, to realize that his life was off track and change course, with the rich young man in Matthew Chapter 19, who is so attached to his wealth that he is not able to accept the message of Jesus. He states that while both men are young, the Prodigal Son has a "young heart" that is "naturally ready to change" (CV, 12), while the young man who approaches Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew had a "spirit that was not really that young, for he had already become attached to riches and comforts" (CV, 18)

Still, Pope Francis clarifies that the youth to which he is referring, rather than being about chronological age, is about the disposition of the heart. He emphasizes the importance of respecting one's elders, being "is open to the future, yet still capable of learning something from the experience of others" (CV, 16).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- What keeps a person's heart young? Why is a "young heart" important in ministry to young people?

- What are some effective ways of helping young people benefit from the wisdom of experience, especially in a culture that tends to idolize youth and devalue the elderly?

Chapter Two – “Jesus Christ, Ever Young”

In the second chapter, the Holy Father turns his attention to the person of Jesus Christ, whom he calls “ever young.” He points out that Jesus was crucified while he was still a young man, and he began his public mission “in the prime of life” (*CV*, 22). Francis recounts the Gospel account of Jesus’ youth, demonstrating from the Gospel stories that Jesus was an integral part of his community in Nazareth as he prepared to carry out his mission. In reflecting on these aspects of the youth of Jesus, Pope Francis calls for youth programs that strengthen, and accompany our young people and “impel them to encounter others, to engage in generous service, in mission” (*CV*, 30).

Pope Francis recalls that various attitudes towards the Church emerged by the young people who participated in the synod, including some who “do not ask the Church for anything because they do not see her as significant for their lives” or even those who “find the presence of the Church a nuisance, even an irritant” (*CV*, 40). He asserts that for the Church to find credibility with young people today, “there are times when she needs to regain her humility and simply listen, recognizing that what others have to say can provide some light to help her better understand the Gospel.” He also calls the youth to assist the Church in maintaining a youthful spirit, saying, “we have to dare to be different, to point to ideals other than those of this world” (*CV*, 36).

The chapter closes with a discussion of the Blessed Virgin Mary and a number of young saints. In his reflections on Our Lady, Pope Francis points out that Mary was “not afraid to ask questions” (*CV*, 43), but fully committed to her “yes”: “Here was the ‘yes’ of someone prepared to be committed, someone willing to take a risk, ready to stake everything she had, with no more security than the certainty of knowing that she was the bearer of a promise” (*CV*, 44). In paragraphs 51-62, Francis gives a quick snapshot of 12 additional saints that serve as role models to young people. He states that “young saints inspire us to return to our first love” (*CV*, 50), and he calls on them to intercede for the Church (*CV*, 63)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- What is significant about Jesus’ connection to his community and his upbringing as a typical youth in Nazareth?
- Why is connection to the larger community important for Catholic youth and young adults today?
- Do some young people today find it hard to fully commit to an idea or course of action as Mary did at the Annunciation? Why might this be?

Chapter Three – “You Are the ‘Now’ of God”

Having provided examples of youth from the Scriptures and the lives of the saints, Pope Francis now turns his attention to the lives of youth today, whom he says are not only the future of our world, but its present (*CV*, 64). Quoting the report of the Synod, he cautions the Church to listen with empathy to young people rather than being quick to respond with “prepackaged answers” (*CV*, 65). Francis encourages parents, pastors and others who minister to youth to look for the seeds of goodness in the life of young people and to consider each young person’s heart as “holy ground” (*CV*, 67).

Pope Francis then outlines a few of the different contexts of youth around the world, including some of the most serious problems youth are facing, including violence, poverty and exploitation. He addresses the concerns and questions are youth have regarding sexuality and the body, including (quoting the final document of the Synod) “questions concerning the difference between male and female identity, reciprocity between men and women, and homosexuality” (*FD*, 81). Here, he reminds young people that “life is a gift, and...we are creatures with innate limits” (*CV*, 82).

Francis also discusses three key themes that emerged from the synod – the digital landscape, migration, and the abuse crisis in the Church. Regarding the latter, he quotes the *Final Document* of the synod, saying that abuse causes “sufferings that can last a lifetime” and represent “a serious obstacle” to the mission of the Church (*CV*, 95).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- How might listening with empathy change our response to the challenges of young people today? How might it change their willingness to benefit from our experience?
- In what ways does our contemporary culture struggle with “seeing life as a gift” and seeing human beings as “creatures with innate limits”? How might these two ideas change our discussions about the body and sexuality?
- Which of the three themes discussed at the end of this document has the most significant impact on the young people with whom you are working? How might this issue be better addressed by those working in ministry with youth?

Chapter Four – “A Great Message for All Young People”

This chapter is dedicated to “three great truths” Pope Francis wishes to convey to young people. He introduces these truths by saying they are “about what is essential, the one thing we should never keep quiet about” (*CV*, 111). The first truth is, “God loves you” (*CV*, 112). Here, Pope Francis reassures young people that “in

every moment,” they are “infinitely loved” (CV, 112). He acknowledges that some youth have negative experiences with their fathers, but then offers several passages of Sacred Scripture that illustrate God’s fatherly love for each of us.

The second truth is “Christ, out of love, sacrificed himself completely in order to save you” (CV, 118). Pope Francis states, “Young people, beloved of the Lord, how valuable you must be if you were redeemed by the precious blood of Christ!” (CV, 122).

The third truth highlighted by Pope Francis in this chapter is, “Christ is alive!” (CV, 124). He reassures young people that because Jesus lives, they also can live: “goodness will have the upper hand” and “all our struggles will prove worthwhile” (CV, 127). “In these three truths,” Pope Francis writes, “we see God the Father and Jesus. Wherever the Father and the Son are, there too is the Holy Spirit. He is the one who quietly opens hearts to receive that message. He keeps alive our hope of salvation, and he will help you grow in joy if you are open to his working.” (CV, 130).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- Pope Francis has frequently called those involved in catechesis and ministry to proclaim the *kerygma* – the saving message of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this chapter, he does exactly that in a concise and accessible way for youth. How might we proclaim the kerygma in our ministry with young people?
- When did you “fall in love” with Jesus Christ? How did this make a difference in your life?

Chapter Five – “Paths of Youth”

Having proclaimed the gospel message in the previous chapter, Pope Francis now discusses various ways that responding to the Gospel message can affect the lives of young people, including giving them dreams and the courage to try new things and choose paths in life. He highlights the difference between the words “child” and “youth,” citing the passage in the Gospel of Mark in which Jesus restores life to Jairus’ daughter. Francis points out that Jesus initially calls her a child, but after she is healed, he calls her “young girl.” Pope Francis contends that in changing how he addresses her, Jesus is making her “more responsible for her life, opening before her the door to youth” (CV, 136). Francis uses this story to illustrate the idea that when we encounter the healing power of Jesus Christ, we are changed. New paths open up to us, and we are inspired “to a better and more beautiful life” (CV, 138). Rather than limiting our possibilities, a relationship with Christ helps us become all we can be.

Pope Francis discusses the importance of growing spiritually as we grow physically, and expands upon the process of moving from one phase of life to another. He encourages the reader to embrace each phase of life, because “every stage of life is a

permanent grace, with its own enduring value” (CV, 160). He encourages us to preserve and cherish the most precious things about our youth, even into old age (CV, 161).

Later in this chapter, Pope Francis points out that young people who are responding to the Gospel do not stay isolated; Rather, they build communities based on Christian friendship, they bring people together despite their differences, they go out and do good in the world, taking the Christian values of justice and charity with them, and they spread the Good News to others.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- How might we better connect our young people with the larger community of faith – both the community of their peers as well as the intergenerational Church community?
- What are some ways you have matured, emotionally and spiritually, since your youth? How have you preserved certain aspects of youthfulness? How can both our maturity and our youthfulness be assets in ministry with young people?
- Why is it important to facilitate both social commitment and missionary work when working in ministry with young people?

Chapter Six – “Young People with Roots”

This chapter discusses the roots of a tree, and how they help the tree stay grounded and weather a storm. Pope Francis compares this to the “roots” young people can find in “the spiritual and human riches inherited from past generations” (CV, 181). If we ignore what came before us, Francis asserts, we are more susceptible to manipulation by those who are only seeking to benefit themselves. He warns young people not to let others exploit their youth “to promote a shallow life that confuses beauty with appearances.” He cites several examples of beauty in family life and relationship and then says, “to disclose and to highlight this beauty, which is like that of Christ on the cross, is to lay the foundations of genuine social solidarity and the culture of encounter” (CV, 183).

Francis rejects the “homogenization” of young people – the tendency to try to blur “what is distinctive about their backgrounds and origins” and make them more similar to one another (186). Quoting the *Final Document* from the Synod, he calls on the Church to “make a commitment to accompanying these young people, so that in the process they do not lose sight of the most precious features of their identity (FD, 14).

Pope Francis advises the young to stay connected with older generations. He states “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” (CV, 191). Using the prophecy of Joel in Old Testament Scripture, Pope Francis discusses how the young and the elderly can complement each other, as the elderly “have dreams built up of memories” and the young “can have visions that broaden their horizons and show them new paths” (CV, 193).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- How might those who work with youth help them discover and reflect on their roots, seeing differences as gifts rather than something to be “blurred” or stamped out?
- Teens and young adults sometimes have an idealized view of “true love.” How can we help them become more acquainted with the stages of growth in marriage and family and the beauty that exists there even in the midst of everyday struggles?
- In what ways might we facilitate more dialogue between youth and those in older generations? How might this benefit both groups?

Chapter Seven -- “Youth Ministry”

The next section of the apostolic exhortation is focused on youth ministry, which Pope Francis acknowledges has gone through many changes that echo the ways in which society has changed in recent decades. While he applauds the ways in which various movements have sought to better meet the needs of young people, he points out two things which he says “Have become increasingly evident: the realization that the entire community has to be involved in evangelizing [young people], and the urgent requirement that young people take on a greater role in pastoral outreach” (CV, 202).

Pope Francis advocates viewing young people themselves as agents of youth ministry, citing their boldness and creativity. He encourages those involved in youth ministry to be flexible enough to meet the needs of youth as they arise. He states that “youth ministry has to be synodal; it should involve a ‘journeying together’” that values the gifts and contributions of each person (CV, 206).

Pope Francis extrapolates on “two main courses of action” in youth ministry: “One is *outreach*, the way we attract new young people to an experience of the Lord. The other is *growth*, the way we help those who have already had that experience to mature in it.” (CV, 209). Regarding outreach, he advocates for youth being active in organizing events and being “given the freedom to be enthused about evangelizing other young people wherever they are to be found” (CV, 210). In outreach, he stresses the importance of the “language of closeness, the language of generous, relational and existential love,” and says, “Young people need to be approached with the grammar of love, not by being preached at” (CV, 211). Here, Pope Francis also

encourages “greater thought to ways of incarnating the *kerygma* in the language of today’s youth.”

Regarding growth, Francis encourages those involved in the formation of youth not to bore them with a series of doctrinal talks shortly after they have had an encounter with Christ, but to “first try to awaken and consolidate the great experiences that sustain Christian life” (CV, 212). Still, Francis contends that “any educational project or path of growth for young people must certainly include formation in Christian doctrine and morality” (CV, 213). He cites two main goals for this formation: the “development of the *kerygma*” and “growth in fraternal love, community life, and service.”

Pope Francis states that young people should feel at home in our institutions, and he recommends giving them spaces they can make their own. He discusses the importance of Catholic schools in the evangelization of young people, and discusses several important principles “for renewal and revival of missionary outreach on the part of schools and universities,” including “a fresh experience of the *kerygma*, wide-ranging dialogue, interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches, the promotion of a culture of encounter, the urgency of creating networks, an option in favour of those who are least...[and] the ability to integrate the knowledge of head, heart and hands” (CV, 222).

Still, Francis highlights the importance of integrating spiritual formation with cultural formation in Catholic schools. Citing a previous address to students and academics, he discusses the value of a good education, including its ability to make us raise questions, keep us “from being anaesthetized by banality,” and impel us “to pursue meaning in life.” He encourages educators and students “to respond to the crippling refrains of cultural consumerism with thoughtful and firm decisions, with research, knowledge and sharing” (*Address at the Meeting with Students and Representatives of the Academic World in Piazza San Domenico, Bologna, October 1, 2017; CV, 223*).

Pope Francis advocates for a “popular” rather than “elitist” youth ministry – one that is inclusive even of youth that might not yet accept some aspects of Catholic teaching. He states, “It is enough to have an open mind to all those who have the desire and willingness to be encountered by God’s revealed truth” (CV, 234).

Later in this chapter, Pope Francis states that while young people “need to have their freedom respected...they also need to be accompanied” (CV, 242). This once again highlights the importance of the whole community in forming youth, but he specifically points to the coordination between youth ministry and the pastoral care of families as integral to the accompaniment of youth.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- To what extent do we allow our youth to be “agents of youth ministry”? How might we better involve them in planning and directing their formational experiences in our Catholic institutions?
- What kind of attention do we give both to outreach and growth in our programs for young people?
- Do young people feel at home in our Catholic parishes and schools? Do they have their own spaces to build community?
- How can we better connect with and support parents and families in their role as the “primary educators” of young people?

Chapter Eight – “Vocation”

Pope Francis first discusses vocation in the broad sense of God’s call in our lives, “including the call to life, the call to friendship with him, [and] the call to holiness” (*CV*, 248). Regarding the call to friendship, Pope Francis contrasts Jesus’ dialogue with Peter with his conversation with the rich young man, noting that Jesus invites both into relationship with him, and their respective decisions changed both the outcome of their lives and the potential impact each of them had on our world. Regarding the rich young man, Francis states, “We will never know what that one young man, upon whom Jesus gazed with love and to whom he stretched out his hand, might have been for us, what he might have done for mankind” (*CV*, 251).

In this chapter, Pope Francis also addresses vocation in the more specific sense of how we are called to participate in the mission of the Church through service to others. He states that responding to our vocation means “finding our true selves in the light of God and letting our lives flourish and bear fruit” (*CV*, 257). He discusses specific types of vocation, including vocation to love and family, work, and consecrated vocations. He quotes the Synod, which calls the family “the principal point of reference for young people” (*FD*, 32). He rejects the cultural contention that marriage is a relic of the past, and he encourages young people to rebel against this idea (*CV*, 264). Francis points to the importance of preparation for marriage, including growth in knowledge of self, in virtue, and maturing in one’s own sexuality, understanding that sexuality is intended to be understood as the capacity for exclusive and generous self-gift, not a “means of using others” (*CV*, 265). Pope Francis reminds those who might not discern a vocation to marriage or to consecrated religious life that “the first and most important vocation is the vocation we receive at baptism” (*CV*, 267).

The next section of this chapter includes a discussion on the cultural and spiritual importance of work for young adults, not only to meet practical needs, “but as a way to seek meaning and fulfillment of their dreams and visions” (*CV*, 268). Pope Francis acknowledges the realities of the job market that sometimes make it difficult for young people to find employment in the areas to which they most feel called, but he

encourages them not to give up their dreams, to “never completely bury a calling” (CV, 272).

This chapter closes with some brief reflections on consecrated vocations. Pope Francis encourages us to encourage each young person to consider whether they might be called to the priesthood, religious life, or other forms of consecration (CV, 274). He reassures young people that if they are indeed called to one of these vocations, it is there that they will find fulfillment (CV, 276).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- How do we as teachers and leaders of youth convey Jesus’ invitation to friendship with him?
- What are some ways we can help young people discover their talents and find opportunities to explore different kinds of work as they find their vocations?
- How might we help young people consider marriage and consecrated life as realistic possibilities for them? What would help them learn more about these vocations and what they mean for people who live them?

Chapter Nine – “Discernment”

The final chapter in *Christus Vivit* is on discernment. He begins this chapter with a reflection from his previous Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, in which he states that young people are “immersed in a culture of zapping,” in which they “can navigate simultaneously on two or more screens and interact at the same time with two or three virtual scenarios.” He states that “without the wisdom of discernment, we can easily become prey to every passing trend” (GE, 167; CV, 279). In the next paragraph from *Gaudete et Exsultate*, again quoted here, Francis states that discernment “seeks a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us” (GE, 168; CV, 280). Pope Francis highlights the importance of conscience formation as well as growth in virtue (CV, 281-282).

Spending time in prayer is important, Francis points out, as well as dialogue with people who can listen and accompany the one who is discerning, such as friends, priests and religious (CV, 283). He offers several questions to assist young people in the discernment of their vocation (CV, 285). Pope Francis points out that “these questions “should be centered less on ourselves and our own inclinations,” and instead should be focused “on others, so that our discernment leads us to see our life in relation to their lives” (CV, 286). Here he encourages us to spend less time asking, “Who am I?” and more time asking, “For whom am I?” telling young people they are for God, and that God has given them “many qualities, gifts and charisms” that are not for them, but are instead to share with others around them.

Finally, Pope Francis discusses three qualities, or “sensitivities,” that are needed in those who are helping others discern their vocations. The first, he says, is “directed to the individual” and “is a matter of listening to someone who is sharing his very self in what he says” (CV, 292). The second sensitivity is “marked by discernment” and “tries to grasp exactly where grace or temptation is present.” This sensitivity helps others “distinguish truth from illusions or excuses” (CV, 293). The third sensitivity is “the ability to perceive what is driving the other person,” seeking to discern “the intention that definitively decides the meaning of their life” (CV, 294).

Conclusion

In the closing lines of the Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Francis calls youth to “keep running the race before them.” He reminds them of the gifts they bring, saying, “The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them!” (CV, 299).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- What are the emotional and spiritual consequences of failing to adequately discern and becoming “prey to every passing trend”? How can we more effectively help young people avoid this pitfall?
- How can those who form youth and help them discern grow in the “three sensitivities” discussed by Pope Francis?

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